The Paradox of Co-existent Exclusivity and Inclusivity in the Mystical Thought of Jalal ad-Din Rumi, Kabir, Abraham Abulafia, Isaac Luria, Pico della Mirandola and Thomas Merton and the Implications for the Gulen Movement

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Mysticism within the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—is built on paradox. Mystics believe that there is a deeper, more hidden recess within Divinity—the *mysterion*¹—that which is the focus of non-mystical religion, and that, by a given methodology, one can access that innermost, deepest recess. Yet, the basic understanding of God within the Abrahamic traditions is that of an endless, all-encompassing Being without contours in time and space that would permit a concept of inner or outer, or deeper or shallower—at least not as we use these terms in the everyday sense.

We might expect and find certain parallels and overlapping among the Abrahamic mystical traditions as we do among their general traditions, consonant with the common roots of all three expressions of faith. We might also expect and find divergences reflecting the historical and conceptual fact that the three are not identical to each other in important ways²—in both their general and their mystical traditions.

One might expect that no Jewish mystic could possibly think in universalistic terms, given the Jewish mystical sense of the impossibility of accessing God’s hiddenness without the instrumentation of the Torah—and without the agency of Hebrew, and the ability to tear Hebrew words and names apart to find hidden meanings within them. One might expect, given the Christian notion that salvation from Hell is not possible without the agency of Jesus, and for the Christian mystic, a sense of the impossibility of accessing God’s hiddenness without emulating Jesus’ physically self-sacrificing model—whether, early on in Christian history, in seeking martyrdom, or later,

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¹ I am using the Greek word from which the term “mysticism” derives, which is in turn derived from the Greek verb “mystein,” meaning “to close” and thus, “to hide.”
² By differences I mean the obvious: for Jews and Muslims, God is incontrovertibly non-physical, whereas for Christians God’s physicality as Jesus is essential; each of the three has its own primary text of connectedness to God, its own prayers, life cycle markers and community celebrations, its own interpretive literature, and so on.
in leading a monastic and/or an ascetic life\textsuperscript{3}—that no Christian mystic could possibly recognize the validity, much less the importance, of non-Christian thought. One might expect, given the certainty for Islam that Muhammad is the last and the greatest of the prophets, who as the ultimate messenger of God, offers the only absolutely reliable transcription of God’s word within the pages of the Qur’an—and that to commit one’s self (which is what “Islam” means) fully to God is impossible without embracing that certainty—that no Sufi could possibly embrace the notion of non-Muslim paths to God’s hiddenness.

Certainly through much of the history of Abrahamic mysticism, this is evident just as it is evident in the non-mystical mainstream. And yet—and this is part, one might say, of the paradoxic nature of all three—one finds, more frequently than one might suppose, a universalistic sensibility among any number of key mystics within these traditions. It is as if, the deeper they dig within their search for and success at encountering something deeper than their garden-variety co-religionists have sought and encountered, the more aware they become not only of the paradoxic way in which the hidden innermost recesses of God are found both within the center and where there is no center at all; the more they recognize that reaching up and out (\textit{ek-stasis}; ecstasy) for that centerless center is to be reaching down and in (\textit{en-stasis}; enstasy); the more they sense the genuine possibility and the actuality that being one with the One is both to completely lose one’s self and to completely find one’s self—the more they realize that there are infinite paths, and not only one path to that hidden, innermost, centerlessly centered Oneness.

\textsuperscript{3} I am referring to the fact that, before the fourth century, when Christianity became legal, its practitioners ran the risk of—and in some cases sought—martyrdom, since the crime of practicing an illegal form of faith, and therefore being regarded as politically subversive to the Roman imperium was death.
Among the earliest such mystical thinkers is arguably the best-known of the Sufis—certainly in the Western, non-Muslim world—the great poet, Jalal ad-Din Balkhi, better known as Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207-1273). Rumi was born in the city of Balkh, in northern (what is now called) Afghanistan, where his father, Bahauddin Walad, was headmaster of one the city’s well-known madrasas, but after Balkh was sacked by Genghis Khan his father and he—his mother was murdered by the Mongols—moved on to Nishapur, in Northeast Persia (i.e., Iran), where they met the famous Sufi poet, ‘Attar; and thence, briefly, to Baghdad, to Makka on pilgrimage, to Armenia and Syria for several years and ultimately to central Anatolia, finally settling in the city of Rum (Konya, Turkey)—as a consequence of which the poet is known as Rumi. It was there that, by 1240, he had become recognized as a master of orthodox scholarship, and four years later, struck by a spiritual and emotional crisis, left orthodoxy behind in favor of mystical thought.

He came by that path honestly, though, since his father had a strong mystical side to go with his skill as a jurist. Rumi studied his father’s esoteric teachings, as well as the writings of the Sufi poets Sana’i and ‘Attar, through a former student of his father, Burhanaddin Mahaqqiq. Thus one might suppose that he was predisposed to respond strongly when the wandering darvish, Shams, appeared in Konya/Rum. The two eventually became inseparable companions in the search for greater intimacy with God. It may well

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4 The Hittites (ca 1500 BCE) called the city Kuwanna, the Phrygians (ca 800 BCE) called it Kowania, the Greeks (ca 600 BCE) called it Ikonion, which the Romans Latinized as Iconium, and eventually the Turks called it Karamanli and then Konya. As the capital of the Seljuks of Rum (“Roman Anatolia”) from 1071 through 1243, it was also called Rum.
have been Shams’ subsequent disappearance that forced Rumi around the final turn toward his transformation as a mystic. In his distress and in his new emotional excitement, he often underscored his teaching with whirling and skipping dance-like movements—appalling the many students he now lost, while attracting others. Soon he became a *shaikh/pir* in his own right, attracting his own followers into what emerged as his own *ribat* (“monastery”) and his own *tariqa* (“movement/school”). Due to the Turkish version of his Sufi name, that *tariqa* is best-known as the *Mevleviya Tariqa*: the Mevlevis.

The *Mevleviya Tariqa* became marked by a unique *dhikr* (mode of initiating communion with God) in which devotees not only whirl with increasing speed in concentric circles, but learn to whirl around individually for extended periods of time, with absolute, perfect equilibrium, so that they are able both to start and to stop abruptly and without a scintilla of balance unease. With one hand pointing down and one up, each whirling *darvish* is a microcosm of perfect centered reality, of close-eyed inner sight, a perfect connector between earth and heaven, a simultaneously still and silent yet ever-moving, rustling conduit to the hidden God. The Order flourished and spread in the course of the Ottoman period from the fifteenth through the early twentieth centuries, in which the empire encompassed Turkey and other lands. As such, it often exerted political influence through *shaikhs* who advised the Sultans and a wide circle of infrastructure.

Rumi is remembered for the exquisite mystical poetry that he wrote. He speaks of union with God using the metaphor of lover and beloved, for both of whom union may happen—God *can* and *will* be our beloved—when we truly pursue God as a lover pursues the perfect, ideal beloved, for

> when you are a lover, you want your beloved also a lover to be.
God is humanity’s greatest lover, and His beloved, who must become his lovers, are we.

In the vast sea of Rumi’s *Mathnawi*, diverse aphoristic comments and varied allegorical images repeat and re-appear, interweave and move along their own paths. His images are exquisite:

I sought a soul in the sea,

and found a coral there;

beneath the foam for me

an ocean was all laid bare.

The vastness of God is incomparable and yet, ever-expanding before him, the infinitesimal coral of himself, of his own soul, is locatable (because the infinitesimally small coral and the infinitesimally large sea are one and the same). He also writes about how “there are two worlds. There is the outer world which appears to exist, and seems solid and permanent, but in truth is an illusion. And there is the inner world which many people deny, and is invisible to the senses, and yet is real and eternal.” And that second world is the realm in which God awaits us.

But for the purposes of our discussion, his most important series of couplets reflects his conviction that that realm is accessible to all humans—and not only to Muslims. That is, in spite of the orthodox notions that insist that there is only one tariqa, or one shari’a—one correct path to connection with God, with only one particular language as one’s guide along that path)—God is available and accessible to all who seek God. In the most full-fledged of panhenotheistic (recognizing the one God in all of creation) senses, the poet identifies with all of humanity as the beloved of God, with all of time and space as the source from which God emanates and to which God extends:
Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu,
Buddhist, Sufi, or Zen. Not any religion

or cultural system. I am not from the East
or the West, not out of the ocean or up

from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not
composed of elements at all. I do not exist,
am not an entity in this world or the next,
did not descend from Adam and Eve or any

origin story. My place is placeless, a trace
of the traceless. Neither body nor soul.

I belong to the Beloved, have seen the two
worlds as one and that one call to and know,

first, last, outer, inner, only that
breath-breathing human being…
This is God within the poet speaking, who transcends all faiths and indeed all *worlds*. God is spaceless, with no geographic or spiritual point of origin and no limiting time parameters. God belongs to nobody and to everyone who seeks God—and God seeks us all, as the lover seeks the beloved. For Lover and Beloved are one in the God who is both ultimate Lover and ultimate Beloved—and the ultimate source of Love from and for all humans of whatever creed or belief system.

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In the very year in which Rumi, in his pre-mystical years, was becoming recognized as an Orthodox scholar, Abraham Abulafia (1240-91) was born in Spain. Abulafia asserted that at age 31 he received the prophetic call, hearing a voice calling “Abraham! Abraham!” to which he responded: “Here am I!” (recalling that brief dialogue that sets *Genesis* XXII in motion). Shortly thereafter he began to gather a circle of pupils around him in his home town of Saragossa. He claimed to be able to train his pupils in what he called “Prophetic Kabbalah” (*Kaballah N’vooeet*) through an intimate investigation of the Names of God. The disciple’s access to God’s Names is through the letters comprising the names into which s/he absorbs him/herself, feeling inspiration (*in-spirit-ation*): s/he becomes possessed by God’s name.

Abulafian *Kabbalah’s* underlying principle is that meditation on any letter within a word that addresses an aspect of the creation transmutes into a meditation on the whole of that word, and by further analogy, on the whole of creation and ultimately on the Creator. Since such a deconstructive method of meditation—emphasizing most particularly the word of God: Torah and, more broadly, biblical words and phrases—
necessarily yields irrational meanings; words and phrases are deprived of their everyday sensibility and thus function as a mechanism of guidance out of the here and now into the Other Realm in its deepest recesses: the more irrational, one might suppose, the deeper.

The process is at once physical and mental. One begins with mivta: the articulation of the sounds of the letters. But not in a simple manner. Take, for example, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, aleph, which is part of the hidden divine name, and repeat it in combination a) with each of the four letters of the Tetragrammaton (YHVH); and b) with every possible permutation of the five Hebrew vowels. The result is 200 non-sense sound-combinations.

As in other systems that emphasize dwelling on or repeating sound combinations—not only in Sufism or the hesychastic Christian mystics, but also in Hinduism and Buddhism—breathing is an essential element, and Abulafia offers instructions regarding how properly to breathe in the course of this process, in his Mafteah haShemot (Key to the Names): “take each one of the letters [YHVH] and wave it with the movements of a long breath so that you do not breathe between two letters, but rather with one long breath, for as long as you can possibly endure it, and afterwards rest for the length of one breath. Do this with each and every letter...” Moreover, one is to shake one’s head in a manner that corresponds with each of the vowel sounds that one is pronouncing. Thus in his Hayyei ha’Olam haBa’ (Life in the World to Come), he instructs the practitioner: “after you begin to pronounce the letter, begin to move your heart and head... and move your head in the form of the vowel[-point] of the letter which you are pronouncing.... when you extend the vowel of the letter in its pronunciation, move your

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5 As he explains in his Or haSeykhel (Light of the Intellect) (MS Vatican 233, fol 97a).
head up toward the heavens, and close your eyes and open your mouth and let your words shine, and clear your throat of all spittle so that it will not interfere with the pronunciation of the letter in your mouth...” Similarly, specific hand movements are to be performed during this process.

One continues with mikhtav: the writing of the letters. The implication of this pair of meditation-focussed actions is clear. The first part reflects an ever-present paradox for Jewish mysticism: the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are significant because they are assumed to be God’s own chosen alphabet. But as such, they are a writing system, not, per se, a phonemic system (the phonemes of Hebrew may be found in scores of other languages and can be represented in any number of other writing systems); Abulafia (and others) treats the sounds, not the visual forms, as if they are unique, in obsessive mivta, but then concentrates on the visual forms—a first within the Jewish mystical tradition—with mikhtav. Moreover, both foci are physical actions, (as opposed to mental exercises): the practitioner repeatedly vocalizes the sound of the letter of focus and repeatedly marks the form of the letter as s/he writes it again and again. Finally, with mahshav, the practitioner contemplates the letter. As much as this last is the third of three stages of focus on a given letter within a given word or phrase, it is also the over-arching action taking place through both the other actions, which are actually undertaken simultaneously: three phases or stages are indistinguishable aspects of one process.⁶ The

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⁶ One can understand why the mainstream rabbinic leadership would have been particularly uncomfortable with Abulafian mysticism: not only does he assert that its practitioners can ultimately become as prophets, but the fundamental paradox of his triune methodology could easily be seen as a means of leading the Jewish mystic astray toward the apostasy of Christianity—especially given Abulafia’s willingness to include Christians (and Muslims) among his pupils. I might note that a claim has also been put forth that Abulafia was himself importantly influenced by the Christian Cathars (a thirteenth-century heretical movement whose members were ultimately destroyed by the Dominicans). That claim, made differently by Yitzhak Baer and Shulamit Shahar, is discussed and eloquently refuted by Moshe Idel in his Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah. Others have noticed the larger coincidence of the upheaval in the Christian world
process and its “phases” yield a state of *ek-stasis* in which the spirit hidden “behind” each letter becomes manifest.

Abulafia asserts that his disciples will begin to experience fiery sensations as they engage with intensity in this process. Each letter corresponds to a different body part, and so each act of focus also yields a fiery sensation for a given limb. Particular body positions and modes of breathing correspond to particular vocalic and consonantal sounds. The danger is that, if a practitioner inadvertently, though loss of complete focus, moves a body part from its proper position while focused on a letter sound/shape, s/he may cripple that body part, Abulafia warns.

On the other hand, key letters emerge through the process as personifications of the beings whose names begin with those letters. Thus focus on the letter *shin* ("sh") can lead to the appearance of the personification of that letter as *Shaddai*, God’s Hebrew-language power-protective name. Again, paradox: God by definition cannot appear, since God is invisible; it is God’s *Name—one of God’s many Names*—that appears, which is and is not the same as *God*. The Masters of the Name, (*Ba’alei Shem*), as the Abulafian terminology calls successful practitioners, ultimate seem to unite with God, moving beyond vision. Having become one with God, the practitioner becomes (and yet does not, cannot, could never imagine that s/he is) God. The dangers are obvious: the ego intrudes to let the practitioner imagine that s/he truly is God, and s/he loses his/her mind; the practitioner cannot separate from this awesomely desirable union, and loses his/her mind occasioned by the Cathars in Languedoc at around the time that the first centers of *Kabbalah* were taking shape in that same part of the world. Shahar, for one, has also suggested connections between the Provençal kabbalistic text, *Bahir*, and Catharism.
or dies. The higher one goes, the greater the dangers and the greater the barriers 
(masteeneem: “withholders”) to success.

As s/he becomes more skilled, the disciple focuses on the numerology of the 
letters and words, first in a straightforward and later in increasingly complicated ways, in 
leaping⁷ from one thought to the next but by means of a carefully disciplined pattern of 
association. Through this process, the entire Torah will ultimately merge into a 
combination of Divine Names. Thus the mystic’s goal, perfectly generating Divine 
energy and prophetic power from within and without him/herself, is to become a perfect 
human being, and more: to be the Torah. God’s most fundamental words are expressed in 
that ultimate text—which, as an entity within our world, is as close to God as the Jewish 
tradition possesses.

Yet Abulafia proclaimed his ability to teach outside the normal “canon” of 
kabbalistic discipleship. The standard understanding of who might safely study Jewish 
mysticism limited that discipleship not only to Jews. It was assumed that, in order to 
access God’s innermost recesses, as a minimum one’s access doorway had to be the 
Torah, engaged with full belief not only in its every word but in the hidden truths to be 
found by digging beneath the words’ surfaces—and only by way of the Hebrew original, 
God’s preferred language—into the letters and their sounds that comprise the words and 
that could be differently and more profitably explored, spiritually speaking, by tearing 
them apart. It was also clear to the standard mystical explorers that the mind-boggling, 
sanity-endangering, life-threatening wonders of mystical contemplation could be borne 
only by males, not females, (who were assumed to be too mentally unstable), and not all

⁷ He called this dilug: “skipping.”
males, but only those over the age of 40 (or 36, in an alternative view), already married with a family. In other words, even within the out-of-mainstream realm of Jewish mystical thought, those deemed fit for such a pursuit were understood to be individuals able to bring a solid share of mental equilibrium to the table of contemplation.

But Abulafia asserted that he could teach his techniques to anyone with sufficient interest and will. He asserted that anyone—male or female; Jew, Christian or Muslim—could achieve the prophetic heights within the depths of the Divine mysterion. He was therefore perceived as dangerous by a Jewish leadership all too aware of how fragile the Jewish condition of non-oppression within their Christian and Muslim worlds could be.

In the end, the leaders of the community\(^8\) seem to have persecuted him sufficiently so that he and his most loyal followers moved on to Sicily, where he spent the last decade of his life, writing and teaching. His legacy would extend into the next phases of Jewish mysticism: his delineation of the three ways through which the Jewish mystic may gain enlightenment yields terminology central to Jewish mysticism in the next six centuries. More to our point, through his universalistic thinking, Abulafia’s influence would receive from and extend into Muslim mysticism (Sufism) and the push toward the work of Renaissance-era Christian mystics such as Pico della Mirandola.

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Two centuries after Abulafia’s teaching made Jewish mysticism available to non-Jews, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, (1463-94) developed an interest in Kabbalah. That interest

\(^8\) The “community” was, by then, the Jewish community of the Papal States, in Italy, whither he had gone intending to convert the notoriously anti-Jewish Pope Nicholas III—but that’s another story.
derived both from his desire to understand—or re-shape—*Kabbalah* as a Christian mystical discipline, out of a belief that it (*Kabbalah*) confirms Christianity; and from his generally far-reaching interests and open-minded sensibilities. For Pico was one of the important philosophers associated with the *accademia* circle of Lorenzo de Medici—particularly Marsilio Ficino, who translated Plato’s works from Greek to Latin under Lorenzo’s patronage, and who became one of Pico’s teachers—in late fifteenth-century Florence. Pico became best known for his 900 theses on religion, philosophy, natural science and magic, published in 1486, when he was only 23 years old, and to which he appended a preface, an “Oration on the Dignity of Man” which vaulted him to prominence.

Trained in Greek and Latin, Pico also studied Hebrew and Arabic and probably Aramaic, and counted among his friends and associates not only Christian humanists like Lorenzo, Ficino and their associates, but the rabid anti-humanist preacher, Savanarola—who would briefly control Florence in the mid-1490s, before being overthrown and burned at the stake. He was also very friendly with the Jewish scholar Elia del Medigo, with whom he studied Near Eastern languages. Pico’s broad-based thinking encompassed Greco-Roman mystery religions, the Hermetic writings associated with Hermes Trismegistas, Zoroastrianism, the so-called Chaldaean Oracles, Greek Orphic hymns⁹—in all of which he saw correspondences with *Kabbalah* as he also studied it and in all of which he in turn

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⁹ Hermes Trismegistas (“Hermes the Thrice-Great”) refers by tradition to a conflation of the Greek god Hermes (messenger god in general and in particular between gods and humans) with the Egyptian god Thoth (inventor of writing); the actual so-named individual was on the other hand apparently a powerful ancient mage with access to profoundly hidden knowledge that yielded some 17 volumes—this and more. But the entire “Hermetic” tradition was actually formulated by the Gnostic community in Alexandria around 200 CE. The so-called Chaldaean Oracles date from about the same time, survive only in fragments, and derive from a synthesis of Neo-Platonic with ancient Babylonian or Achaemenid Persian material. The Orphic Hymns are a series of poems ascribed to the mythical poet Orpheus (who went down into Hades to rescue his bride, Eurydice and charmed not only the three-headed dog, Cerberus, with his music, but even Persephone, queen of the dead, herself. He returned to the light, but lacking perfect faith, turned back at the last minute to be certain Eurydice was just behind him and lost her forever.
perceived anticipatory references to Christianity. He was a champion of syncretistic thinking, perceiving different schools of thought to be directed toward the same issues and capable of reconciliation, whether Platonic with Aristotelian thought; or Greek philosophy and Jewish and Muslim thought with Christian thought.

In addition to the 900 Theses and their appended “Oration”—which brought him into the way of papal opposition and the authority of the Inquisition, who saw much to be considered heretical in them—Pico subsequently wrote works focused on the problem of Divine Creation as well as one tearing apart the underlying theories of astrology. He saw in this discipline an address of “lower magic” rather than the “higher magic” that has as a goal to benefit humankind by its penetration of divinity. For Pico was convinced not only of the unique position of humankind within the hierarchy of God’s creatures, but he saw the human position as standing outside the standard animal chain of being yet sliding within it in accordance with how we behave.

Thus when we operate at a more profound and philosophical level we ascend within the chain toward the angels and toward communion with God; when we don’t use our intellect, we descend toward the worms. Moreover, he suggests, we are unique as a species in having the capacity to change how we are through the exercise of free will. If on the one hand his writing feeds into the Renaissance idea of the solitary, divinely-inspired genius (who resides at the peak of the hierarchy), on the other one can readily see how an interest in esoteric mystical systems would have been consistent with this viewpoint. He apparently studied a number of Jewish mystical texts, such as Moses ben Nahman of Gerona’s commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah*.10

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10 See Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, 57-8. Wirszubski’s
One of the most interesting ways in which his kabbalistically-attuned thinking expresses itself is in his observation that there are 86 Orphic hymns, and that “86” equals *Elohim* (Biblical Hebrew for “Lord”) by way of numerology, thus suggesting an equivalence between the two systems—one pagan Greek, the other Judaeo-Christian (not Jewish, but *Judaeo-Christian*)—of addressing divinity.\textsuperscript{11} Syntheses of different kinds of doctrines and thought from different traditions, including but not limited to *Kabbalah*, offers the solution to the ultimate problem for the world: that of good and evil. If we are to understand how evil exists in a world created by a God that is both all-good and all-powerful, then we must seek in and through every tradition and all traditions and find their common threads. As such we can weave a new tapestry of explanation which will be the tapestry of solution to the problem.

Pico connects Christian and Jewish mysticism by his deliberate and specific use of kabbalistic thought in general, as the overall breadth of his theological and philosophical studies connects him as a thinker to both Abulafia and Rumi. Pico also differs from both Rumi and Abulafia in maintaining a fairly clear sense that the other traditions he studied could and must ultimately be understood as anticipating and confirming his own. Abulafia simply believed that individuals of whatever spiritual persuasion can access God’s hiddenmost recesses through his kabbalah-focused methods, and Rumi simply believed that, in the right spiritual hands, any tradition can offer access to those recesses.

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\textsuperscript{11} Remembering that only the consonants “count” in Hebrew (and that what is rendered here as an “e” is a glottal-stop consonant): E=1, L=30, H=5, M=40; Y (almost invisible in transliteration, as it is replaced by its vocalic equivalent, “I”) =10.
An older contemporary of Pico and, like Rumi, a poet, is Kabir (ca 1440-1518). One of the more compelling figures in the entire history of Indian mysticism, Kabir was born in or near Benares, and little is known about his childhood: the weaver family in which he grew up was apparently Muslim, but some assert that he was born of a Brahman widow and adopted by a childless Muslim couple. Otherwise the only information regarding his early life is that he became a disciple of the renowned Hindu ascetic, Ramananda, and a devotee of that form of Hinduism known as bhakti (Sanskrit for “devotion”), that emphasizes the Divine-human love relationship, particularly (but not only) as expressed in the literature that presents Krishna (an avatar of the god Vishnu) as engaged in a love-relationship with Radha, a gopi (goatherd girl).

Kabir came to be revered as a teacher (in Sanskrit: “Guru”) who emphasized inward, loving devotion to a divine principle. As much as his poetry has a rapturous, passionate and prophetic feel to it, it is directed to the common man. He eschewed the sort of social distinctions enshrined in the Hindu caste system and despised the religious exclusivism that went with it, as well as the sort of religious perspective that emphasized differences between Hindu and Muslim thought. He would eventually disavow an affiliation with either tradition—or better put, he asserted his membership in both, as “at once a child of ‘Allah and of Ram’; he “dreamed of reconciling the intense personal

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12 By some accounts he was born as early as 1398.
13 “Hinduism” is to a certain extent a misnomer: those we label “Hindu” (which is ultimately merely a Sanskrit word for “Indian” or “Indic”) recognize a universal Oneness that is variously manifest in three primary Gods each of whose devotees acknowledge all three and see all three as aspects of One Being. But a Brahman perceives Brahma (the Creator) as the ultimate form of divine expression; a Vaishnate perceives Vishnu (the Maintainer) as the ultimate form; a Shaivante perceives Shiva (the Destroyer) as the ultimate form. Particularly among Vaishnate and Shaivite there are also subset groups. The most popular one, coming to dominance from North to South India during the 14th-17th centuries, focused on Krishna, Vishnu’s most written-about avatar, (and in one further subset kraishnite tradition, the single source of all of Vishnu’s avatars) whose persona is reminiscent in many ways of the persona of Christ as the Son/avatar of God the Father.
Mohammedan [sic] mysticism [expressed in the poetry of Hafiz, who was then exercising a strong influence on Indian thought] with the traditional theology of Brahmanism.”

Kabir understood life to be an interplay between the individual, personal soul (Jivatma) and God, the universal Soul (Paramatma). Salvation (in the dual sense of the survival of the individual and the perfection of the everyday world) derives from the synthesis of the two. That synthesis involves a merging of Hindu (especially Bhakti) and Muslim (especially Sufi) ideas; thus the Hindu notion of an ongoing cycle of reincarnation governed by the law of karma is joined to the Muslim assertion of a single God and its rejection both of the worship of images and of a social or religious caste system.

Kabir’s poems are reflections of the passion for the Infinite expressed through the vocabulary of a mystically intimate and personal realization of God. He constantly extols the life of the home and family and love, and criticizes those who assert that the road to connection with the Divine is a road of flight away from the world of love, joy and beauty:

Lamps burn in every house, O blind one,

and you cannot see them!

One day your eyes shall suddenly be opened

and you shall see: and the fetters

of death will fall from you.

There is nothing to say or hear.

there is nothing to do:

It is he who is living, yet dead,

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14 Rabindranath Tagore, transl., Songs of Kabir, 7.
15 This law essentially states that what one does in a given lifetime will have consequences for the next life (and sometimes, lives) into which one will be subsequently born.
who shall never die again... (XXI)\textsuperscript{16}

For “he who is living, yet dead,” is the one who revels in and experiences the joys of nature, the love of life on earth that is found through the things that God has created, immersed within which one dies to the wrong-directed austerities of an ascetic life, and is reborn in a full savoring of the world around us—and “dead” in the sense of being merged with the Other World, which is yet the source of eternal life. The true guru guides his devotees on such a path, not the path of mindless chanting, endless rituals or self-flagellations, which are substitutes for reality, and in fact impediments to intimacy with the\textit{mysterion}. For these actions are walls separating the human soul from the Divine soul within the God of love and beauty.

Kabir spoke of God as accessible wherever God is genuinely sought, in the heart of the common man and in the beauty of nature, without specificity as to the institutional religious affiliation of the devotee:

\begin{quote}
Oh servant, where dost thou seek Me?

Lo! I am beside thee.

I am neither in temple nor in mosque: I am neither in Ka’aba nor in Kailash, neither am I in rituals and ceremonies, nor in Yoga and renunciation.

If thou art a true seeker, thou shalt at once see Me: thou shalt meet Me in a moment of time.

Kabir says: ‘O Sadhu! God is the breath of all breath!’
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} The Roman Numerals refer to the numeration in Tagore’s volume (see fn #14).
...Are you looking for me? I am in the next seat,

My shoulder is against yours.

You will not find me in the stupas, not in Indian shrine rooms,

not in synagogues nor in cathedrals:

Not in your masses, nor kirtans, not in legs winding

around your own neck, nor in eating nothing but vegetables.

When you really look for me you will see me instantly—

You will find me in the tiniest house of time.

Kabir says: Student, tell me, what is God?

He is the breath within the breath. (I)

Not in the edifices or actions associated with the range of institutional forms of faith, be it Hindu or Muslim, Jewish or Christian or be it Yogic, will God be found, who is rather in the innermost recesses of the everyday person’s love of, and preparation to serve, God. Neither ascetic practices nor specialized gastronomy, which separate one from ordinary, everyday life, will get one there; rather, the full-hearted recognition that God is all around and within everything will lead to God.

Thus perhaps even more emphatically than Rumi, and very differently from Abulafia or Pico, Kabir recognizes myriad paths as legitimate paths to in-depth connectedness with divinity. By “more emphatically” I mean that, whereas Rumi embraces

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17 Thus the ka‘aba is the center of Muslim faith. Mount Kailash, in Western Tibet, is venerated by billions of people of four different faiths. Kirtan is one of the pillars of the Sikh religion and refers to the singing of the sacred hymns of the guru Granth Sahib—it’s Hindu equivalent is more commonly called bhajan. The winding of legs around one’s neck refers to the various asanas (body and spiritual positions) of the varied Yogic tradition.
as legitimate a range of forms of faith that carry even beyond the Abrahamic traditions, Kabir may be seen to reject the *formal* articulations of *all* these modes of faith as too limiting, keeping the would-be mystic from the path to that in-depth connectedness.

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Isaac Luria, born in Jerusalem in 1534, traveled as far afield as Cairo within the Ottoman Turkish domains and eventually settled in Safed, around 1570. There he would gather his own disciples through his charisma, but his flame burnt briefly: he died there in 1572 of plague.

Luria’s activity as a mystic was mainly oral; the doctrines that he developed and espoused were recorded by his disciples, in particular Hayim Vitale Calabrese. In Luria’s thought, we begin to see an intense merging of kabbalistic thought with Jewish messianic thinking. Luria approaches the question of Creation by asking the question “how can there have been (and does there continue to be) room for the created world when God is all-encompassing?” His answer is *tzimtzum*—a term that generally means “concentration/contraction,” but which in his vocabulary, comes to mean “withdrawal” or “retreat.” In midrashic sources there are references to God as concentrated within the *Shekhinah*—God’s presence in the everyday world—specifically within the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem, the center of the center of the umbilicus of Divine-human, heavenly-earthbound, contact, where God’s power is concentrated and contracted into a
single infinitesimal point.\textsuperscript{18} The concept seems also to have appeared in an obscure thirteenth-century essay which Luria apparently read.\textsuperscript{19}

But the point is that Luria goes further—as we might expect of a mystical thinker—in suggesting that even from such a point of concentration God withdraws: in order to make room for the universe, God shrinks into 	extit{no-thing-ness}. At the same time, that shrinkage is a shrinkage from within God’s all-encompassing self, so that it is a withdrawal from a spaceless space within the infinite spaceless space that is God into yet deeper recesses, in order to make “room” for the space of the universe.

It is to those infinite, concentrated recesses that the mystic seeks access. Gaining access will yield 	extit{tikkun}—“repairing” the mystic’s soul, bringing it toward perfection. The question, as always, then, becomes: how can the mystic gain access that will complete the soul’s ascent toward perfection, its act of 	extit{tikkun}? The Lurianic system offers a fourfold path: 	extit{sigguf} (“chastisement”) is the first aspect—which is the recognition of all of the soul’s errors, which recognition comes about through rigorous self-examination. 	extit{Ta’anit} (“fasting”) is the second, and frequent 	extit{tevillah} (“ablution”) is the third. The fourth is 	extit{kavanah} (“intention”), which refers both to special prayers and devotions beyond what is in the normative liturgy, including the sort of combinations of sound-letters that recall Abulafia’s system; and to the recitation of those prayers and devotions with particular, special, intense, complete care and focus.

Luria carries forward an increasingly complex theory of the human soul, with its own terms and concepts. Thus he speaks of the 	extit{partzufim}.\textsuperscript{20} the Divine countenance, found

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\textsuperscript{18} See Scholem, 	extit{Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism}, 260-1.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 260-1.
\textsuperscript{20} The word 	extit{partzuf} means “face” or “countenance” in Hebrew; it is rendered in the plural in Lurianic
in all of God’s besouled beings, which become fully partzufim when their Divine source is realized by their being turned toward each other. When that happens, the presence of the Godhead in those spiritually turned toward each other becomes manifest, and the Divine “qualities” become activated in the human sphere.

Every besouled being is understood to possess a soul that has been incarnate and gone through life one or more times before, and every one who dies can expect his/her soul to return to this world again. The process of gilgul, (literally, “rolling” of the soul through its incarnations), it would appear, will continue until the messianic era, when all souls will be re-merged in a definitive and final way with God. There is more. The master—the word that the mystical community uses to refer to him is tzadik: “just one”—possesses the capacity to recognize the prior incarnations of the souls of all those he meets and can trace those souls’ wanderings back to their beginning. As such he is in a position to elicit spiritual qualities from each of those he encounters by drawing from the previous times, places and experiences which an individual might not be aware his/her soul has been and had.

Further, the soul has sparks within it—netzotzot—that are the endless fragments of the primordial light of Divine goodness that was shattered when Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command and were exiled from the Garden of Eden. Those sparks are found in all of nature, since all of creation contains elements of the Creator—or rather, of the light that marked the beginning of God’s creative act vis-à-vis the everyday world—inherently

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Kabbalah to suggest that it is never present or activated in the singular, but only when two or more individuals are engaged so that their spiritual countenances are turned toward each other. The pluralization also plays on the fact that the biblical name of God most readily identifiable as to gender and number, Elohim, is a grammatical plural, although it refers to a God considered emphatically singular. The midrashic explanation for this is that the name suggests how everything (hence plurality) is encompassed within the one God.
within it. The sparks housed within human souls shoot out from one to the other when the
partzufim are engaged; the pregnancy of each soul gives birth to goodness and both souls
(if it is a matter of two, but it could be, and ultimately must be, many more than two) are
successfully engaged in the act of tikkun.

Indeed the concept of tikkun so essential to Lurianic Kabbalah is never limited to
the perfection of an individual soul—certainly not to the mystic’s own soul. The practices
of the fourfold path of bringing the soul toward perfection is intended not simply to aid the
individual in gaining access to God’s hiddenmost recess, but to bring the messiah. When all
souls are ready, perfect, suffused with kavanah—when the entire world is ready and in
alignment with perfect goodness—the messiah will arrive. Thus Lurianuic tikkun is
ultimately not tikkun haNefesh (“perfection/repair of the soul”) but tikkun olam
(“perfection/repair of the world”). The tzadik is able to help facilitate all of these processes,
but it is the intense kavanah with which the practice of sigguf, ta’anit, and tevillah is
undertaken by each and every member of the community—everyday people—that will
hasten the coming of the messianic age.

Given the overall non-proselytic nature of Judaism since the fourth century, that age
and the perfection that comes with it can only be understood in the broadest of
universalistic terms. The Messianic Age is not conceived in terms of a particular, Jesus-like
figure but in broad, happy-co-existence-for-all-besouled-beings terms. While the
immediate guide for the pure, positive behavioral patterns that will lead in that direction is
kabalistic and therefore Jewish, ultimately Luria’s community of followers must by
definition have in mind to encompass all people of good will as part of the community,
regardless of the specifics of their spirituality, their texts—even their articulation of what God is.

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Thomas Merton (1915-68) carries this narrative out of the medieval and renaissance periods into the twentieth century. Merton was born in France to a pair of artists, an American mother (who died of stomach cancer when he was six years old) and a father from New Zealand (who died of a brain tumor when Merton was 16 years old).

Brought up as a nominal Protestant he found himself in Rome some time after his father’s death, visiting churches without really knowing why. One night he sensed his father’s presence for a few moments in his room and with that presence, his own feeling of emptiness. He prayed seriously for the first time, asking God to deliver him from his darkness. But it was only after a long period of losing and re-finding himself, which period carried him from Europe to America, eventually to Clare College in Cambridge (England) and thence to Columbia University in New York City, that he discovered Catholicism in a real way.

In 1938 he met the Hindu monk Mahanambrata Brahmachari, who surprised him by suggesting that he look more deeply into his own faith, rather than attempting to convert him to Hinduism. Merton’s spiritual quest led him back to the Roman Catholicism with which he had been flirting on and off for several years; he was baptized as a Catholic on November 16, 1938. In May, 1941 he picked up the old copy of the Bible that he had acquired in Italy eight years earlier and his eye fell arbitrarily (or not!) on the passage in Luke stating “behold, you shall be silent.” He immediately thought of the Cistercian Order
with its vows of silence. A few months later he entered the Trappist monastery, Our Lady of Gethsemani, in Kentucky—on December 10, 1941. After three days in the monastery guest house he was accepted as a postulate into the Order. There Merton found his vocation not only as a man of the Spirit, but as a writer.

He wrote poetry, a number of works for the monastery, works of hermetic focus, and, in a turning point with regard to his vocation as a bridge between the inner life and outer action, a memoir, *The Seven Story Mountain*, which he authored in 1946, and which a few years later brought him unanticipated renown. His work was deeply syncretistic, drawing not only from the Christian mystical tradition, but from Far Eastern religions as well as from secular literature and art and also psychology.

The Trappist Cistercian Order emphasizes silence, but Merton spoke continually through his writing. His Abbot recognized the importance for the Order—and for the spread of spirituality in broad directions—of Merton’s talent, and encouraged him to use it when Merton himself feared that his writing might make him too self-focused. His words are shaped by silence and solitude; their purpose is to guide others as he seeks his own inner path back toward the union with God from Which all humans, since Adam and Eve, have been in exile. True union requires true contemplation which necessitates a true emptying of the self—a kind of spiritual death:

> ... The contemplative is one who would rather not know than know,

> rather not enjoy than enjoy. He accepts the love of God on faith, in defiance of all

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21 The Trappist Order was established in 1644 in La Trappe, France, as a sub-order of the Cistercians. Otherwise known as the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, it was founded in response to the relaxation of practices in many Cistercian monasteries. The Trappists are a contemplative Order that follows the Benedictine Rule; its members practice lives divided between manual work and prayer and with a sensibility focused on penance.
apparent evidence. This is the necessary condition, and a very paradoxical condition,
for the mystical experience of God’s presence and of His love for us. Only when we
are able to ‘let go’ of everything within us, all desire to know, to taste and to experience
the presence of God, do we truly become able to experience that presence... 22

Paradoxes, again, then: one seeks not to know because what one seeks is beyond
“knowledge.” Only when we let go of the desire for God—which stems from our self,
which self generates even that desire—can we find the unknowable God who can then find
us. The image of an inner desert suggests a return to the beginnings of Christian
monasticism, but without the necessity of physical isolation in the wilderness: one can find
the desert of sense-less, empty contemplation within one’s self (which is where the One
will find the contemplative one).

And it is only after one has achieved self-understanding through contemplation that
one will be able to be useful as an instrument in helping to improve the condition of the
world. Without self-understanding, the world gets nothing from the individual but
obsessive, aggressive, ambitious, overweening self. And “there is nothing more tragic in
the modern world than the misuse of power and action to which men are driven by their
own Faustian misunderstandings and misapprehensions,” and nothing more dangerous to
the world than that self-obsessed condition, given the technological power we have
attained, as a species, with “…more power at our disposal today than we ever had, and yet
we are more alienated and estranged from the inner ground of meaning and of love than we
have ever been.” 23

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Moreover, the Source of the inner ground of meaning and of love offers Itself along diverse paths, not along any one exclusive path. As his years in the monastery moved forward, Merton became more and more focused on spiritual dialogue with other faiths, particularly the Far Eastern spiritual traditions. In this he recalls Rumi and even more so Kabir—and also circled back to where his spiritual search began in earnest in 1938. Having previously met the expatriate Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, author and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh,24 as well as D.T. Suzuki, renowned author of books and essays on Zen Buddhism, Shin Buddhism and Buddhism in general; he undertook a tour of Asia in 1968 during which he met with the Dalai Lama, supreme head of Tibetan Buddhism, among others. His syncretistic spiritual inclinations were on the verge of exponential further expansion. In what was then Ceylon, he visited Polonnaruwa, where he is said to have had a transformative religious experience while meditating before the enormous statues of the Buddha. But it was on this far-reaching journey that he died suddenly in Bangkok, on December 10—the precise anniversary of his entering the Gethsemani monastery 27 years earlier—when, stepping out of the bath he touched a poorly grounded electric fan.

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In each of these mystical masters we recognize a realization that there is a particular paradox among the many paradoxes with which mysticism is inherently fraught. For whereas each tradition offers a more intense, and thus tighter and narrower focus on

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24 “Thich” is a title used by all Vietnamese monks and nuns to signify that they are part of the Shakyamuni Buddha clan. Nhat Hanh as a spiritual activist coined the phrase “Engaged Buddhism” to refer to teaching outside the monastery in the world, in order to help improve it, in his key work, Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire, written during the Vietnam War era.
divinity than does its “normative” counterpart, yet both the process and the goal connect one mystical tradition to others in a more obviously broad manner than is true for the “normative” forms of faith to which each corresponds. The question in the end is less why these six thinkers, each in his own manner and according to his own particulars, located this truth within his search and his faith, than why many other mystics have not.

Nonetheless, we can recognize that the embrace by these six of those outside their own faiths is neither identical with regard to who is explicitly included nor is it with respect to their goals. Abraham Abulafia is willing and eager to include any aspirants, regardless of their tradition, within his process of seeking the mysterion, but there is an obvious if unstated condition attached to that inclusion. Any participants, one must assume, would need to learn Hebrew quite well, and be able to embrace the precepts of the Torah. The same might be inferred of Lurianic universality. By definition, if one is to engage God, from the perspective of Jewish mysticism, the instrumentation must be Hebrew-language and Torah-focused—even if the particulars of belief system need not be incontrovertibly Jewish.

The universalism of Pico, that includes his genuine and respectful interest in both Kabbalah and Muslim texts, has as its conceptual goal to find the underlying principles of these sources to validate Christianity. Thomas Merton, interestingly, reaches out and finds important spiritual nourishment in branches of Buddhism—but does not turn to either Jewish or Muslim mysticism. Both he and Pico, as Christians and as Christian mystics, may not be able, perhaps by definition, to reach in an absolute manner outside the Christian religion, since centerpieces of that religion include not only the fact of the divine nature of Jesus but the conviction that, without embracing the notion of Jesus’
divinity, one is doomed to exclusion from heaven. Buddhism, as a form of spirituality that does not specify a God, can offer spiritual enrichment to Merton without undercutting his Christianity as Judaism or Islam (or Hinduism or any number of other forms of faith) presumably would.25

Kabir, who was born and grew up in a mixed community in which he partook simultaneously of Islam and Hinduism, was able to embrace an absolute sense of the reality of multiple paths to God and God’s mysterion.26 There are no intrinsic inhibitors to that embrace: he did not come from a community of Arabic-speaking purists for whom that language and its heart-text are the only means of gaining access to the mysterion, or where a doctrine of heaven and hell dominates. The same might be said of Rumi: although he spent his life within a largely Muslim world, his passage through its various communities—and more important, his diverse linguistic as well as cultural experience of Islam itself—offered no inherent impediments to a fully universalist perspective. What he needed to push him from a spiritually parochial to a universalist view was the right kind of mind and heart, which he clearly possessed.

There is more, as with Thomas Merton we have followed the issue of universality deep into the twentieth century and a world—that of America—which is ostensibly secular, and in which, therefore, such spiritual thirst and the response to that thirst might be assumed to be less than in the worlds of Rumi, Abulafia, Pico, Kabir and Luria. Can we find such a thirst still in evidence, and if so, can that thirst be met by a still broader universality? The simple answer is yes.

25 Buddhism is most often and mistakenly referred to as a religion—I say “mistakenly,” since the existence of God (or gods) is a given for what we call “religion” and Buddhism does not specify a divinity, but puts its emphasis, rather, on achieving enlightenment along the branches of the eight-fold path.

26 Hinduism is for that matter inherently possessed of that concept, with its triune godhead with their respective avatars variously emphasized by diversely focused devotees.
First, the fact is that Merton is far from the only individual in the twentieth (or early twenty-first) century who might be labeled a mystic. Moreover, particularly as we follow American history toward the end of the last millennium and the beginning of the current one, we can observe a distinct upsurge in spirituality in a range of ways, from sheer volume of those declaring an interest in and participating in expressions of spirituality, to the range and variety of emergent forms of those expressions. Further, we can observe this growth not only in America, but in other places and diverse polities, from the Russian Federation\textsuperscript{27} to the state of Turkey.

Indeed, in turning to the Turkey in which Rumi developed his Sufi thought, we are positioned to connect the question of spirituality in an apparently secular context to the matter of universalistic thinking. The lens of connection focuses on Fethullah Gulen and the movement that bears his name. Reference to him brings us geographically full circle to where we began our discussion with Jalal ad-Din Rumi and to the broadest of universalist mystical perspectives. Is this mere coincidence or is there something about the Anatolian-Turkish culture as it has merged with the \textit{dar al’Islam} that yields such a distinct breadth of perspective?

Moreover, Gulen’s philosophy, while it might not in and of itself be called mystical, is fraught with paradoxes that obliquely recall the paradoxes that define mysticism. For on the one hand, Gulen is perceived as a threat by some in the secular establishment that has ruled Turkey for 85 years and reflects the concerns of Turkey’s founding father, Gemal Ataturk, that a state with a particular religion built into its

\textsuperscript{27} I am referring to the explosion of spiritual interest in post-Soviet Russia that is expressed in the reopening of monasteries, the rebuilding of the great cathedral in Moscow that the Communists destroyed in 1922 and the proliferation of an endless range of Christian and other denominations across the nation. See the article by Serge Schmemann in \textit{The New York Times}, Wednesday, July 28, 1993, p A1, A8.
foundations inevitably comes to favor that religion at the unhappy expense of others. Gulen is perceived as desirous of re-shaping contemporary Turkey as an Islamic state.

But what the secularists don’t recognize is that Gulen’s image of Turkey as an Islamic state is radically different from that embodied in any other Islamic states across the planet, combining aspects of Turkey’s Ottoman past at its inclusive best28 with elements of Ataturk’s wide-open secular embrace of diverse ethnic and religious groups—a perspective that was spiritually expressed by Rumi in the thirteenth century.

There is more. Gulen has noted that the democratic form of government accords with the notion in the traditional Muslim shari’a of “consultative consensus” (ijma). And while the Gulen movement includes any number of individuals as members and/or supporters of political significance, its primary goal is spiritually focused. Further, to the extent that the Gulen movement does have a religious foundation, and to the extent that such a foundation is Muslim, perhaps the closest sibling to it as an ideology is Alevism, an indigenous Turkish movement that emphasizes love and respect—embrace, and not merely lip-service toleration—for all people, regardless of religion, ethnicity or race.

Alevi pray in centers called cemevis, rather than in mosques, and Gulen has spoken of the ideal of constructing cemevis and mosques side-by-side as a symbol of interweaving diverse elements of the community—in this case, the Muslim community. But Gulen has met with Jewish and Christian leaders—both from within Turkey and without (from Israel’s Chief Sephardic rabbi to Pope John-Paul II)—to promote

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28 I have in mind the ideal that a truly pious Sultan governs according to absolute principles of justice and equality. The Ottoman state at its liberal best could and did offer great autonomy to non-Muslim minorities, as when in the sixteenth century the Jewish vizier to several sultans, Joseph ha-Nasi was made Count of Naxos and also granted territory around Tiberias in which to create a semi-autonomous Jewish mini-state. Religion could be and at such times was regarded as a private matter; Christians and Jews were governed by their own laws. Moreover, with the advent of Western domination in the nineteenth century, the Ottomans even with a less than ideal leadership adopted Western political innovations and embraced the science and technology of the West.
dialogue. He has been praised by Alevi leaders, but also by non-Muslim leaders. The latter have remarked on his emphases not only on interfaith discussion but on the interchange between scientific and religious thinking and leadership.

Further, Alevism may also be understood—in its articulation of four gates and forty levels of spiritual attainment, led by a spiritual guide—as a mystical movement. So while the Gulen movement is not considered mystical, it has ideological ties not only to past but to present Sufi thinking. Both the Gulen movement and Alevism have come to emphasize gender parity, which is consistent with the principles that Ataturk put in place for the new state of Turkey back in the 1920s on the one hand and on the other harks back to Abulafian thinking in the thirteenth century.

Further still, the movement’s educational focus has primarily directed itself to Turkic peoples within and beyond Turkey, which reflects a defined ethno-linguistic perspective rather than geo-political identity. But Gulen shares a sense of what, in the varied expressions of spiritual goals articulated by mystics from Rumi to Merton, offers itself as the ultimate point and purpose of spiritual and educational enrichment for its devotees: to bring about an improved universal condition for all peoples everywhere, across the planet.29

Pan-planetary ambitions under everyday circumstances are typically and historically reflections of self-centered egotism on the part of the bearer of those ambitions. The danger they offer is what Merton referred to as “the misuse of power and action to which men are driven by their own Faustian misunderstandings and misapprehensions.” But the mystic, in order to succeed as a mystic, must abandon his

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29 Gulen uses the Turkish term hizmet, “service” to refer to the endless discipline and effort necessary to perfect the world. The will to engage in constant hizmet, he asserts, stems from faith as well as offering a means of gaining God’s favor.
ego—emptying his *self* to make room to fill that self with God. When the early second-century Rabbi Akiva reported to Rabbi Ishmael in an early (pre-kabbalistic) mystical text that he had suddenly “grasped the Name of God,” that suddenness followed a transition through seven states of being—“first I was pious, then I was pure, then I was straight,” and so on. Any and all of the first six states that Akiva described would define him as arrogant and narcissistic under ordinary conditions. But Akiva’s report had to be innocent of such egocentricity, or he could not, by definition, grasp that Name.

Humility is a necessary concomitant of the mystical enterprise. By analogy, all the reports regarding Fethullah Gulen suggest that he embodies the kind of humility that a mystic would embrace. His desire to address spiritual needs and offer education as well as to offer a program for stability in a time of great stress places him firmly within the Sufi tradition as it was articulated by Rumi—who, like Gulen, was feared by much of the political leadership of his era as a pursuer of political power—and which, in various ways may be seen to have been shared by Kabir and Abulafia, as well as by Pico, Luria and Merton. That desire is consonant with hopes for improving conditions both within the Turkey envisioned by Ataturk eight decades ago and across the human condition.

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