Exaggerated Sufism in the age of terrorism

by Dr. Qaisar Abbas

Mysticism and Sufism have some potential in providing a common platform to world religions for reducing unnecessary religious animosities and tensions. The potential of mysticism, however, as a dynamic ideology in the contemporary world should not be over emphasized.

Believe it or not, world religions despite their image as a bunch of hot-headed tribes engaged in hostilities can forge unity and peace not only among themselves but also among the masses searching for tranquility in today’s violent world. Unfortunately, we rarely see the common strands that connect people all over the world through cultural embodiments of mysticism in a meaningful and positive way.

Mysticism strives for direct connection with the supreme reality and nature, and bonds of harmony with humankind through self purification, spirituality and contemplation. With this connectivity to the nature, environment and humanity, it offers a variety of formations and colors around the world. From Sufism in Islam to Kabbalah in Judaism and Bhakti in Hinduism, it offers streams of philosophical, ritualistic, literary and artistic forms. These dimensions, however, are rarely explored as social, academic, reformist and research approaches in the main stream religion, higher education, social work and politics.

Mysticism has similar philosophical themes in the three Middle Eastern religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Rarely explored, these common themes can be used for establishing strong alliances between these religions. Kabbalah in Judaism is the oldest form of mysticism in the world that strived to search for connecting humanity with the Divine force. God in the Jewish mystic tradition has 10 attributes that explain the basic philosophy to understand humanity and
universe. These attributes or Sephirot, as they are called in Hebrew, include the highest attribute of the above-conscious will, intellect of knowledge, love and kindness, strength, mercy, splendor, and foundation. These attributes also define an ethical framework for humanity to comprehend aspects of morality and human character. Kabbalah defines the human soul in terms of three elements: the animal instinct, moral virtues, and the super soul. With these foundational tenets Kaballah offers several schools of thought with the objective of exploring connectedness of human beings with God. The conceptual framework of Kaballah is integrated with the teachings of the holy book Torah but the practice separates it from the Orthodox Judaism.

Christianity also offers a rich tradition of mysticism grounded in the teaching and message of the Bible itself. The overall Christine doctrine generally maintains that God exists in each Christian who can experience the supreme reality directly by believing in Jesus. There are three main streams of mysticism in the Christian traditions that are very similar to Sufism: mysticism of nature that believes in the existence of God in the nature itself, the monistic mysticism that perceives individuals as identical with the Absolute and finally, the theistic mysticism that believes in the existence of a transcendent and supreme reality.

Mysticism in Christianity also has a practical dimension that provides individual experiences to reach God through the three basic elements of body, soul and spirit. New mystics start with the first level of purification of body through discipline, prayers at certain times alone or with a group, in certain body postures. Traditional mysticism in Christianity also has a significant element of a communal base where community of believers and Church are actively involved in the mystic rituals led by a mentor or teacher as a significant part of mysticism, very similar to the Sufi concept of Murshid.

Historically, the Islamic tradition of Sufism has been a broad-based movement developed in the modern-day Middle East, popularized in Iran as a poetic form and became a grassroots movement in South Asia. During the Abbasids period when deep and complex philosophical discussions and the strengthening alliances between the clergy and the court of the time were emerging, people started thinking about alternate ways on approaching God with personal contemplation, purification of mind and body as opposed to philosophical complexities and prevailing interpretations of religion under the court patronage. Historically the Islamic Sufism initiated and established itself in three phases: rudimentary conceptual development, philosophical sophistication, and mass-based movements across a large span of time.

Although mysticism in all religious traditions strive for coexistence with others, the South Asian mystic traditions of Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism historically are intertwined with grassroots movements connecting people beyond religious, ethnic and cultural boundaries. Several Bhakti movements became popular in India during the 14th and 17th centuries which were grassroots oriented and communal based. These movements led by the mystics like Kabir, Tulsidas, Namdeo, Ravidas and others taught that people can simply express their love for God without traditional rituals declining the patronage of the religious elite. These movements also produced a large number of devotional literature, poetry and prose, in ethnic languages rather than the mainstream and elite religious language. Despite minor difference these movements involved common people with their message of tolerance and love for God and humans.
Sufism left a huge impact on the cultural milieu of South Asian societies. While a large number of poets were also practicing Sufis in Iran such as the great Sufi poets Jalaluddin Rumi and Sanai, in India Sufism became part of the poetic discourse in the form of bold symbols and liberal concepts that gave the Indian poetry a freedom of social and political expression that was not possible otherwise. While spring became the season of love and ecstasy, autumn was a sign of oppression and grief. Drinking vine became a symbol of rebellion while Saqi or the bartender a symbol of piety. These and other symbolic lexicon refined poetic renderings that became popular in regional languages and the mainstream Urdu poetry at large.

Sufis in the sub-continental context are known for providing a common venue for people of all religions and ethnicities. Sufi shrines are still highly popular among the believers of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian and other faiths. Although the institution never challenged feudalism directly, it created a parallel institution that provided an alternate route to the established social order based on the hegemony of the prevailing feudal system and the ruling aristocracy.

Beyond their love for humanity and tolerance, Sufi imprints in music, poetry and literature are monumental. Amir Khusrow, a known mystic poet and disciple of the great Sufi of his time, Nizamuddin Ouliya, was also a pioneer of the Indian music who invented several musical instruments and ragas. The Punjabi poetry of Bulhay Shah and Baba Farid, and the Sindhi poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, all are assets of Sufi legacies in the subcontinent. It is because of this heritage that the Sufi music is still a popular genre in the subcontinent today.

Sufism also evolved into an institution that became a source of psychological catharsis to the poor and needy in the Indian subcontinent who sought refuge from their sufferings in Khanqahs and Sufi shrines. In the times of war, political chaos, social disorder and political oppression, people approached Sufis for their advice and assistance. Coming from a middle and lower class orientation Sufism was primarily a grassroots movement in South Asia.

Despite its religious orientation, however, the most significant impact the institution left in the region was creating a society based on communal harmony in a highly diverse region culturally, ethnically and socially. It was because of this institution that South Asian lived peacefully and collaboratively for centuries.

Despite the conflictive attitude of orthodox religions toward each other, their mystic institutions astoundingly offered similar teachings, philosophical tenets and the overall approach to reach out to individuals of all schools of thought. These institutions and their teachings became a powerful bond that exists in all major religions with similar linkages of spirituality and love for all.

All mystic traditions tried to comprehend divinity, universe, and life from personal, subjective and individual perspectives. Setting aside the tenets of outwardly rituals of the orthodoxy, mysticism offered a humanistic approach to religion. Because of this all mainstream religions consider mysticism as impure and questioned its relevance and legitimacy.

Mysticism also deemphasized self-righteousness of all mainstream religions and promoted the concept of equality of all world religions which are thought to be different paths to reach out to the supreme reality. These ideas, however, put Sufism in a heightened state of conflict with the
orthodox religion which emphasized on outward rituals while Sufism approached it from a subjective dimension based on personal experience.

In the 21st century, however, mysticism exists in poetic, musical and literary forms only and it has a symbolic presence in terms of great shrines and annual fairs as part of the cultural milieu in South Asia. Unfortunately the same institution that served the down trodden for centuries in the subcontinent, has become a part of an exploitative feudal system in South Asia, falling down to the lowest possible level.

Mysticism and Sufism have played a significant role historically in developing alternate religious ideologies, promoting liberal thoughts, and providing a grassroots base to the otherwise ritualistic and rigid religious ideologies. However, being a passive rather than a politically active ideology, it can play a limited role in today’s complex world.

Mysticism and Sufism have some potential in providing a common platform to world religions for reducing unnecessary religious animosities and tensions. In the South Asian context, it can also provide a conceptual framework for grassroots movements working for equity, gender equality and communal harmony. The potential of mysticism, however, as a dynamic ideology in the contemporary world should not be exaggerated and over emphasized.

**Dr. Qaisar Abbas**, a U.S. based freelance journalist, grant writing consultant and a published Urdu poet, frequently writes on media, literature and society. With a Master's degree in Journalism from Punjab University, Lahore, he worked as Public Relations Officer for the provincial government of Punjab. Later he joined Pakistan Television as News Producer before moving to the United States where he did Ph.D. from University of Wisconsin-Madison in Mass Communication. After working on administrative and teaching positions at several universities in the U.S., he is currently working as Assistant Dean at the University of North Texas. He can be reached at qaabbas@gmail.com