

The Concept Of Mystical Union: Juxtaposing Islamic And Christian Versions

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Abstract

Mystical Union is an umbrella term commonly used to represent the highest level of spiritual elevation and a mystic or Sufi's experience of ultimate reality. In Christianity, it represents the mystic's experience of direct contact with God or Jesus Christ. In Islamic version, it is delineated in two perspectives, Wahdat-ul-Wajood (School of Ibne Arabi) and Wahdat-ul-Shahood (School of Sheikh Ahmed Sirhandi). This article is a comparative study of Islamic and Christian versions of mystical experience. It is focused on tracing affinities in mysticism rooted in two different religions. The term is defined from both perspectives and necessary evidence from the text of the Holy Qur'an and the Bible is supplemented by the works of well-known mystics, poets, or writers. Through following the principles of comparative research model promoted by David Freidenreich focused on four modes of Comparison, it has been safely concluded that, at the highest level of spiritual elevation, differences based on religious beliefs and practices either cease to exist or appear to be almost insignificant.

Key Words: Mystical Union, Sufism, Christian Mysticism, David Freidenreich, Comparison

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore Islamic and Christian mysticism to find out similarities in both versions on the concept of Mystical Union. Although Islam and Christianity show serious differences on fundamental beliefs e.g., concept of God, position of Hazrat Esa (Jesus Christ), prophethood, revelation, sacred texts (Qur'an and Bible), the life after death, and the day of judgment yet the followers of both religions are united under the title of the People of the Book (Ahl al-Kitab). It paves the way for comparative study of Islam and Christianity and explore the common points on which both religions may be in a total agreement.

The significance of this study lies in the position of Mystical union as a level of spiritual elevation where dogmatic differences cease to exist. In this way, the mystical aspects of both religions with common points may help to explore universal themes in both religions for promoting universal brotherhood of mankind. This study is a step forward in the direction of promoting better understanding between the followers of world's two major religions through adding slightly to existing scholarship on the subject. For this purpose, the scheme of comparative study developed by David Freidenreich has been followed as an appropriate approach to trace similarities between both versions of mystical experience.

Existing scholarship on the subject is in such a bulk that it appears almost impossible to discuss all works. It is neither possible nor the scope of this article to have even an overview of maximum works related to comparative religions from mystical perspectives. However, few of the works of researchers on comparative mysticism in the last two decades can be presented as a tip of iceberg. Such works provide necessary space for this article to be an ordinary and minor addition to existing scholarship in comparative mysticism particularly from Islamic and Christian traditions. The following research works can be regarded as noteworthy.

Milani¹ examines comparatively the concept of love in Islam and Christianity. This comparison is made in two shapes. At first, the beginning of every chapter (other than Surah al-Tawbah) prefaced with the name of Allah, the merciful, which means full of love. It is juxtaposed with the figure of Jesus as a symbol of love in the Bible. On the other hand, Jesus is compared with al-Hallaj. Here the form of love is a bit different. Devotional love is motivating force for the martyrdom of Mansoor al-Hallaj and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Milani explores theme of love with reference to the works of well-known mystical figures like, Rabia al-Adawiyya (717-801), Jalal-ud-din Rumi (1207-1273), Hafiz Shirazi (1325-1389), Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240) and Louis Massignon (1883-1962).

Netton² offers comparative study of Islam and Christianity from their mystical dimensions. It explores the significance of contemplation to be the highest form of prayer and its scope in Spiritual Progress in line with the views of Juan de la Cruz and Teresa of Ávila. It is followed by Quranic version of mystical knowledge. The reference to the verse of Holy Qur'an stating that, "We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in their very souls" is presented as a basis for

mystical journey. The dynamism of mystical path like that of al-Khaḍīr/Elijah is presented as a model for mystics from different periods of history using different languages and following different cultural values in their personal and social life.

Zarrabi-Zadeh³ examines Comparative mysticism from two different angles. At one hand, there is a common perspective of essentialists or phenomenologists who follow comparative approach in order to highlight the harmonies or common points between different mystical traditions. On the other hand, a group of researchers usually called constructivists who use comparison as a tool for highlighting differences between mystical traditions. Zarrabi-Zadeh rejects both approaches focused on either similarities or differences and suggests an alternative approach based on comparison for highlighting the specific characters and themes. Through following this technique, he tries to provide the way to understand the mysticism of Rumi and Meister Eckhart. He suggests that the purpose of comparison should be comprehension rather than a measuring rod to measure the increase or decrease and similarity or difference.

Griggs⁴ suggests a different approach in inter-faith studies. He claims that Christian-Muslim comparative studies have always been controversial because of their apologetic nature. He suggests dialogical model promoted by mystics as a good alternative and emphasizes its relevance in promoting better understanding and reconciliation between two completely different and conflicting ideologies. Dialogue on mystical ground moves beyond the rigid boundaries of religious belief systems. Dialogue on mystical themes opens new avenues for developing common thinking on mystical ideas because the ultimate objective of mystical knowledge is almost similar in both traditions.

Bisma Ilyas⁵ is focused on Mystical approaches in Christianity and Islam. She claims that in spite of being two different religions both bear strong resemblances in mystical domain. The mystics of both religions preach love, peace, and universal brotherhood of mankind. Holy books of both religions (Qur'an and Bible) provide necessary guidelines to proceed on mystical path to achieve its ultimate goal. Both traditions have similar history. Mystical approaches in both religions have criticized by political authorities because of theological nature of Islamic and Christian empires. She gives historical account of mysticism in both religions. Their development in the presence of serious opposition by the people in power. She concludes her thesis through justifying the need for dialogue for Universal peace and harmony in mystical traditions of both religions.

Research Methodology

Keeping in view the nature of current article, Comparative analysis of both religious versions has been made. Comparison, in this case, serves as an appropriate analytical framework. Every comparative study is usually based on its goals and is designed in a way that may lead to achieve its goals. In this way, a Comparative study appears to be more a process than method. And thus, the findings of research are mostly unpredictable. The goals of comparison seem to be highly

philosophical and thus beyond the limits of usual discussions on research methodology. However, the significance of ideas being compared is usually attached to the process or mode of comparison.

Modes of Comparison

The modes of comparison suggested by David Freidenreich⁶ have been followed in making comparison of Christian and Islamic versions of Mystical Union. Freidenreich's suggestion is perhaps the most suitable research design in comparative study of religions. He emphasizes his proposed methodology of comparative religions through categorically declaring that "I define the comparison of religion as the examination, in a unified work, of sources from at least two distinct religious traditions addressing an aspect of religion common to the comparands".⁷ His strategy of comparative study shifts from what is comparison? to how to make comparison?

Freidenreich's approach of comparison appears to be the outcome of his analysis of existing approaches to the comparison of religions. He divides it into four different modes to meet the need of different researchers in religious studies. He declares, "I have divided these approaches into the broad categories of comparative focus on similarity, comparative focus on difference, comparative focus on genus-species relationship, and the use of comparison to refocus".⁸ His scheme of comparative study can be analyzed as follows:

1. Freidenreich's first mode comparison describes such studies of two religions that demonstrate a strong focus on similarity through ignoring dogmatic dissimilarities between the religions being compared.
2. The second mode refers to religious studies focused on differences without leaving any space for common human values of all religions. Such a one-sided approach does not serve any purpose because of fundamental differences between different religions. However, the focus on differences provides good information for research.
3. Third mode of Freidenreich's comparative study seems to be more relevant in analyzing themes from different religions. It shows a focus on genus-species relationship, constructing a genus (such as religious nationalism, scripture, or myth) by comparing various varieties and discovering affinities and differences between them. It is comparatively more practical mode of comparison particularly on mystical ideas of different religions.
4. The fourth mode of comparison is designed for such studies that use comparison to refocus. In other words, to understand one fact the lens of other fact is used. In this way, an idea or belief of one religion or a term of one religion can be analyzed from the perspective of another religion.

The principles of Freidenreich's model i.e., the modes of comparison, paved the way for the study of Mystical union with reference to Islam and Christianity. The study follows simultaneously one or the other mode of comparison. The study proceeds from the definition of mystical union from a common point of view, to its Islamic and Christian perspectives. The textual evidence from the Holy Qur'an and the Bible is complemented with the evidence from the mystical literature of

Muslim and Christian writers. The writers or literary figures chosen for this study are those who either experienced mystical union or who have been its strong believers.

The Nature of Mystical Union

To describe the mystical experience in plain words is really difficult for the people who follow any religion based on monotheism. However, the scholars who made efforts to give tongue to such an inexpressible experience used the tool of poetry (literature) or relied mostly on the views of well-known mystics. The term, Mystical union, may have many connotations but hardly a single connotation is commonly acceptable to mystics and scholars of mysticism. In this way, the nature of mystical union would be discussed with maximum subjectivity in accordance with the background of concerned writer.

As Mystical union is a part of Mysticism as a discipline it would be better to define mysticism before analyzing its highest stage. Bernard McGinn defines mysticism as “an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God”.⁹ McGinn’s definition gives an impression of mystical experience as a direct link between the Creator and Creature. If majority of the religions in the world including Islam and Christianity are explored the number of people who expressed such an experience is considerable. If we focus on only two religions i.e., Islam and Christianity the concept of mystical union can be confirmed in both religions with a number of similarities.

Islamic Mystical Union

Islamic mysticism or Sufism is the journey of a mystic on the path of purifying the Self to the highest stage or perfected soul (nafs-e-kamila). At this stage, the Sufi may experience Mystical union. Nicholson observes: “Whatever terms may be used to describe it, the unitive state is the culmination of the simplifying process by which the soul is gradually isolated from all that is foreign to itself, from all that is not God”.¹⁰ Nicholson’s definition of mystical union can be interpreted from two perspectives. And these schools of thought are well-known in Muslim societies all over the world.

At one hand, it is Oneness of Being (Wahdat-ul-Wajood) by School of Ibne Arabi, which suggests that Real Existence (Wajood-e-Haqiqi) is one and all others are supposed existence (Wajood Ikhtiari) which means that nothing exists other than Real Existence (God). Hence, the Sufi cannot see anything other than God. On the other hand, it is Oneness of appearance (Wahdat-ul-Shahood) by the School of Sheikh Ahmed Sirhandi, which suggests that in the presence of Real Existence, all others also exist but cannot be seen because of the light of Real Existence. In order to examine the highest level of spiritual elevation the text of the Holy Qur’an and mystical literature may provide sizeable information and spiritual insight.

Qur’anic References to Mystical Union

Sufism appears to be based on the inner meaning of the Holy Qur'an and thus its central theme may also be derived from the same source. Keeping in view the doctrine of Oneness of Being (Wahdat-ul-Wajood) the verse of Holy Qur'an clearly defines the status of man in God's kingdom, "When I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him of My spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him."¹¹ An injunction from God for angels to prostrate before Adam shows that it was prostration to God's spirit in man rather than man himself. The worship can be offered only to Real Existence (God) and not to Unreal Existence (Man).

Similarly, the spirit of God is staying transitorily in Human body and naturally wants to go back and unite with its original source. Such a natural desire can be analyzed from the verse of Holy Qur'an, "from God we came, and to God shall we return."¹² This returning to the original destination is much important and central to the Sufism. The journey of a Sufi on mystical path is actually the journey of separated Human Soul or Spirit of God to God, the original source and ends with mystical union with God.

There are many verses in the Holy Qur'an which provide inspiration for Human soul to crave for union with God, the real master of soul. The isolation from material world is the first stage on mystical journey. Qur'an says, "Remember the name of the Master, and isolate thyself to Him with a total isolation."¹³ The journey of Soul to achieve nearness to God (Qurb-e-Elahi) is strengthened by two verse of the Holy Qur'an. At one hand, "Wherever you turn, there is the Face of Allah"¹⁴ and on the other hand, "He is with you wherever you be."¹⁵ It provides a clear picture of Sufi path and encouragement to avoid disappointment so that the Sufi may be able to overcome the difficulties of Sufi path. Sufi's realization of God's nearness may give him more power to exert on the way to union. The verse of Holy Qur'an clearly guides, "He is nearer to him than his life Vein."¹⁶

Literary References to Islamic Mystical Union

A vast majority of the Sufis used poetry as a tool to express their own mystical experience. They expressed it through using literary symbols which apparently look something like heresy and deviation from the accepted norms of society, however, the followers of such mystical figures have always been inclined to support their ideas but also made maximum efforts to promote and disseminate them.. Al-Hallaj publicly declares in one of his poems:

I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I:
We are two spirits dwelling in one body.
If thou seest me, thou seest Him,
And if thou seest Him, thou seest us both.¹⁷

The lines of poetry depict Hallaj's spiritual condition where he is under the influence of Oneness of Being (Wahdat-ul-Wajood) and negates his own existence. Under poetic license, poets are usually able to express even the most inexpressible ideas but the state of being united with Real Existence and losing one's own identity is something unique and hardly expressible even by poets using different languages including Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Sindhi and Punjabi. The poets used the heroine of the romance as the symbol for the soul longing for union with God through suffering and death.

Other examples of poetic representation of mystical union are that of Attar's well-known, the Birds' Conversation (Mantiq ut-tair). It discusses seven valleys (veils) which the "Bird of the Sky" passes to meet Simurgh (God). Hafiz of Shiraz (1320-1389), used imagery to describe various features like, the beauty of lips, long hair, bright eyes, and attractive neck and tried to discuss the beauty of Beloved (God) and that "union is hidden behind separation as light is hidden in the darkness"¹⁸ Similarly, the poets have been using well-known historical figures or well-known personalities as symbols of true lovers like Mahmud of Ghazna and his love for Ayaz, Laila and Majnun, Shirin and Farhad represented various aspects of love which leads to mystical union.¹⁹

Christian Mystical Union

The idea of mystical union in Christianity seems to be as old as Christianity itself. Harvey D Egan examines the nature of mystical union by suggesting that, "the Christian Mystic awakens to, is purified, and illuminated by, and is eventually united with the God of Love. As an icon of agapic love, the mystic both amplifies every person's more hidden life of faith, hope, and love and points the way to full human authenticity".²⁰ Mystical union according to Evelyn Underhill²¹ can be described in two different ways. At one hand, it is deification, a form of spiritual change of human being. The mystic becomes spiritually the part of God and loses his own identity. On the other hand, Christian Mystical Union is the form of Spiritual Marriage of his soul to God. This is a permanent form of union which does not disintegrate with the passage of time. There are two major sources of information about Christian Mystical Union i.e., the bible and mystical literature.

Biblical References to Mystical Union

The Bible is the main source of information about Christian beliefs and practices. Biblical description of Mystical union seems to cover both aspects of its two-sided definition (deification and spiritual marriage). It takes the shape of the mystic's realization of God's companionship or friendly association as stated in the Bible: "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ".²² It helps to understand Christian spiritual ideology of seeking personal fellowship with God and Christ through passing various stages on the way to enlightenment.

The Bible provides necessary guidelines to understand and interpret the concept of spiritual union. Biblical representation of union with God or Christ is represented in the verse: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me".²³ The Holy Spirit in the hearts of mystics works to let them continue their struggle to achieve the very goal of their life. They are stimulated through the idea of being closer to God as the children are closer to their father. Bible says: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God."²⁴

Bible also provides necessary guidelines to be able to travel on the path of mystical union. It is love at heart that gives necessary power to a mystic to achieve higher degree of consciousness. Bible says, "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love."²⁵ In this way, the roots of mystical journey are filled with nothing but burning fire of love. A Christian in simple terms is supposed to live in Christ and Christian mystic is not united but reunited. It seems to be in line with the definition of mystical union as spiritual marriage.

In Christian mysticism the destination of a mystic is the attainment union with God through Jesus Christ instead of achieving gifts of God. Biblical interpretation of mystical union appears to be based on the knowledge of God's commandments. The nature of mystical experience is clearly described that, "Union with God is realized in the vision of the Divine Being "face to face."²⁶ In this way, the picture of mystical experience depicted in the text of Bible gives the impression that Bible is the only primary source of information about mystical knowledge all mystics usually rely on.

Literary References to Christian Mystical Union

The concept of mystical union is discussed and interpreted by Christian mystics through using literature as a tool of expression. In this regard, Julian of Norwich is perhaps the most quoted figure who rejects all doubts and feelings of disappointment on the way of success in attaining the unitive state by saying that "For Jesus is our blessed Friend, and it is His will and counsel that we hold us with Him, and fasten us to Him homely evermore, in what state so ever we be; for whether we are foul or clean, we are all one in His loving."²⁷

In literary discourse both interpretations of union with the divine i.e., self-deification and spiritual marriage have been extensively discussed. However, Emerson, well-known for being intoxicated by the draught of self-deification expresses his condition more like al-Hallaj by saying:

I am the owner of the sphere,
Of the seven stars and the solar year,
Of Caesar's hand, and Plato's brain,

Of Lord Christ's heart, and Shakespeare's strain.²⁸

By achieving a new identity with God, Emerson believes to be the owner of all that belongs to God, all that existed or all that exists in the universe. The sense of ownership makes him a universal human being who may love to promote universal brotherhood of mankind. His condition appears to be intoxicated with the Divine love, who may declare everything to be his own as everything belongs to God. Mystical union as self-deification is commonly recognized in literary circles of Christian literature.

William Law is also a strong believer of Mystical union as self-deification. He claims to have achieved the status of being part of Absolute Authority. In this way, he feels God to be the part of his life. He declares that: "It is not I who know these things, but God knows them in me."²⁹ His human identity is replaced by Divine identity and supernatural power and wisdom replace natural human wisdom. Another important but different angle of interpreting mystical union is introduced by Crashaw who claims that the unitive state is the outcome of God's love for Human soul. God is lover and the Beloved. He categorically suggests: "Let not my Lord, the mighty lover of souls, disdain that I discover the hidden art of his high stratagem to win your heart".³⁰ Crashaw's description of God's desire for winning the soul of human being shows that love is actually the spirit of God and man's longing for union is actually a gifted quality.

Affinities in Islamic and Christian Versions

While defining the term, Mystical Union, affinities in Islamic and Christian versions seem to be noticeable. Both versions agree on the nature of Mystical union as a state of one's experience of being one with one's Creator. Islamic version postulates it being one with God like humble servant through relinquishing joys of material life. Similarly, Christian version also emphasizes mystical union as a state of being one with God (Jesus Christ) through realizing one's soul to be in Jesus Christ. In other words, both versions espouse the nature of such an experience as a meeting of two intimate friends without making any distinction in man's desire or God's love as motivating forces.

The experience of Mystical Union in Sufism (Islamic Mysticism) described as Oneness of appearance (Wahdat-ul-Shahood) refers to man's loss of existence (identity) in the presence of light from Real Existence (God) appears to be similar to Christian concept of unitive state as deification, the loss of human identity through achieving new identity of God. In both versions the mystic's new identity can be compared to that of grape-juice having different identity from grapes. The mystic's own reasoning power based on specific religious school of thought is lost through being placed at the mercy of the Absolute Authority.

Another interpretation of mystical union on which both versions seem to be in total agreement is realization of spiritual contact through physical death or purification of soul through

overcoming physical desires. It is symbolically same as man's meeting with God on physical death (Wisal) or friend met friend (Wasal-al Habiba il-al Habib). In Muslim Societies the term Urs is used to recognize the services of deceased saint which appears to be derived from the word Uroos (bride). It seems to be similar to Christian concept of mystical union as Spiritual Marriage. The Christian mystic's spiritual marriage with God (Jesus Christ) shows greater affinity in both versions of mystical experience.

To attain Mystical Union on physical level, the activities of both, Muslim and Christian mystics are almost similar. While using guidelines from their specific sources of knowledge (Qur'an or Bible), they used music, poetry, and other physical exercises like dance. The followers of both versions also follow the practice of self-restraint (ignoring food and avoiding marriage). There are certain terms commonly used by both types of mystics like, ecstasy, annihilation, path, love, poverty, death, life, Master, states, and stages etc.

Conclusion

An overall comparison of Islamic and Christian versions of mystical union in the light of research model suggested by David Freidenreich reveals the very truth that even the conflicting ideologies have something common. Significant similarities in both versions provide platform for friendly research in humanitarian values of religion, love for mankind, and respect for ideological differences. It can be safely concluded that despite fundamental differences between Islam and Christianity at the highest level of spiritual elevation dogmatic differences cease to exist. Both versions of mystical union appear to principally similar on many points. In the presence of major affinities, the dogmatic differences pale into insignificance.

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