

The Other in the Light of the One: The Universality of the Qur'an and Interfaith Dialogue

Reza Shah-Kazemi, Islamic Texts Society, 2006

Reviewed by Patrick Laude

The purpose of this remarkable and timely new book is, in the author's own terms, to present "an exposition of the universality of the Qur'anic message of *tawhid* (...) and the implications of this universality for dialogue." In his cogent and rigorously developed argument, Shah-Kazemi sets out to articulate and substantiate a few fundamental theses that may pave the ground for a genuinely renewed religious dialogue in the wake of the post-September 11 era. This book is intended for a general readership with an interest in religious and Islamic studies, but it clearly addresses two kinds of audience –not necessarily exclusive of one another, the first being more attuned to inter-religious dialogue, the second more involved in intra-religious debates within the Muslim community. In other words, the inclusiveness that the perspective of the book fosters is from the outset defined both with a view to universality and in compliance with a religious commitment to identity. Although the richness of the argumentation and the wealth of illustrations called to buttress it defy an exhaustive treatment of the whole book, what follows is an attempt at summarizing some of the main articulations of the hermeneutic theses that are instrumental in bringing out the fundamental inclusiveness that the author has set as his goal.

First of all, Shah-Kazemi argues that the healthy state of a religious universe is proportional to the presence of a profound spirituality within its fold. Such a healthy presence is moreover inversely proportional to the advent of ideology in religious life and discourse. In the absence of a strong spiritual consciousness within the community "(...) (the) revealed text becomes an ideological pretext; morally reforming oneself gives way to violently rectifying the Other; spiritual contemplation is scorned in favor of political machination; the subtleties of revelation become submerged by the exigencies of revolution." (2) The spiritual sap of Islam is particularly apt to bring fruits within the domain of Qur'anic exegesis. The methodological thrust of this entire book lies precisely

in a reading of the *Qur'ân* from the standpoint of spiritual hermeneutics, as exemplified in the Sufi tradition of such as Ibn 'Arabî, Kashânî, Rumî and Haydar Amulî. In this hermeneutic tradition “religion (...) is divine dis-closure, not human ‘closure’, openings to higher truths and deeper realities, not simply exclusive affirmations of simple dogmas combined with perceptions limited to surface phenomena.” (8) Now this very “dis-closure” is a fundamental way to opening oneself to the universal horizon of the revealed text, and such an opening is the main objective of this book. Its four chapters are devoted to laying out the principles and illustrations conducive to this objective.

In a first chapter, Shah-Kazemi clears the methodological way for his approach of the *Qur'ân* by contrasting the Sufi hermeneutics for which he has opted with modern and post-modern theories of interpretation. He brings to the attention of his readers the fact that Sufism, in his earlier phases, can be viewed as a response to two tendencies of the Islamic society, that is worldliness and formalism. Although Shah-Kazemi does not explicitly make the point in this historical context he certainly implies that these two negative tendencies are not without relation with the modernist and fundamentalist faces of contemporary Islam. The thrust of his methodological emphasis on Sufi hermeneutics lies precisely in that this type of hermeneutics is the only effective answer to the concerns for universality and integrity that are central respectively in modernist Islam and in fundamentalist Islam. Sufi hermeneutics provides Shah-Kazemi with the tools to formulate a radical critique of these two contemporary movements while satisfying the concerns that they harbor, i.e. respectively the aspiration toward universality and the need for religious identity. A second part of this initial chapter engages the reader in a condensed and cogent critique of postmodern types of hermeneutics by highlighting both the ground that they share with the Sufi perspective, but also and above all the point where they clearly part with the latter. Shah-Kazemi fully acknowledges that the traditional Sufi perspective is not to be equated with a “blind imitation of traditional authorities” (29); in addition, he underlines that Sufi hermeneutics is given to highlight the relativity of forms as well as the limitations of reason and language. Capitalizing on these dimensions of Sufi hermeneutics, some contemporary commentators have been tempted to draw parallels between mystical perspectives and post-modern approaches. As a response to this attempts, the author stresses the assumptions and contradictions of the

various forms of “hermeneutics of suspicion” --through a discussion of such influential figures as Paul Ricoeur, Mohammed Arkoun, Jacques Derrida, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Ian Almond— while unveiling the radical chasm that separates the mystical emphasis on “points of view and aspects” (to use Schuon’s phrase) and the post-modern “suspension” of belief (Arkoun), concessions to the epistemological criteria of contemporary social sciences and ideologies (Ricoeur’s critical hermeneutics), and deconstructionist self-contradiction and anti-metaphysical obsession with language and unending *différance* (Derrida.) Shah-Kazemi shows that Ibn Arabî’s “stability in variegation” is to be understood as a kind of spiritual method –aimed at preventing a rational “freezing” of spiritual insights-- that does not preclude the position of the Absolute beyond all determinations, aspects and perspectives, quite to the contrary since it is precisely predicated on an understanding of the infinite Essence as free from conceptual and linguistic determinations.

Chapter II is focused on answering the question that may be raised from a defective comprehension of the *wahdât al-wujûd*, i.e. “if nothing but God is real, and there is no ‘otherness’, in reality, what is the meaning of dialogue with the Other?” The fundamental answer to this question lies in an understanding of existence as a kind of “dialogue” between archetypical possibilities. The key is to grasp that divine unity and existential multiplicity are not exclusive of one another but that they are in fact the two “faces” of the same Reality. Relying primarily on Kashanî’s commentary of the *Surat al-Ikhlâs*, Shah-Kazemi highlights the “resolution of the outward multiplicity of phenomena within the single reality of God by means of the relationships constituted by the divine Names.” (97) These Names constitute as it were the “multiplicity within unity.” Multiplicity, then, is viewed from the standpoint of essential unity, as expressing this unity through particularity –which is a manifestation of unity on the plane of relativity—so that the divine unity of the *tawhîd* is understood as perfectly compatible with metaphysical “polytheism,” “each phenomenon within (...) plurality being a kind of ‘god’ in the very measure that ontological autonomy is attributed to it.” (100) Thus understood the One is both the principle of manifestation of multiplicity and, in addition, its principle of integration. This perspective is to be applied to the question of religious diversity in order to reach a full grasp of the nature and function of differences and

dialogue in that realm. It is a key to the integration of universality –by virtue of the transcendent principiality of the One—and identity ---by virtue of the integration of diversity within unity. Bringing in Haydar Amulî’s theosophy --and its stress on the constant renewal of reality in each manifestation without any room for mere repetition (a sort of Sufi commentary on Heraclitus’ *panta rhei*)-- the author asserts the paradox of a “uniqueness which manifests infinite diversity, and a diversity which reproduces uniqueness.” (106) The Qurânic expression of this double relationship appears in a series of verses that highlight the spiritual significance of differences and “otherness” in creation. On the basis of such verses as XXX:22, V:48, II:62, IV:124, II:136 and XXIX:46 Shah-Kazemi shows how the Qur’ân invites “the sensitive reader to contemplate divine ‘signs’ in the Other, thus to learn more about the divine reality –and about themselves—through the Other (...) (114) The recognition of ‘otherness’ that is inscribed in the Qurânic injunction must moreover be situated within the context of an integral understanding of the *shahâdah* that prevents any form of association or *shirk*, whether on the individual level (the ego) or in the collective realm (the group, the nation, the religion as a collective psyche). When penetrated in its deeper metaphysical implications *Tawhîd* is therefore the best protection against idolatry, narrow exclusivism and fanaticism. To the sensible objection that such heights of metaphysical understanding and spiritual recognition are not likely to be of much help when dealing with a general religious audience which is predetermined by unexamined reflexes and bias, mental laziness and collective passions, the author expresses the conviction that the Qurânic emphasis on human “nothingness” and the ephemerality of all that is not His Face can be an effective theme of meditation for exoteric believers by preventing them from absolutizing the forms of their faith. Whatever one may think concerning the concrete “horizon” of this possibility –which may be deemed to underestimate the “gravity” of the fallen state of mankind including its “believing” segments-- there is little doubt that a willingness and a capacity to enter the mold of such a meditation could and would constitute a fundamental criterion of religious understanding and sincerity on the part of believers. In fact, a recognition of this kind would amount to reaching the mystical sap of faith through “a presentiment both of one’s own nothingness before the divine reality, and also, of the innate holiness, ther divine ‘face’, within the ‘neighbour’.” (128)

In the third chapter of his book, Shah-Kazemi delves into the question of the universalism of the Qur'ân in the light of Sufi exegesis. The thrust of his argument lies in a clear recognition that the Qur'anic term "Muslim" must be understood in two different senses that are not contradictory but complementary. In the first sense, that touches upon the universalist chord of the *Qur'ân*, the term "Muslim" refers to those who surrender themselves to God and to one of his revelations, the latter being only a means toward the former. In a second, more restrictive sense, the terms "Muslim" and "Islam" refer specifically to the community following the Prophet Muhammad. It is clear that for Sufis such as Ibn 'Arabî and Kashanî these two meanings of Islam point to two different ontological and epistemological levels. That distinction is encapsulated by Kashanî's assertion, quoted by Shah-Kazemi, that "(...) the right religion (*al-dîn al-qayyim*) is tied to that which is immutable within knowledge and action; while the revealed Law is tied to that which alters in respect of rules and conditions." (156) The "right religion" can in fact be equated with the *fitra*, or an ontological and epistemological strata that is deeper than any confessional affiliation. Shah-Kazemi lucidly acknowledges that this point of view should not blind one to the fact that, for Sufis like Kashanî and Ibn 'Arabî, Islam as a confession "would be seen as resonating most harmoniously with this inner substance (...)" (157) In one sense, "Islam" is "religion as such," in another sense it is "such a religion" (Schuon). Shah-Kazemi's goal is to show that both visions of Islam must be upheld in order to preserve a truly universalist and inclusivist perspective. In fact, the differentiation that is at the source of confessional exclusiveness is not to be interpreted, according to the author, in terms of a deplorable insufficiency, so to speak, but rather as a metaphysical necessity, a reflection of the infinity of the Divine nature. On that point, some readers might be tempted to argue that such a differentiation is still on a certain level the result of an ontological and epistemological fragmentation which, albeit "necessary" on the highest plane, is nonetheless manifested by a defectiveness on the human level, as illustrated in a sense by the the exile of Adam and Eve from the Garden and the episode of the Tower of Babel. In the words of Ramana Maharshi: "It is a great wonder that to teach such a simple truth a number of religions should be necessary, and so many disputes should go on between them as to which is the God-ordained teaching.

What a pity! “³³⁹ This consideration is not without relation to the discussion of Ibn ‘Arabî’s “bringing together of opposites” with respect to nondelimitation (the point of view of God’s omnipresence, “wherever ye turn, there is the face of God”) and delimitation (the confessional “orientation,” the *Qiblah*): “Nondelimitation is not contradicted by delimitation; if nondelimitation were devoid of delimitation it would be delimited: by the absence of delimitation.” (164) On the one hand this echoes on the highest plane the “need” within the Infinite for finite manifestation, on the other hand—and when considered simply on the human level—one may fail to see why nondelimitation would be “delimited” by the absence of delimitation, or at least why it should necessarily be so by absence of confessional “limitations,” not to mention the question of the extent, abuse or legitimacy of such limitations. A parallel question may be raised with respect to Sufi hermeneutics as a whole: such an hermeneutics is based on the “*ilm min ladunnâ*”, i.e the Intellect as embodied by al-Khidr in the famous passage of the *Surat al-Kahf* in the sense that the very selection and understanding of Qurânic verses that Sufis bring to the fore to foster their universalist perspective cannot but be informed *a priori* by an intellective grasp that has precedence over the revealed text in its literality. The status of this immanent “universal consciousness” that is akin to the dimension of sanctity is undoubtedly higher, as confirmed by Kāshanî, to that of prophethood, in the sense that the latter pertains to the law-giving, outer dimension of a particular message. However, that Ibn ‘Arabî and most Sufis subordinate in fact sanctity to prophethood on the grounds that the latter “is the source of the sanctity of the saint” (169) proves that their gnostic perspective is mitigated by a confessional outlook that sees, for all practical purposes, intellection dependent upon revelation, or that the question of the consequences of the superiority of the *wilâyat* over the *nubuwwat* remains at least shrouded, in their perspective, in a halo of ambiguities that are the ransom of their more or less unavoidable confessional solidarity. This is confirmed by the principle, enunciated by Ibn ‘Arabî, according to which the criterion of truth in religious matters is revelation, this criterion being defined in terms of “felicity”, or eschatological opportunity, and not in terms of truth pure and simple: “The road to felicity is that set down by revealed religion, nothing else.” (180) Arguably, the questions that have just been raised may have an incidence on

³³⁹ *The Essential Teachings of Ramana Maharshi, A Visual Journey*, Inner Directions, 2001, P.48

our understanding of esoterism but they are not directly relevant to the main matter at stakes and to the specific objectives of Shah-Kazemi's book, that is the unveiling of the universal dimension of the *Qur'ân* in full respect of the Islamic "right" to exclusiveness. The most important task is, in this respect, to highlight the transcendence of God over any form that points to Him and the primordially of immanent knowledge of Him and the *fitra*. In this respect the main lesson of this chapter lies perhaps in the author's penetrating remarks concerning the fact that an exclusivist confessional restriction of the Divine is not only a confinement of objective truth but it is also, and perhaps more importantly on the level of the argument of the book, a "diminishing receptivity to the mercy that *encompasseth all things*." (181)

The final chapter of this book is an application of the principles of Sufi hermeneutics to the intra-Islamic dialogue concerning the compatibility, or lack thereof, between the call of universality and the demands of religious preaching, or "invitation." In this part of his work, Shah-Kazemi presents the thesis, championed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, of the need for a third way between liberal pluralism and conservatism exclusivism, the latter being insensitive to the universal horizon of Islam, the former being oblivious of the rights of Muslim particularism. In this context, Sufi universalism may be paradoxically conceived as one of the best tools of *da'wa* or "invitation" to Islam, it may both satisfy the need for an opening to the Other while preserving the attachment to the "normativity" of Islam. The main thrust of Shah-Kazemi's thesis is expressed in the Sufi paradox of "both a greater degree of 'rootedness' in one's own religion (...) and a greater degree of detachment from it." (237) A quote from Martin Lings illuminates this paradox: "(...) as each mystical path approaches its End, it is nearer to the other mysticisms than it was at the beginning. But there is a complementary and almost paradoxical truth (...): increase of nearness does not mean decrease of distinctness, for the nearer the centre, the greater the concentration, the stronger the 'dose.'" (237) Now the question that may be raised in this connection is that of the definition of this "rootedness" and this "dose:" if this higher and deeper concentration is to be understood as referring to the quintessential archetype of the religion, then what is the relationship between this archetypal Islam and the integration of the complex network of forms that defines Islam as a religious world? In other words, is the dose to be defined as a dose of "essential Islam" or a dose of

“particularist Islam”? Schuon’s distinction between an “essential *Sunnah*” and a “formal *Sunnah*” or his differentiation between an “Islamic esoterism” and an “esoteric Islam,” not to mention his contradistinction between a “quintessential esoterism of Islam” and a Muslim “exo-esoterism” suggests the ambiguity that may appear when trying to define the “confessional distinctness” of the sage. Notwithstanding these difficulties, Shah-Kazemi’s final pages may well suggest a sort of resolution, or at least relativization, of such ambiguities through an emphasis on the dimensions on Beauty and Presence. William Chittick and Sachiko Murata had also emphasized, in their *Introduction to Islam*, the conspicuous absence of *ihsân* and a sense of beauty from most of contemporary Islam. Beauty –inner and outer—and Presence –the source of Love-- opens onto universality by virtue of the non-conceptual and non-dogmatic character of their language. And not the least of the lessons of Shah-Kazemi’s very rich and nuanced book is that in order to be fully understood and realized, Islam and the *Qur’ân*, as any other authentic tradition, need to be lived through a sense of the sacred and a beautiful wisdom, *ihsân*, that make our presence in the world both a way of witnessing and a mode of blessing. That is no doubt the most beautiful and the most effective form of dialogue, in attentive silence.