

THE QUR'ĀN HAS MANY FACES: IT IS DHŪ WUJŪH

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Abstract

At the very root of the vast body of qur'anic commentary literature one finds an old saying that characterizes the many aspects the Qur'an possesses. It states that the Qur'an has many "faces," it is *dhū wujūh*, that is it possesses many aspects that open up the rich content of the Qur'an to a great variety of interpretations. Rather than going into the breadth and depth of the great multitude of aspects expressed or hidden in the Qur'an and elaborated by the commentary literature, I would like to examine this saying in the direction of early Sufi qur'anic exegesis. Behind the manifold ways of interpreting the Qur'an as *dhū wujūh*, so I suggest, there is the search of the Sufis for the one face, the face of God, *wajh Allāh*, as expressed in the Qur'an, "They are patient in seeking the face of their Lord" (Q 13:22) and, "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (Q 2:115).

This search for the face God is intimately linked with the oral and aural nature of the Qur'an manifested in its daily recitation that articulates the divine words as it seeks to listen into the actual speech of God. As a result, we have two dimensions hidden in the image of the Qur'an as *dhū wujūh*, a visual one in the search for the face of God, and an aural/oral one in the recitation of the qur'anic words by listening to the speech of God. The recitation makes it possible for Sufis to listen to the divine speech, while the search for its hidden realities enables them to seek those aspects that reveal the divine face. I would like to proceed first by examining the Sufi method of Qur'an interpretation; second by relating it to the oral/aural nature of the Qur'an; and third, by analyzing three themes of Qur'an interpretation that demonstrate the intricate connection of these two approaches of seeking the divine face and listening to the divine speech. These themes are the supreme name of God, the mystical vision of God, and the recollection of the divine presence in prayer.

Our International Symposium intends to trace the many ways in which the Qur'an has been studied, understood and interpreted in history over the centuries and plans to develop methods that may facilitate the understanding of the Islamic Scripture in the contemporary context. Scholarship within and without the Islamic world has traced the history of the Qur'an to the proclamation of Muhammad (570-632) that became codified in the *Mushaf*. This archetype, collected and redacted in written form some twenty years after the Prophet's death, further perfected in fine points over three centuries, and meticulously transmitted for more than a millennium, has remained in use until today by Muslims world-wide. It is the undisputed core of Islamic religion and to the Muslim mind represents the verbatim word of God, revealed in clear Arabic. Today, as in the past, the Qur'an is copied and recited in Arabic, pronounced only in Arabic in ritual worship by Arabs and non-Arabs alike. It cannot be rendered adequately into any other tongue and, in the Muslim view all translations are crutches, at best helpful explanations of its original intention and at worst doubtful makeshifts, obscuring its true meaning. Inasmuch as Muslims hold that the Qur'an has been preserved unchanged over time in its pristine Arabic, it is believed to be humanity's final scriptural revelation and hence superior to all other holy books.

The Qur'an has been the object of a vast literature of qur'anic commentary and exegesis, a literature that aims to explain what is meant by the text (*tafsīr*) and to discover what is hidden behind its wording (*ta'wīl*). This literature proposed various ways of reading the Qur'an according to its literal meaning (*ẓāhir*) and its hidden meaning (*bāṭin*). It distinguishes between *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*, the categories of permissible and forbidden food or lawful and unlawful conduct. Another distinction are different types of verses, those considered to be clear, *muḥkāmāt*, such as those setting forth legal regulations, doctrinal statements, ethical premises, or practical rules, and other verses called obscure, *mutashābihāt*, including admonitions, exclamations, oaths, legendary narratives, symbolic expressions, or similes. These four fundamental approaches of interpretation -the ways of reading the Qur'an, the distinction of lawful and unlawful conduct, the bifurcation of qur'anic verses into clear and obscure ones, and the premises of the theory of abrogation- had their basis in the Qur'an itself, even if they were transformed into hermeneutical theories only later in the vast literature of qur'anic commentary. In the long history of this

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literature, comprehensive approaches to qur'anic exegesis came to manifest themselves in major trends of interpretation, be they traditional, theological, philosophical, sectarian, mystical, modern or fundamentalist. At the very root of this vast body of qur'anic commentary literature one finds an old saying that characterizes the many aspects the Qur'an possesses. It states that the Qur'an has many faces, it is *dhū wujūh*, that is, it possesses many aspects that open up the rich content of the Qur'an to a great variety of interpretations. Rather than going into the breadth and depth of the great multitude of aspects expressed or hidden in the Qur'an and elaborated by the commentary literature, I would like to examine this saying in the direction of early Sufi qur'anic exegesis. Behind the manifold ways of interpreting the Qur'an as *dhū wujūh*, so I suggest, there is the search of the Sufis for the one face, the face of God, *wajh Allāh*, as expressed in the Qur'an, "They are patient in seeking the face of their Lord" (Q 13:22) and, "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (Q 2:115).

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Early Sufism developed its own approach to qur'anic exegesis and formed its own body of Qur'an commentary. The well-known foundation of the Sufi approach to exegesis is the distinction of two levels of meaning: *zahir*, the outer literal meaning, and *bāṭin*, the inner hidden meaning of the qur'anic text. This Sufi distinction of *zāhir* and *bāṭin*, however, is not only applied to particular words and verses of the Qur'an, it is also understood as a twofold reading of the qur'anic text as a whole. As such it hinges on the belief that beneath the surface of the literal sense of the Qur'an, an inner hidden meaning can be unearthed in the inexhaustible depth of the divine word. Qur'anic support for such a belief is illustrated by the verses, like "If the sea were ink for the words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before the words of my Lord are exhausted" (Q 18:109), and, "And if all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea [ink], with seven seas after it to replenish it, the words of God would not be used up" (Q 31:27). In the Sufi view, each verse of the Qur'an as well as the qur'anic text as a whole may be understood as including the multilayered depth of divine meaning hidden underneath the literal meaning. This hidden, inner and allegorical meaning of the Qur'an, its *bāṭin*, became the focal point of early Sufi exegesis of the Qur'an.

For the Sufis this *bāṭin*, as the inexhaustible level of meaning contained in the divine word of the Qur'an, had its counterpart in the spiritual knowledge the Sufis acquired through introspection into the inner emotions stirring their soul. They called this inner knowledge *'ilm al-bāṭin* and perceived it as a divine gift granted to them after intense ascetic effort and psychic discipline. Possessed by an elite of mystics who were granted insight into the realities, hidden within their souls, this inner knowledge was acquired in two principal ways: intuition and extrasensory perception. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) expressed these with a pithy definition, "Knowledge of the *bāṭin* can be knowledge of inner things, such as knowledge of intuitions and moods existing in the heart or it can be knowledge of extrasensory things of which prophets were apprised."

Although virtually each verse or qur'anic phrase was understood as opening vistas to the infinite variety of divine meanings embedded in the unfathomable depth of the Qur'an, it became a characteristic feature of the Sufi exegetical approach to concentrate upon keynotes within selected passages of the Qur'an. These keynotes, frequently short phrases from a particular verse or characteristic words linked to images of a particular passage, are chosen as the focal point of the commentary. Whether taken up in isolation from their context within the text or in relation to it, these keynotes awaken associations in the

mind of the interpreter that spring from the mystical matrix of a Sufi world of ideas. The process of the spiritual encounter between qur'anic keynotes and the mystical associations achieves a level of synthesis which makes it impossible to discern where "exegesis" ends and "eisegesis" begins and where the discovery of the interpreter's own experience disappears in the revelation of the divine word. To bring to light the depth of meaning, either uncovered in the word of the Eternal Speaker or discovered in the soul of the mystic, clusters of figurative expressions such as allusions, symbols and allegories, were required to reflect the various shades and facets of meaning that cannot be captured in one single definitive expression. To a large degree, these figurative expressions constitute the Sufi language of Qur'an interpretation and give witness to its particular exegetical approach.

The fundamental question about the actual process of divine revelation forced the exegetes to deal with the piecemeal character of the qur'anic revelation. The conflict between the Qur'an as a book existing in the presence of God in its entirety as source of all revelation, *kitāb*, and as the actual communication of revelation in stages, *furqān*, was already highlighted by the objection Muhammad's adversaries raised in the Qur'an, "Why has the Qur'an not been sent down upon him all at once (*jumlatan wāḥidatan*)" (Q 25:32). A hadith statement on the authority of Ibn 'Abbas (d 66/687-8) was used by Sufi exegetes to blunt the antinomy by linking a single revelation of the divine book with its piecemeal communications to the Prophet. God sent down the Qur'an to the lowest heaven at one and the same time in its entirety but revealed it piecemeal to the Prophet over a period of about twenty years. Furthermore, the Sufi exegetes linked this assertion with the qur'anic reference to a "guarded tablet" (*lawḥ mahfūz*, Q 85:22). Since the Qur'an included references to the tablet preserved in heaven, and depicted Gabriel as the envoy of revelation, Sufi exegetes could use this hadith to provide the environment and imagery of the process of revelation. God, seated on his throne, fixed his sight on the heavenly writ of the Qur'an, preserved in a tablet of emerald, and beckoned the angels sending them as his envoys to Gabriel, the angel of revelation, who communicated each divine message to the Prophet, five times five verses at a time.

In addition to recognizing an outer meaning, *zāhir*, an inner meaning *bāṭin* of the Qur'an, the Sufis also distinguished a moral meaning, *ḥadd*, and an anagogical meaning, *maṭla'/muṭṭala'*. The outer sense is the recitation (*tilāwa*) and the inner sense the understanding of the verse (*fahm*). The moral sense defines what is declared lawful and unlawful and the anagogical sense is the command of the heart over the meaning intended by it as understood from the vantage point of God. This distinction was based on a hadith reported by Ibn Mas'ūd, "Each verse [of the Qur'an] has a back (*zahr*) and a belly (*baṭn*); and each word (*ḥarf*) has a definition (*ḥadd*) and a point of ascendancy (*muṭṭala'*)."

This hadith combines two seemingly separate assertions. First, it states that each qur'anic verse (*āya*) has an outer meaning, a *zahr*, literally a "back, outside or surface," and an inner meaning, a *baṭn*, literally, a "belly, inside or depth". Second it links with this image the idea that each word (or letter, *ḥarf*) of the Qur'an has a definition or norm, a *ḥadd*, literally a "boundary" or a "horizon" of its intended meaning, and an anagoge, *maṭla'/muṭṭala'*, literally a "dawn" or a point of ascending from the horizon of the intended meaning to a higher understanding of the passage. Please notice that these are two entirely separate images: each verse is compared to a body with a back and a belly, and each word is likened to the sun rising from the horizon at daybreak. The Sufis collapsed these two separate assertions into a composite declaration of the fourfold meaning of each qur'anic verse. Finally, a four-point pattern of qur'anic exegesis was coined: "The Book of God is based on four things, the literal expression (*'ibāra*), the allegorical allusion (*ishāra*), the mystical subtleties (*laṭā'if*) and the divine realities (*ḥaqā'iq*). The comprehension of the literal expression is assigned to the common people (*al-'amma*) while the elite of the mystics (*al-khāṣṣa*) are granted access to the allegorical allusion. The mystical subtleties are reserved for the friends of God (*awliyā'*) and access to the divine realities is the privilege of the prophets (*anbiyā'*)."

For most Sufis this understanding constitutes a transition from the ordinary interpretation of the Qur'an to God's very own understanding of its meaning.

The fourfold pattern of qur'anic interpretation is not, however, systematically employed in the interpretation of qur'anic verses throughout the Sufi commentary literature. In general, there are no single

qur'anic verses or keynotes to which the fourfold pattern has been applied in a rigorous fashion. Rather, most authors consistently differentiate between a twofold meaning, a literal and a hidden allegorical sense, with primary emphasis on the hidden meaning of the Qur'an.

Now let us turn to the second point of my presentation. The principal response of Muslims to God's every word of the Qur'an is reciting it or listening to its recital; actually, the Arabic word "Qur'an" means "recitation." Two human organs convey that response, the tongue and the ear. For the Qur'an is primarily a text to be voiced and heard, rather than a book to be read and pondered. As the qur'anic word is pronounced again and again, the Muslim tries to absorb its meaning for all circumstances of life. Couched in rhymed prose, the Qur'an creates the effect of cadenced language without the constraints of poetic meter. Its characteristic end rhymes facilitate memorization and encourage the frequent audible or silent repetition that keeps the sacred word present to the believer and prevents its being forgotten. Though copied throughout the centuries with infinite care, the Qur'an is essentially treated as a spoken word, pronounced in recitation, rather than a written text, pondered in meditation.

Neither a mediator nor a bridge intervenes between God and man in the act of listening to the qur'anic word or reciting it. Muslims strive to pronounce the words of the Qur'an as accurately as possible, hearing them as coming directly from God. This aural process of communication from the tongue to the ear, rather than from the pen to the eye, also especially marks Muslim ritual prayer, in which the believer is hearer of the divine word par excellence. Standing upright in prayer and reciting passages from the Qur'an in an audible voice, the believer most acutely experiences God's speech in and beyond the cadences of Qur'an recital. In the act of prayer he listens to revelation itself, perfect and matchless, spoken by God in clear, flawless Arabic beyond translation into any other tongue. The Qur'an recited in prayer most vividly manifests Islam as a religion of the ear, rather than the eye. In prayer, the Muslim is fully immersed in the articulated word of God, rather than simply visually engaged in examining the scripture for information or casting his glance at the text for inspiration.

Listening to the qur'anic word, the individual Muslim replicates the situation of the Prophet himself to whom the Qur'an was delivered aurally and inwardly over a period of about twenty years. In fact, the vast majority of the qur'anic passages reflect this process of aural communication or audition: The Prophet inwardly heard the revelations and handed them on to his followers in spoken form. The text itself, then, bears abundant witness to its aural/oral genesis.

The early Sufis, from the beginning of Islamic asceticism in the eighth century to the time of al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) gave unequivocal witness to their own personal encounter with divine speech by claiming to hear the divine Speaker beyond His word and to hold a position similar to that of the Prophet, the prototypical hearer of the qur'anic word. Their principal prayer practices, called *dhikr*, recollection of a divine name as recited in a qur'anic verse or repeated in a prayer formula, and *samā'*, listening to the chant of the Qur'an or the recital of poetry, hinge on such oral/aural experience. In actual practice, the uninterrupted repetition of God's name was experienced as hearing God speak in their very soul. In its consummation of mystical experience, *dhikr* returned the Sufis to the dawn of creation when all of humanity (symbolically enshrined in the prophetic ancestors as light particles or seeds) had heard God's voice for the first time and understood His self-revelation on the Day of Covenant (Q 7:172) in preexistence. Following the basic qur'anic mode of auralness, the early Sufis therefore perceived themselves predominantly as hearers of the word who rendered the divine world present in their practice of recollection.

It is striking that the qur'anic passages where the Prophet experienced a vision or saw what was revealed to him are comparatively rare. In the Qur'an allusion to Muhammad's vision can be confined to two major passages: (Q 53:1-18, with a parallel passage 81:19-25; and 17:1). The first and longer passage refers to a vision in which Muhammad witnessed God directly "at the Lote Tree of the Boundary" (Q 53:14) and may reflect, according to reports of Muslim tradition and historiography, the inaugural vision Muhammad had at the beginning of his prophetic career. The second, more enigmatic verse fragment refers to Muhammad's dream experience of a mysterious night journey (*isrā'*) from Mecca to Jerusalem, which the traditional interpretation of qur'anic commentary connected with an account of his ascension to

heaven (*mi'rāj*). This ascension, according to the detailed elaboration in Hadith literature, occurred during Muhammad's lifetime, rather than after his death and culminated in a vision of God that Muhammad subsequently described to his followers.

The early Qur'an commentaries of the Sufis record only fragmentary statements to the effect that, in his night journey and ascension, the Prophet was accorded an unmediated vision of God. At closer scrutiny, however, these same fragments manifest themselves as keystones of interpretation for the full Sufi understanding of the nature of mystical vision. What was decisive for the mystics in the *isrā'/mi'rāj* accounts was the central fact that Muhammad experienced a vision of God, regardless of the particular circumstances of travel or instruments of ascent. Eminent prophets before Muhammad had not reached this stage. Abraham had only witnessed God in the stars. Moses had desired to see God face to face in this world, but then, realizing his bold presumption, had repented and abandoned the desire. Only Muhammad, at the climax of his journey to heaven, was granted witness of God at the Lote Tree of the Boundary, at a distance of "within two bows' length" (Q 53:9). For Sufis, his vision, with the eyes of his heart, was a spiritual, yet actual, sight of God. It was a foretaste of the beatific vision in the world to come and a reminder of the primordial vision at the dawn of creation. It also served Sufis as the prototype of the visions of God they were granted, here and now, at the height of their mystical experiences. Muhammad's vision of God, then, became the anchor ground in which the Sufis moored the possibility of their own vision of God and the explanations of its nature.

Three themes shall show the way in which Sufi authors directed their attention to central questions of Islamic mysticism, such as those surrounding the supreme name of God, the mystical vision of God and the recollection of the divine presence in prayer. The first theme is the visionary experience of "the greatest name of God" (*ism Allāh al-a'zam*). The Sufis knew this supreme name from its biblical revelation to Bal'am b. Bā'ūrā (cf. Numbers 22-24 and 31:8) and, following a trend of traditional qur'anic exegesis took the anonymous allusion of Q 7:175-6 as an implicit reference to Bal'am who despite his knowledge of the supreme name was led astray by passion and pride. In early Sufism, the supreme name of God is generally identified with "Allāh," although sometimes it is also understood as one of "the most beautiful names of God" (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*). A widely shared Sufi view holds that "Allāh" is the supreme name of God because, even if stripped of its letters one by one, the Arabic typeface of the *tetragammaton*, 'llh (pronounced "Allāh") continues to enunciate none else but God alone: 'llh meaning Allah "God," llh, meaning *li-llāh*, "for the sake of God," and lh meaning *lahu* "to Him," and h meaning *hū*, that is to say *huwa* "He." Hence the ineffable mystery of God is concealed in the letter *h*, which is articulated in pronunciation with an almost inaudible sound. The recital of the supreme name of God is converted by the mystics into a divine secret, communicated by initiation and revealed by its actual vision.

Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 166/778), for example, was initiated into the supreme name of God following an encounter in the desert with al-Khāḍir, the spiritual guide of the mystics. Bāyazīd al-Bastāmī discovered the supreme name in the *shahāda*, the formula professing Islamic monotheism, but also challenged a questioner to show him the smallest name of God. The most striking example of an actual vision of the greatest name of God, however, is that of Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/897) who saw God's supreme name written in the sky with green light from east to west. Relating his experience of seeing the heavenly stars, or the Milky Way, at night, Tustarī states that he went one night into the desert and saw the name of Allah written in all the stars of the sky. Interpreting the verse, cited twice in the Qur'an, "God, there is no god but He, the Living, the Everlasting" (Q 2:255 and 3:2), he states: "This is the greatest verse in the Book of God. It includes the supreme name of God, which is written in the sky with green light in a single line from east to west. I used to see it written like that in the Night of Might (*laylat al-qadr*) when I was at 'Abbādān." This vision of God's supreme name aptly illustrates the transformation of the verbal recital and mental recollection of God's name into the visionary world of the early Sufis as it beholds the greatest name of God in the book of nature.

A second and even more striking theme is the prototype of the Sufis' mystical theophany is Muhammad's vision of God at the Lote Tree of the boundary (*sidrat al-muntahā*, Q 53:1-18). The various

facets of interpretation linked with the Sufi commentary on this passage demonstrate the way in which the Sufis translate the aurality of the Qur'an as a recited scripture into visual imagery. It further demonstrates the wide range of their exegetical flexibility. Four examples highlight Muhammad's vision of God from different perspectives -- the foretaste of the beatific vision, the primordial vision of preexistence, the vision as a spiritual journey of the soul and the vision portrayed by the symbolism of love in secret communion. All of them attempt to bridge the gulf between humanity and the Transcendent in a partially allegorical and a partially anagogical sense.

For al-Wāsiṭī (d. 320/932), the Prophet stands in the presence of the Transcendent at the Lote-Tree of the Boundary with his gaze fixed on the concealed God hidden behind veils. As the veils are lifted, all of Muhammad's qualities, including self-consciousness, are effaced, and he is drawn into the vision God has of Himself. As Wāsiṭī says, "In reality, it was God's essence witnessing his own essence," even though Muslim tradition states that Muhammad witnessed God. Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) traces the vision back to pre-existential times when Muhammad witnessed God at the dawn of creation in an act of primordial adoration during the unfathomable eon preceding Adam's creation. When God resolved to fashion the cosmos and the human race, so Tustarī explains, God shaped Muhammad from his own light as the first creation and had him bow down in prostration before the veil of divine majesty. From this light of Muhammad (nūr Muḥammad), God fashioned a column of light, crystalclear in its translucency. It remained in the presence of God for a hundred thousand years before the beginning of creation, witnessing God face-to-face in the theophany of his attributes.

Ibn 'Aṭā' (d. 309/922) interiorizes Muhammad's vision as a spiritual journey to the innermost stages of the soul, a journey that paradoxically reaches the farthest horizon of nearness to God. Combining the vision at the Lote-Tree with the Prophet's night journey, Ibn 'Aṭā' internalizes it and states that "Muhammad set out with his soul (*nafs*), traveled by night with his spirit (*rūḥ*) and was driven on by his inmost being (*sirr*)." Firmly fixed in the station nearest to God "Muhammad beheld the Real one (*al-ḥaqq*) apprehending something of him without any mediation and without any human support." A Sufi statement attributed to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq understands Muhammad's vision as a meeting of lover and beloved, one establishing an exclusive domain of intimacy and awe. There is no space for a third party in this personal encounter with God nor is anyone else aware of the secrets God communicates in confidential conversation. A poignant segment of the commentary reads: "The Real One inclined toward him with the affection of a lover for his beloved, and he communicated with him in secret as a lover converses with his beloved. They kept things hidden and did not divulge their secret to anyone else. No one knows that revelation except the One who revealed it and the one who received the revelation. No one knows what he beheld except the One who showed it and the one who beheld it. The lover drew near to the beloved, becoming his confidant and intimate."

To supplement and support their spiritual exegesis, the Sufi commentators employ a method of synthetical interpretation that draws other, seemingly related, qur'anic verses into the commentary on the particular passage. They use regiments, such as the verse pointing to the Prophet's night journey, the famous light verse, or the verses alluding to the purification of Muhammad's heart to bolster their exegesis of the primary passage, detecting an inner affinity, even when, as in some cases, the linkage seems rather tangential.

The third theme to be examined, that of the recollection of the divine presence in prayer, can best be approached from the idea of the primordial covenant between God and the human race as this is rediscovered within the soul of the mystic by a process of anamnesis during the practice of *dhikr*, mystical recollection. Junayd (d. 297/910) and Ruwaym (d. 303/916) connected the interpretation of Q 7:172, "And when your Lord took from the children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify, touching themselves, 'Am I not your Lord (*alastu birabbukum*)?' They said, 'Yes we testify (*balā shahidnā*).'" with Q 79:35 when Pharaoh proclaims, "I am your Lord, the Most High!" (*anā rabbukum al-ālā*)." Sufi exegesis traces the first passage back to preexistence, and completely reverses the ordinary interpretation of the second passage. In preexistence, before the beginning of time and prior to God's creation of Adam as his viceroy on earth, the entire future human race embryonically enshrined in their

biological ancestor as Adam's seeds, is taken by God from the back of Adam. Spiritually extracted as sperm of light particles from the loins of their forefather, they are summoned by God to testify to His oneness and lordship, assuming the contractual obligation to profess monotheism once born into earthly existence. Intuitively perceiving God's testimony about himself in preexistence they bear witness to him as the one and only Lord. The offer of divine testimony and its acceptance by the future human race not only constitute the primordial covenant between God and humanity, but at the same time endow individual human beings with intellect in their first self-conscious act.

Once born, virtually all human beings have the capacity to recall and re-actualize their pre-existential past in the secret of their soul, created by God as the locus of his intimate colloquy with each human being, but only Sufi mystics ever actualize this potential. The concentrated introspection of the mystic comprehends this colloquy as a soliloquy of God's self-revelation manifesting himself in the soul of the mystic through the qur'anic words "I am your Lord, the Most High!" These were the very words God uttered in his primordial self-revelation, and the mystic hears them as echoing in the secret of his inmost being (*sirr al-nafs*). Were this secret publicly divulged, its revelation would obliterate the distinction between prophets and saints or relativize the purpose of prophethood, the essence of which is the summons to monotheism.

At one point, however, God revealed this inmost secret to Pharaoh, the symbol of unbelief in the Qur'an. Hearing the qur'anic words of Pharaoh's blasphemous proclamation of his own divinity, "I am your Lord, the Most High!", the mystic ironically perceives the actual essence of belief (*īmān*) flowing from Pharaoh's tongue of unbelief (*kufr*). In his exercise of Sufi recollection, the mystic remembers, as if by anamnesis the moment in preexistence when God affirmed his oneness and lordship for human consciousness.

After these forays into the realm of esoterics -the flight into eternity the return to the primordial past, the journey of the soul and exegesis turned into eisegesis- one may conclude that Sufi interpretation of the Qur'an demonstrates a great measure of reverence for the revealed word of God recorded in the Qur'an. Reading the book of God as the source of their inspiration, and relativizing the prophets as mediators between humanity and God, the Sufis turn their attention single-mindedly to the Qur'an and assign the role of mediator solely to the divine word. Unflinching in their monotheism and unrestricted in their interpretation of God's word, they seem unconcerned by the subjectivity of their exegetical method and the variegated nature of their hermeneutics. In its analytical interpretation, they transform the episodes that relate God's interaction with the prophets into prototypes of mystical experience. They also isolate telling references to verses in which God speaks about himself in the first person. Whenever God says, "Anā, I am," permitting no rival to his claim for unicity and oneness, mystical Qur'an interpretation attains its singular spiritual sensitivity. The mystical exegesis of qur'anic expressions, such as "Am I not your Lord?" or, "I am your Lord, the Most High!" dissolve the distinct identities of the human self and God, leaving only the ultimate and absolute "Anā," called "God" as the object of faith but "I" as the subject of mystical experience. The final truth of Islamic mysticism that there is only One who can truly say, "I", is expressed in the ecstatic utterance of the Sufis, such as "I am He" or "I am the Real" (*anā l-ḥaqq*), secured in the innermost reaches of the soul through insight into the allegorical and anagogical meaning of the Qur'an.