



Spirituality- Man's Emotional Quest to Find God

The search for God, to know Him, to get closer to Him has been a recurring theme in human history. Religion therefore has been a powerful force in human societies since the beginning of human times. Human inclination towards organized religion is in itself an expression of human desire to sanctify the Supreme Being. We find this quest for God present in different civilizations and different belief systems across many centuries and millenniums. However this quest has led many men astray. The existence of many different belief systems and organized religions are partially due to the different human experiences in their search for God. Men tried to find God and in the process developed a multitude of concepts and rituals based on their personalized experiences in this quest. At the heart of this quest for God was spirituality. The emotional state in which men felt they are connected with God.

The term 'spirituality' has been used in different meanings by different belief systems. Its broader or generally understood meaning relates to man seeking closeness with God. Therefore the term is generally used to define the personal sensations of a religious man with regards to God. However some individuals used spirituality to refer to man's relationship with the universe or what they call the forces of nature. These individuals believe that the universe in which man lives that includes the animate beings and inanimate things has a special relationship or bond with man. So they talk about man's relationship with nature and how man and nature communicate with each other. This bond is often considered as a spiritual bond. Another understanding of spirituality refers to the elated sense of pleasure which the human body feels. Extreme sensual pleasures are considered an expression of the soul's powerful energy. Although some ancient pagan belief systems also hold this view towards spirituality, modern Western liberalism, with its focus on individual liberty, has given impetus to this view. Yet another view considers spirituality as man's relationship with his soul. The carriers of this view consider meditation and spending time alone to discover one's own self as a spiritual exercise. By being alone, a man would be able to settle the internal conflict within and this would bring him peace and spiritual satisfaction. However the most widely understood meaning of spirituality concerns man's relationship with God and it is this meaning which we aim to discuss and address in this endeavor.

Although different religions, belief systems and thinkers have different views on spirituality or how to get closer to God. There are three dominant themes common to almost all views on spirituality:

- The dualism present in man's nature. That the human being consists of the spiritual and material self. That the spiritual part of man is his connection with God and the material part is his connection with this world. That the spiritual and material parts are in conflict with each other. For man to get closer with God, he must suppress his material part and elevate his spiritual part. This conflict defines man's quest for God. If he is able to conquer his material part, he will find God. If however he fails, he is doomed and lost in the path of God.
- The belief in the unity of God and an attempt to explain the relationship of man, universe and God in the context of this unity. This belief considers the universe and human beings as part of the unity of God not necessarily physically. As to what exactly this unity means is vague however it is an attempt to explain the harmony of man, universe and the existence of God.
- Man's relationship with the universe and the universe's relationship with man and how his relationship/closeness with God affects his relationship with the universe. The universe is seen either as part of God or an expression of His unity or His creation and it is generally believed that man's closeness with God helps him command the forces

of nature. Or that the universe or nature communicates with man to help him get closer to God.

Islam has a very unique and distinct viewpoint towards spirituality. The rapid expansion of Islam brought it in contact with multiple belief systems and civilizations. The interaction of Muslims with these belief systems and civilizations led to some erroneous concepts which were part of these foreign civilizations to be absorbed by the Islamic civilization. Among other things, the Muslim view on spirituality was affected by these foreign concepts.

Let us briefly review some of these foreign concepts which had a direct or indirect impact on the Muslim view on spirituality. Hinduism believes that there exists a supreme God which is a pure spirit. The human soul (the secret of life) is eternal and it is part of the supreme spirit. The soul is present in everything and everyone and there is oneness in all life. However the soul present on earth must go through the process of purification till it as pure as the supreme spirit or becomes part of it. The idea of rebirth in Hinduism concerns the journey of the soul in this universe where it is going through a purification process. So the soul is purified progressively in a stepwise process towards its ultimate purity as that of the supreme spirit or becoming part of it. The spiritual man in Hinduism would abandon all worldly pleasures, denounce social relations and through this seek the purification of his soul. Zoroastrianism, the ancient religion practiced in Persia before the advent of Islam and with some followers today, believes in two gods. The god of goodness and the god of evil and that there is a conflict between the two. It believes that dualism in the nature of universe and also man is the result of this conflict between these two gods.

It would be helpful here to understand the Christian view on spirituality as well. Allama Muhammad Asad in his book, *Islam at the Crossroads*, explains the Christian view on spirituality as follows: **“According to the Christian dogma, mankind stumbles under a hereditary sin committed by Adam and Eve, and consequently the whole of human life is looked upon - in dogmatic theory at least - as a gloomy vale of sorrows. It is the battlefield of two opposing forces: the Evil, represented by Satan, and the Good, represented by Jesus Christ. By means of bodily temptations, Satan tries to bar the progress of the human soul towards the light eternal; and whereas the soul belongs to Christ, the body is the playground of satanic influences. One could express it differently: the world of Matter is essentially satanic, whereas the world of the Spirit is divine and good. Everything in human nature that is material, or "carnal", as Christian theology prefers to call it, is a direct result of Adam's succumbing to the advice of the hellish Prince of Darkness and Matter. Therefore to attain salvation, man must turn his heart away from this world of the flesh towards the future, spiritual world, where the "original sin" is redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.”**

The quest for spirituality in the Islamic civilization was championed by the Sufi movement in Islam. The Sufi movement first appeared in Baghdad during the Abbasid caliphate and we find its proponents in Islamic Persia and Central Asia. It later became a powerful force in the Indian subcontinent during the era of Muslim rule. Sufi teachings differed according to different regions and individuals however we can find some general broader themes within these teachings. One of the prominent ideas in Sufi thought is the idea of human soul and its relationship with Allah. Sufis interpret the following Ayah of the Quran to suggest a link between human soul and the knowledge of unity of Allah. **﴿وَإِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَأَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ قَالُوا بَلَىٰ شَهِدْنَا أَنْ تَقُولُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هَذَا غَافِلِينَ﴾** **“And (remember) when your Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their seed (or from Adam's loin his offspring) and made them testify as to themselves (saying): "Am I not your Lord?" They said: "Yes! We testify," lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection: "Verily, we have been unaware of this.”** [Al-A'raf:172]. So the human soul is aware of God's unity as before birth all human souls were asked about their Lord and they all testified that their Lord is Allah. However once the soul unites with the desires or *nafs* of man the knowledge of God's unity becomes veiled in the case of believers while the unbeliever totally forgets this link between human soul and the unity of God. It is the friends

of Allah (the Awliya) who are able to conquer the desires of the human body and get closer to God. The Sufis believe that the Awliya (friends of Allah) like the Prophets help mankind find closeness to Allah. The Prophets and Awliya never forget the day of the covenant while the common people have forgotten about that day and they need to be reminded about it. So Sufis talk about the journey of the soul through an organized hierarchy till the soul is able to truly comprehend the unity of God as it once comprehended it on the day of the covenant. This journey cannot be taken except in the supervision of Sufi masters or Sheikhs who help the lovers of God reach the Ultimate Reality. Once the human soul encounters the reality of the divine it becomes overwhelmed by it and it loses its identity and becomes unaware of its surroundings in some cases. Some Sufis have tried to explain this “powerful” encounter with divine reality as the realization of the unity of God where the individual human soul loses its identity and becomes part of the unity of God. Although Sufi teachings have focused on human soul’s quest to experience the unity of God we see Sufi vocabulary and Sufi ideas referring to the dualism present in the human body between the heart which is considered the place of God and *Nafs* which constitutes the bodily desires. If a man follows his heart he will grow closer to God however if he follows his *nafs* or desires he will move away from God. So the purity of the soul is achieved when the spiritual aspect of man becomes stronger than his material aspect (desires). Being the friends of Allah, the Sufis and the Prophets receive the signs of Allah which in the case of Prophets are the miracles and in the case of Sufis are Karamat. These signs help the Sufis in their mission to help mankind come closer to Allah.

Spirituality is an emotional state. As to the question of how do we define the spiritual state or how do we comprehend what happens to a spiritual man there is no one and definite answer from those who have expressed their views on the subject. Different people would narrate their spiritual experiences differently. In fact the varied definitions of spirituality as discussed above point to this precise reality. Therefore spiritual experience is also referred to as mysticism, an experience which cannot be explained through the rational thought process. The great Sufi poet and philosopher Allama Muhammad Iqbal in his book, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, which is based on his lectures on philosophy has pointed to the exact same phenomenon. In the chapter “Knowledge and Religious Experience”, Iqbal states: **“To the primitive man all experience was super-natural. Prompted by the immediate necessities of life he was driven to interpret his experience, and out of this interpretation gradually emerged ‘Nature’ in our sense of the word. The total-Reality, which enters our awareness and appears on interpretation as an empirical fact, has other ways of invading our consciousness and offers further opportunities of interpretation. The revealed and mystic literature of mankind bears ample testimony to the fact that religious experience has been too enduring and dominant in the history of mankind to be rejected as mere illusion. There seems to be no reason, then, to accept the normal level of human experience as fact and reject its other levels as mystical and emotional. The fact of religious experience are facts among other facts of human experience and, in the capacity of yielding knowledge by interpretation, one fact is as good as another.....Since the quality of mystic experience is to be directly experienced, it is obvious that it cannot be communicated. Mystic states are more like feeling than thought. The interpretation which the mystic or the prophet puts on the content of his religious consciousness can be conveyed to others in the form of propositions, but the content itself cannot be so transmitted. Thus in the following verses of the Qur’an it is the psychology and not the content of the experience that is given:** ﴿وَمَا كَانَ لِنَبِيٍّ أَنْ يَكَلِمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا أَوْ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا فَيُوحِيَ ۖ وَإِنَّمَا كَانَ لِنَبِيٍّ أَنْ يَكَلِمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا أَوْ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا فَيُوحِيَ ۖ وَإِنَّمَا كَانَ لِنَبِيٍّ أَنْ يَكَلِمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا أَوْ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا فَيُوحِيَ﴾ **“It is not for man that God should speak to him, but by vision or from behind a veil; or He sendeth a messenger to reveal by His permission what He will: for He is Exalted, Wise”** [Ash Shuraa 42:51]. Iqbal has argued that the very existence of men narrating a spiritual existence points to its reality and even though the men who go through the spiritual experience are unable to explain or narrate it in a comprehensible manner, this does not mean that spiritual experience cannot form a basis for knowledge which man can use.

So how do we understand spirituality? A phenomenon which is so widely observed in human history and yet is unexplainable? At the core of understanding the problem of spirituality is the idea of what qualifies as knowledge and fact. In other words what method or thought process do humans use which helps them differentiate between fiction and irrefutable evidence which cannot be denied by anyone. That method is the logic of sensation (manTiq al-Ihsas) i.e. understanding of reality through direct sensation. Concrete knowledge is only that knowledge which is based on the logic of sensation or which has logic of sensation as its basis. So knowledge should be built by directly sensing the reality. Only conclusions or principles derived from direct sensation of reality can be used as a basis to analyze and build further knowledge. The human mind must not endeavor into things whose nature it cannot perceive through direct sensation. Any such indulgence would be based on speculation and would mislead the human mind about the true reality of things. This is what happened with men who attempted to understand the causes and reasons of spirituality. They did not limit their understanding to direct sensation of reality rather they tried to speculate about something which in their own words is unexplainable.

The confusion about spirituality arose from confusions about two different phenomena perceived directly through sensation by the human mind. Men observed the reality of life and concluded that there is a secret of life which they referred to as the spirit. Men also personally felt and observed in other men the emotional state of spirituality, a feeling and an emotional state when they felt close to God. They assumed that the two are connected without any evidence that the two were actually connected. The idea of secret of life perplexed men. They were not able to explain it. Their inability to explain it created a mystery around the idea of secret of life. The spirit fascinated them. They revered it. They thought of it as something which is powerful, for in it lies the secret which forms the basis of all human life. This fascination with what the spirit is invoked in them the emotion of reverence, of being overwhelmed.

Spirituality is an emotional state. When man observes or experiences a phenomenon or a reality which creates in him a strong sense of weakness and he feels overpowered and very strongly perceives his own inability to match the perfection, or higher power or stronger force which he has witnessed, an emotion of weakness or reverence appears in him with respect to what he witnesses. This is what Iqbal referred to **“that religious experience has been too enduring and dominant in the history of mankind to be rejected as mere illusion”**. The logic of sensation points towards what Iqbal referred to as “religious experience” and its enduring and repetitive occurrence witnessed throughout the history of humankind. What Iqbal refers to as religious experience and which can be sensed to be present in human beings throughout history and even today is in reality the emotional reverent state. Its undeniable presence in human beings leads us to conclude that this is actually part of the human nature. Reverence is a human instinct. Whenever human beings experience what they perceive as perfection, or greatness or an overwhelming and powerful force they feel an emotion of weakness with relation to what overwhelms them. This emotion creates in them a need to sanctify, glorify and hold in awe the force which created this feeling in them. This is the reason that one of the definitions of spirituality refers to man’s relationship with the universe. The magnanimity of the universe, its extraordinary organization and its phenomenal ability to support all life in a coherent manner overwhelmed those who observed these realities. This created in them an awe towards the universe and they felt the emotional need to acknowledge this greatness. However they could not explain their emotions of sanctification so they referred to them as a spiritual connection with the universe.

So the spirit was the secret of life and spirituality an emotional state, man’s emotional need to revere the greatness which he encounters. This is what the logic of sensation led to. However confusion arose when it was assumed without any sensation that the reason for spirituality was the spirit. Islam believes that only Allah should be sanctified and worshipped as one and only God. Man’s emotional need to sanctify a power greater than himself is satisfied in Islam by the Islamic Aqeedah (creed). Islam explains that man himself, this vast

and extremely organized and coherent universe and everything it contains of animate beings and inanimate things are created by the all Powerful and Mighty Allah who is the Lord of all the worlds. He is the Master of and the Controller of everything in the universe. So a Muslim is not misguided in his emotional need to sanctify powers which he feels are superior to himself. The object of spirituality in Islam, the One who should be sanctified, is Allah. So Muslims understand and recognize spirituality as an emotional state when they sanctify their Creator, Allah. Hence spirituality for them is a state when they emotionally feel closer to Allah. Due to influence of foreign culture some Muslims wrongly assumed that spirituality or closeness to Allah is connected to what they observe as the secret of life or the spirit. As the secret of life was something which they saw as part of the human body, they became confused about the human nature. So they considered the human body of being made of the spirit which they equated to as spirituality and hence they considered the spirit a part of the human body which is connected to Allah. The other part of the body they then sensed constituted the human desires and bodily needs. So the concept of dualism emerged among them and they considered the human being of physically being composed of two parts, the spiritual and the material. Where the spiritual part was man's connection with Allah, while the material part or the desires were man's connection with this world.

A Muslim's search for spirituality is his quest to seek closeness to Allah. He feels this closeness emotionally when he is overwhelmed by the instinct of reverence or what we can also call the instinct of spirituality. This emotional feeling is powerfully felt by him. When overwhelmed by this emotion of weakness with relation to Allah, he sanctifies Him and one of his emotional needs is met. However it must be understood that this emotion which we refer to as spirituality is a direct result of the human instinct of reverence. It is a human emotion not different from other human emotions like the emotion of fear which overwhelms man when he feels threatened and insecure. Neither is this emotion different from the emotion of altruism which we find in human beings towards their offspring or towards other fellow human beings. They are all the same in their capacity as human emotions. The difference between them is that they are different emotional states of man when responding to different external stimulus. So when threatened or feeling insecure the survival instinct of man creates in man the emotional need to attain security. The mother's relentless and tireless efforts to take care of an infant baby or a man's urge to help a physically disabled man or the attraction between men and women are a direct outcome of the emotional needs rising from the species or procreation instinct. Similarly the need to sanctify a higher being or the phenomenon in which man thinks of himself as weak with relation to a higher power is the emotional need rising from the reverence instinct. These three instincts form the core of what we can refer to as the vital energy present in man. It is these instincts which give rise to man's different needs. However all of these instincts are excited by external stimulus outside the human body. So an external reality or a thought about external reality is what agitates the instincts. So if no external reality exists which agitates a specific instinct, man will not experience the particular emotional state related to that extinct. As an example if he is not threatened, he will not feel fear. This means that if a man does not encounter a reality in which he feels weak in connection to a higher power, he will not feel the emotional need for sanctification. The emotional urge to sanctify the Creator emerges in man only if he feels weak and overwhelmed. So man may witness the vastness of the ocean or a desert and he may get overwhelmed and thus feel the need to sanctify the One who created them. However if he is sitting in a cafeteria talking to his friends or drinking tea or he is walking in a market place looking to sell his merchandise he may not feel overwhelmed and hence he will not feel spirituality. This means man will not always be in an emotionally spiritual state. Sometimes he will be seeking security to satisfy his survival instinct. Sometimes he will be involved in parenting thus satisfying his species instinct. These breaks from spirituality to other states or when he is not in an emotional state are often wrongly concluded as being in the material state. So human beings will never be in a permanently spiritual state. It is wrongly assumed that when they are not in a spiritual state, they are in the material state. The correct conclusion is to not consider this dualism at all, rather revisit the whole issue of seeking closeness with Allah from another perspective.

Seeking closeness with Allah is not an emotional process. It is an intellectual process. This is a unique view on spirituality. Man by his nature will never be permanently in his spiritual state or what we referred to as spirituality. Even when someone is overwhelmed with emotions of spirituality this results in only actions which are material. So man tries to express his desire for sanctification by either praising the Creator or prostrating before him both being material actions. Let us now define the intellectual paradigm which brings a Muslim closer to Allah. All actions whether done in pursuit of satisfying the reverence, species or survival instinct are material actions. The spirit which men confuse with the secret of life and being a connection with Allah is not a physical thing. It is a concept. That concept is the realization that there is an all-powerful and managing God who has created man, life and universe. He is Allah (swt). Man, life and universe's connection with Allah (swt) is that they are all under His dominion. So the universe and life within it follow the path which Allah (swt) has set for them. As for man he lives in two realities. In one reality, Allah has given him choice to perform his actions as he wills. As for the other reality, Allah has set a path for him where he has no choice. Man is only accountable for the reality where he has choice while he is not accountable for the reality where Allah has not given him any choice. The reality in which man has choice he must obey Allah's orders conveyed to him through Allah's messenger, Prophet Muhammad (saw). This whole concept is the spirit. The idea that man, life and universe are connected with Allah in the abovementioned manner. This connection is intellectual and voluntarily conceived. A Muslim must perform all his actions always keeping this concept in mind. This is the most basic concept which should underwrite all of his actions. This concept is what is called spirit and if man performs all of his actions according to this concept then he will be mixing spirit with matter. As for the physical phenomenon of secret of life, it is also referred to as spirit however when used in this capacity, the word 'spirit' refers to a practical reality not a concept. It is wrong to assume anything other than what we can conclude about it from the logic of sensation. The logic of sensation tells us that this spirit is the secret of life nothing more. We can tell that it exists because we see that a human body is alive and then it is dead. This transition from life to death is explained as the spirit which is the secret of life leaving the body. To speculate more about this spirit would be wrong and would lead us astray. Allah says in the Quran: **﴿وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي﴾** **“They will ask you concerning the spirit; say, ‘the spirit is by command of my Lord, of knowledge it is only a little that is communicated to you, (O men!).’”** [Isra'a:85]

Getting closer to Allah is an intellectual process of basing your actions on the commands of Allah (swt), therefore a man may perform an action which brings him closer to Allah (swt) yet he does not feel any spirituality. Because spirituality, the emotion of reverence is his bodily feeling which is only triggered when he feels overwhelmed by the presence of Allah (swt) when he senses Him through His creation. So when he controls his anger when a fellow Muslim has wronged him, or when he seeks to learn Arabic to understand the Quran or if he attends a lecture on the science of hadith or he is respectful towards his parents or plays with his kids and spends money on his wife and friends. All of these actions may bring him closer to Allah but he may not emotionally feel it. It may happen that in his adherence to Islamic laws a man may not feel any emotions and hence no spirituality yet he will still draw closer to Allah.

The quest for God has been a permanent endeavor of man. However it had led many men astray because they did not limit themselves to knowledge through sensory perception or what the sensory perception leads to. And also because they defined closeness to God as an emotional feeling rather an intellectual process. The destructive idea of dualism of the material and spiritual world created a battle in which man was forced to fight his own nature. This resulted in a worldview where the world of religion was seen as a world conflicting human nature and religion itself was seen by many as impossible. It was this conception of religion which resulted in a revolt against religion in Europe and gave rise to the destructive idea of secularism. The idea of dualism instead of bringing people closer to religion and

hence producing a more spiritual world infact did the exact opposite. It is only Islam which has a unique and powerful viewpoint towards human nature which brings human beings in perfect harmony with their own nature and the universe around them. Islam strongly rejects the dualistic conception of man and acknowledges and satisfies all of his needs. And because of this unique viewpoint it is only Islam which promises spiritual elevation and material progress at the same time. It was this uniqueness of Islam which attracted the European journalist Leopold Weiss towards Islam where after studying it in depth he became a Muslim. Comparing Islam with other religions in his book which he authored as a Muslim, Muhammad Asad, he mentioned the Islamic view on spirituality as singularly unique and different from all other religions. He states: **“But Islam, and Islam alone, goes beyond this theoretical explanation and exhortation. It not only teaches us that all life is essentially a unity - because it proceeds from the Divine Oneness - but it shows us also the practical way by which everyone of us can reproduce, within the limits of his individual, earthly life, the unity of Idea and Action both in his existence and in his consciousness. To attain that supreme goal of life man is, in Islam, not compelled to renounce the world; no austerities are required to open a secret door to spiritual purification: no pressure is exerted upon the mind to believe in incomprehensible dogmas in order that salvation be secured. Such demands are utterly foreign to Islam: for it is neither a mystical doctrine nor a philosophy. It is simply a program of life in accord with the "laws of nature" which God has decreed upon His creation; and its supreme achievement is a complete coordination of the spiritual and the material aspects of human existence. In the teachings of Islam, both these aspects are not only "reconciled" to each other in the sense of leaving no inherent conflict between the bodily and the moral existence of man, but the fact of their coexistence and-actual-inseparability is *insisted* upon as the natural basis of life.”** It is this promise of harmony and spiritual elevation towards which Islam once invited and will again invite all humanity once it returns to power and might at the global stage.

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