

# EXISTENCE OF EVIL, THEODICY AND SUFISM

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## ABSTRACT

THE PRESENT PAPER ATTEMPTS TO PRESENT SUFI THEODICY AND ARGUES THAT IT IS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SUFISM THAT THE VEXING PROBLEM OF EVIL COULD BE CONVINCINGLY TACKLED. READING CRITIQUES OF THEODICY IN THE LIGHT OF SUFI METAPHYSICAL THOUGHT AND ARGUING FOR REORIENTING THE FRAMEWORK FROM WHICH THE QUESTION OF EVIL IS USUALLY APPROACHED IN CONTEMPORARY DEBATES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION, IT HIGHLIGHTS THE MUCH IGNORED PERSPECTIVE OF ISLAMIC THEODICY AND ALSO ATTEMPTS A CRITIQUE OF THE PESSIMIST-ABSURDIST MODERNISM.

The problem of evil is arguably the most difficult problem for all theistic worldviews. Modern age is characterized by the extreme obtrusiveness of evil and it could well be argued that it is the changed perception or cognizance of evil that differentiates the modern humanist secularist worldview from the traditional religious worldviews. The problem constitutes perhaps the foremost challenge to traditional theology in modern times. Any attempt to secure a rational foundation for religion in modern times must seriously reckon with the problem. And theodicy has become a notoriously difficult job for any theologian in modern times. It has been a canker in the heart of theism. The usual theological apologies or answers are hardly convincing and have been subject to searching criticism from various quarters. However, the traditional metaphysical approach to the problem, as presented in the writings of Sufis, has largely been ignored in academic debates on the philosophy of religion. The present paper argues that the problem of evil hardly appears such a disturbing issue from the perspective of Sufism.

We may begin with a brief reference to the limitations of scholastic approach to the problem of evil. The Qur'an has quite explicitly made certain statements in connection with God's relationship to evil that have defied satisfactory theological exegesis and that appear incongruous to the generally

accepted image of the Qur'anic God. The statements, hard to be understood at theological plane, include such verses which state that God leads astray whom he wills, God does what He wills, God is the creator of your actions, from God everything originates and to Him everything returns, evil comes from your own hands and from God comes only good everything happens by the grant of God. The Qur'an emphasizes in the same breath the apparently divergent attributes of Mercy and Wrath. It declares God to be both wise and omnipotent. It also declares God's unity and absoluteness in an uncompromising tone and leaves no space for any recourse to a dualistic thesis in accounting for evil. The question of fate or the problem of predestination has always resisted a consistent theological treatment. All this necessitates a shift to traditional metaphysics and the metaphysical conception of *Tawhid* as Oneness of Being. This alone would make possible a coherent theodicy. This is what Sufism and such Sufi metaphysicians as Ibn "Arabi have done and this is what the perennialists— who include Sufi metaphysicians like Frithjof Schuon— argue for. Heresies like the necessitarianism of Jabarites and a veiled dualism of Qadarites and certain paradoxes and dilemmas of the Ash'arite theology are all avoided by taking recourse to traditional metaphysics. We must shift to traditional metaphysics if we are to make sense of these assertions. Such critics of theism and theodicy (especially Islamic theodicy) as Flew could be easily and convincingly refuted by taking recourse to the Sufi perennialist metaphysical approach. The question of moral evil or the existence of sin is approached from a quite different perspective in Sufism. The problem of evil is solved if one transcends the moral plane without denying its validity at its own level— the good-evil duality. These points will be argued in this paper.

The fact that the existence of suffering is no problem at all for faith and is perhaps precisely the very opposite in that it serves to kindle it is best perceived by Sufis. If we grant that Sufism is the inner or esoteric dimension of Islam, we could well say that there is no such thing as the problem of evil for Islam. Islam, understood as submission to the objective truth or reality, by definition, solves the problem of evil. Perhaps the most profound statement (that could be made only by those who don't blink on seeing the face of the sun of Truth) of Islam vis-à-vis evil is that both good and evil are from God. Not only we, but our actions also, are created by God, declares

the Qur'an. *Iblis* too has been created by God. God offers no explanation, no apology for the creation of evil. He has nothing to be ashamed of. All the creation sings His praise. But the Qur'an is also emphatic that God carries all goodness in His hands. And that the good comes to men from God but evil comes to them through themselves. God is not only good, but merciful and compassionate. He defeats evil. The traditional formulation of the Islamic creed reflects all these "contradictory" statements of the Qur'an. *Iman-i-mufassal* (the detailed formulation of faith) has a clause wherein it is stated that 'both good and evil are from God'. Even the extreme logical extrapolation of this formulation is accepted or owned by the Qur'an as it says that it is God who leads astray whom he wishes. Yes it is the same God who demands faith and punishes in hell those who disbelieve. The problem of evil is closely tied to the question of predestination. It is God who made Adam and who created *Iblis* and the serpent and it is He who planted the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil and the Tree of Eternity in the garden of Eden and who could thus well be accused of tempting Adam to sin - to eat the forbidden fruit. It is He who seals off the hearts against belief. It is the God-given freedom that man has misused in a world that has the ideally congenial environment for the breeding of sin or evil. It is God who has moulded the clay of man who is predisposed to evil. God has moulded man from the lowly earth and has created the ever-vigilant Devil who perpetually chases Adam and leads him away from God to the hell of one's sin and despair. It is God who has decreed one's place in heaven and hell before one is even born. Nothing can alter this decree. The moving finger having writ writes on and not all the tears of the world can lure it to cancel half a line. Islam thus seems to affirm the polar opposites – the contradictory propositions of freedom and predestination or God's goodness and His responsibility for evil in the world simultaneously. This is too difficult for the exoteric theology to appropriate and properly reconcile and synthesize. It has led to either atheism or a morbid pessimism and fatalism.

The great excesses of an exclusively scholastic approach have proven a menace in the Muslim history. It is especially the issues like predestination and theodicy that have been so hard to be properly dealt with from the scholastic-theological approach. Indeed the many heresies and blasphemies connected with the scholastically oriented Muslims have sometimes resulted in rejection of the whole discipline of *kalam* at the hands of Sufis and even a

class of jurists-cum-theologians. Ratiocination in such matters as that of predestination had already been castigated by the Prophet of Islam. Indeed it could well be said whether there is any orthodox warrant for theodicy - especially what is called philosophical theodicy - in Islam. Perhaps it is no accident that Muslim philosophy and theology (and of course Sufism) have not traditionally been preoccupied with theodicy. However we could decipher outlines of consistent and convincing theodicy in Sufi thought. It is *tasawwuf* that alone has tackled the problem of evil in a manner that can't be problematized by the usual critiques of theodicy. Muslim theologians had marginalized the problem of evil in many ways and managed to avoid it. It is the Sufis alone that have seriously reckoned with the problem of evil and the tragic sense of life. Sufi poetry reveals an acute sense of pain and suffering; indeed the question of evil and suffering contributes a lot to its genesis. It is the agony and frustration of temporal living that prompts one to respond to the music of the eternal. Pain has well been seen as the megaphone of God. The hunger for the infinite and the eternal is directly proportional to dissatisfaction with the finite, the temporal (that is the realm of limitation, and thus evil). Pessimism and asceticism are conditioned by a negative estimate of this world of space and time. Sufism has been accused of both, and if we restrict our view to their estimate of this finite and temporal world only, this charge is justified. The Sufi's preoccupation with the transcendent world – the realm of peace and bliss – could well be seen as a response to evil that characterizes the realm of immanence. The Sufis have highlighted the evils of this world (Ma'ari could well be seen as an extreme example of this streak of Sufi thought). Ghazali devotes a whole chapter to the evils of the world in his *Ihya*. *Tasawwuf* has been dubbed as escapist by its critics. However, this so-called escapism is connected with the Sufi's cognizance of the world's fleetingness and the preponderance of evil in it. The Sufi looks at the world squarely and finds it not worthy of love and thus turns to God. We will return to this point later.

The problem of evil is essentially a problem of (exoteric) theology. Sufism answers not by advocating any argument but by seeing and experiencing. The Sufi has the intellectual intuition of the goodness of God and the voidness of evil. He crosses the dark night of the soul and eradicates the cause of evil or suffering (*dukka* in Buddhist terminology), and attains the Bliss unspeakable, a state of total victory over evil. He sees with the inward eye that the

goodness and mercy of God is written large on the face of the heavens and the earth and thereby proves that evil is naughted. He, as Rumi says, passes beyond the duality of poison and sugar as he scents unity. He knows that there is no solution to and escape from evil as long as the heavens and the earth are there, as long as we are caught in the realm of space and time, as long as there is a separative principle of ego, as long as we are exiled from the Garden of Eden and don't return home, as long as the Beloved's face is hidden from us. (It is only posthumously when neither space or time thus characterize our finitude and the flesh that can't but be heir to all kinds of sufferings that every type of suffering finally cease.) There can be no salvation or final triumph over evil as long as 'we' are there or 'I' is there, until everything comes to naught and there remains nothing but the face of the Lord. As long as existence is afflicted by the curse of thingness, this-ness or that-ness and I-ness or individuality, time and finitude and the consequent dualism of any kind there can be no salvation, no enlightenment, no heaven or *baqa* in the absolute sense. Religion (whose object is God who reconciles all opposites, whose vision transports a gnostic beyond the realm of good and evil) is the hunger of the soul for the impossible, the unattainable, the inconceivable as Stace—building on Whitehead—elaborates in these powerful words:

The religious impulse in men is the hunger for the impossible, the unattainable, the inconceivable – or at least for that which is these things in the world of time ... Religion seeks the infinite and the infinite which by definition is impossible, unattainable. It is by definition that which can never be reached. Religion seeks the light. But it isn't the light which can be found at any place or time. It isn't somewhere. It is the light which is nowhere. It is the light which never was on sea or land. Never was, never will be even in the infinite stretches of future time. This light is non-existent.<sup>39</sup>

Yet it is the great light which illumines the world as the Qur'an calls God the Light of the World. Religion's object is something which is the

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<sup>39</sup> Stace, W.T. *Time and Eternity*, p.4.

ultimate ideal, but the hopeless quest, something whose possession is the final good, and yet is beyond all reach, as Whitehead said.<sup>40</sup>

The above quoted characterization of religion by Stace is essentially mystical. The Sufi's ideal is thus not something that we can think about, reason about, catch hold of, be advocates of. His God is Beyond-Being, the totally other. He is No-thing. He is best described by the Upanishadic *neti* and *neti* and the Qur'anic "nothing is like Him." Evil is not conquered (or God's vision isn't possible) in this world. The Mystic's God isn't an object out there, some being or a being among other beings, some humanized subject (in a subject-object dualism— the veracity of which is presupposition of all theologies and theodocies as traditionally understood by literalist exotericism; binaries of good and evil, God and the world, have any meaning only in a worldview that takes the subject-object dualism for granted), an entity of which this or that could be predicated, some cosmic power or force that could be appealed to or invoked— in short that could be made a party in the trial on account of evil in the universe. He is best described by "It" and nothing answers the question as to 'what is It' as Al-Jili has said.<sup>41</sup> It is the supraformal Essence stripped of all attributes. It is best "revealed" in silence. It is silence (and all the prophets, like the Buddha, have been silent, in their own ways, on the ultimate questions. The Prophet of Islam emphasized this silence on the questions of God's nature and predestination) that answers all questions, all problems including the problem of evil. Mystics have wisely been silent. It is the theologian, the scholastic who has always (and characteristically so) been a rhetorician. Rumi asks God that he be transported to a state where speech comes without words. When we transcend the realm of thought, of logic, of propositions, of words, of time then alone is God revealed; then alone are answers clear and then alone we know the truth that the Truth can't be grasped, conceptualized, or divulged. The theologians have emphasized the importance of mystery at the heart of things, and mystery in God's doings. In fact *iman* is belief in the unseen, the *ghayyib*, the unknowability of the ultimate ground of Being or Existence. It is faith in the mystery and goodness of Being. Faith isn't knowledge. A knowable God is no God at all. God known as an object is no God at all.

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted by Stace, op. cit., p.3.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted by W. N. Perry in *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Bedfont, UK, 1979, p.987.

God as an object, as a reachable ideal, doesn't interest the religious or mystical soul. Religion refuses, on principle, to demystify existence. The original sin consisted in approaching the Tree of Knowledge. The mystic builds no altar for the God in his heart. He isn't interested in the knowledge of God or understanding His ways or the rationale of His actions. He is incredulous towards all narratives of dogmas and creedal formulations. It is absurd to build a science of God— which is the literal meaning of the word theology— from the Sufistic perspective. As Oshu puts it: “Revelation comes the moment knowledge ceases. The known must cease for the unknown to be. And the true, the real, is unknown.”<sup>42</sup> And that “a person who claims knowledge may be a theologian, a philosopher, but never a religious person. A religious man accepts the ultimate mystery, the ultimate unknowableness, the ultimate ecstasy of ignorance, the ultimate bliss of ignorance.”<sup>43</sup>

There is a difference between theology and religion (whose inner dimension is mysticism). I again quote Oshu:<sup>44</sup> “Theology goes on talking about God. Religion talks God, not about God. The ‘about’ is the realm of theology .... Religion isn't talking about reality. Religion talks reality.”<sup>45</sup> A mystic doesn't feel obliged to advocate, to apologize for God and His governance. He has no one to defend for or against. All the worlds are in him. As Rumi, in his *Divan-i-Shams Tabrez*, has said: “Knowledge, virtue, temperance, faith and piety/Blazing fire of hell, fierce flaming am I.” Evil is within us. It is ourselves who are accountable. We need to fight a battle. We need to escape the hell we are in and this hell hasn't been created by some external agency. God and heaven aren't to be found out there but experienced within. He who knows his self knows God. And the Self needn't justify its ways. The world isn't an object lying outside the infinitude of the Self or God. It hasn't been created out of nothing as literalist creationist theology believes. It has been always there, as an unrealized idea in the

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<sup>42</sup> Oshu, *Psychology of the Esoteric: New Evolution of Man*, Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi, 1978, p.114.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114.

<sup>44</sup> Whose exposition of mysticism by his life and works - though deeply affected by certain modernist anti-traditional and anti-metaphysical tendencies and thus quite objectionable on perennialist grounds— does still pithily express the essence of esotericism.

<sup>45</sup> Oshu, *Come Follow Me: The Sayings of Jesus*, Vol.2, 1977, p.199.

knowledge of God. God has only manifested what was already there (in His eternal knowledge) in a sense. The concept of creative emanation isn't opposed to the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*; it only explains it. God, the world and man aren't three separate existences. There is a unity of Being. *Tawhid* implies a God who is all-comprehending, all-encompassing. Only God exists. *La Manjuda-Illallah*. Perhaps none of the presuppositions of an Epicurean-Humean formulation of the problem will be shared by the Sufi. In that formulation one presupposes that God is some objective being among other beings, some power that is operating from outside and fashions world or makes it as He wills. He is responsible for the world. The world is an object for God the subject. God could have made some other world, in some other way. He had a choice to make while designing the world. He is, in short, conceived in man's image, in anthropomorphist terms. As a humanized subject He becomes an idol. The world is His creation and not manifestation. Another assumption is that God could possibly be known, or conceptualized. He is not the infinite and the *Muhit*, the outward and the inward, the first and the last. We could pass judgments on His character by studying the world. We are subjects and God is an object of knowledge. Attributes are *Dhat* or they exhaust *Dhat*. There is no distinction made between Being and Beyond-Being, and the latter too is reduced to being. God isn't taken to be something wholly outside the order of time. He isn't "the dark mist" (*ama*), "the wild waste," "the nameless formless nothing," as mystics have described Him. Omnipotence extends to His nature. It is His plan that is being executed in the universe. We are accidents, thrown into the world. We are dispensable. The knowing subject couldn't have been there. We haven't been consulted when we were created or when the world was made. We register our complaints against heavens both when we are born and when we depart. Man is an object who is manipulated by the forces outside him. He is in a position to scan God and file a suit against Him. The Epicurean critique of theodicy presupposes a literal exoteric sense of basic religious terms like God.

But mysticism, Sufism being Islamic mysticism, has more or less emphasized the symbolist character of religion's God. His goodness or love isn't conceived literally but symbolically. Stace, an eminent mystical philosopher, well emphasizes this point. The Sufi is ideally silent. He knows that the wings of words are clipped for soaring into the realm of God. All



words fall short in describing God and His relation to the world. The Sufis are fond of using elliptical and oblique phrases and use evocative imagery. Finding nothing that could fully convey the ineffable, they resort to various strategies. This has also contributed a lot in giving rise to contradictions in the mystic's utterances and his disparagement of thought-language. One thing is clear— the Sufi takes religion and its terms symbolically rather than literally. All force in an Epicurean-Humean formulation and critique of theodicy is dependent on taking these terms (God, God's goodness and His love and wisdom) literally. Thus this critique isn't valid on the Sufi theodicy. The Sufi isn't interested in being an advocate of God. He is not bothered with justifying His ways. The Sufi believes ultimately only in the goodness of Self or the goodness of Life. His prayer is nothing but gratitude to existence. A Sufi transmutes evil into goodness through the alchemy of love. He sees the face of the Beloved in even the ugliest of things (for him *Iblis* too is a sort of intensely jealous lover of God, *Khawja ahli firaq* in Rumi's phrase). He celebrates the goodness of life and existence. Nothing is profane in his worldview. He sees God and none but God (and thus Good and only Good) in the phenomenal world. He identifies his Self with the whole of existence and sings its celestial song.

The Sufi vision is the vision of blessedness and bliss. He finds everything beautiful after crossing the dark night of the soul, after opening wide the doors of perception or the third eye. He sings so ecstatically of the beauty of life. He is the last man to contemplate suicide. He is for the "pristine" affirmation of life. He loves life so intensely that he contemplates of winning immortality. He aspires for the life that is in heaven, or eternal bliss, the life that has finally defeated death and sorrow. No optimism can be more daring and so consistent. Paganism (e.g., that of Camus and Gide) can't see life's eternal dominion, its heavenly kingdom. The Sufi celebrates life and sees it as God's gift, the supreme benediction. He makes no complaints. Despair never overcomes him. He, drunk with the soul of love, is ever in a state of bliss. He is in a state where neither good nor evil entereth, in the words of Ba Yazid. He achieves a sort of omniscience and given the knowledge of alpha and omega of the universe, he is liberated— liberated from sin and from finitude. He regains paradise here and now. His hands become God's hands. He sees with the eyes of God. God descends to ask him what he wants, as Iqbal would say. He enjoys eternal felicity. He beholds God everywhere and always

as the God of Love. This God is revealed (manifested) in all forms as every form derives its existence from His *tajalli*. He surrenders his ego, his will and basks in the ocean of Existence. He possesses no ego, no separate consciousness or 'I'. Thus he surrenders all his claims over and against Existence, fate or God. His will merges with God's will. Having no desires there is no room for despair or tragedy of unfulfilled desires. He has renounced the desiring self and thus eliminated *dukkha*. He no longer feels what the existentialists call *angst*— the feeling of being condemned and exiled in the world or thrown into the world. Peace comes by submitting to God, i.e. by becoming a Muslim. There is no problem of alienation, of the Fall, of Sin for any non-human existence for such people because they have already submitted— they are already Muslim by their response to the call of existence, to God's command to "be" (*kun*). They have no will, no separative ego over and against the *Tao*. Islam demands a similar conscious attitude, chosen out of free will, towards God and His will and summons. It demands saying yes to life, affirmation of life and accepting it as a blessing. To be a Muslim (especially as the Sufi understands the term) means to annihilate the separative self-consciousness and attain God-consciousness. It demands *fana* as a prerequisite to attain *baqa*, the Bliss unspeakable, the joy everlasting, the felicity eternal. The Sufi is the king of both the worlds because he has renounced both of them. He clings to nothing. Thus no evil can touch him. One can conquer evil by refusing to be. This alone leads to innocence of becoming and that is what the notion of surrendering to God means. Islam means total acceptance and total submission and that implies patience and resignation and thus there is no such thing as resentment and the consequent despair. Islam's is an existential response to the existence of evil. It concentrates on a practical solution rather than mere speculation on its metaphysical genesis. It dissolves the problem by showing us how we can conquer it, transmute it. This point is forcefully argued by Evelyn Underhill in her classic *Mysticism*. It is hardly interested in philosophical theodicy but what may be called as religious theodicy that presupposes the existence of evil and proceeds to show how it could be used for the purpose of good. The Qur'an hardly indulges in any apologetics that attempt to justify the ways of God to man. It is man— that frail, weak-willed, impetuous, fallible, ungrateful creature that has to justify God's faith in the human project. The onus lies on man, rather than on God.

Dr. Mir Valiuddin claims that it is only Sufism in Islam that has solved the problem of evil. The present author agrees with this claim, and now we will be proceeding to technically discuss the Sufi metaphysical thought that pertains to the discussion on evil. Valiuddin begins by pointing this out:

Both for philosophers as well as divines, the problem of evil is the most delicate and most abstruse one. It is undoubtedly an enigma which the sages and philosophers are unable to solve. Particularly those systems of thought which are established on a theological or teleological basis try to solve this problem but on being frustrated in achieving their end they exclaim: "There was a Door to which I found no key, there was a veil past which I couldn't see."<sup>46</sup>

Ibn Sina is quoted to the effect that no perfect solution of the problem of evil has been reached by the sages.

The secrets of Existence look hazy and are but partially revealed,

The best of pearl scarcely shows its thread bole.

Everyone has but surmised,

The thing that matters remains still unsaid.<sup>47</sup>

Valiuddin resorts to that familiar strategy of mystical philosophers attacking the traditional Aristotelian logic of non-contradiction to answer the rationalist critics of theodicy. We must resort to alternative logics or just emphasize the limitations of traditional logic and the conceptualizing intellect in apprehending the nature of the Ultimate. I quote him:

God has been admitted as the creator of good and evil, yet evil has not been ascribed to God (by Islam and Sufis). Apparently this statement appears to be self contradictory; however you should learn this art of 'commingling of contradictions' from the Sufis of Islam and remember:

Affirmation and denial are at times both valid

When aspects alter, relationships vary!<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Valiudin, Mir, *The Quranic Sufism*, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1987,rpt. p.129.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.129.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.134.

Our author, however, doesn't much dilate on this logic of contradictions. So we will discuss it in a little detail, borrowing from Stace's brilliant and lucid exposition. This discussion of the mystical or Sufistic logic must form a prolegomena to our discussion of theodicy. Stace notes that men have always found that, in their search for the ultimate, contradictions and paradoxes lie all around them. This is because, as Whitehead's famous definition of religion that he quotes in the beginning of his *Time and Eternity* shows, contradictions and paradoxes lie at the heart of things. He says that either God is a mystery or He is nothing at all. All attempts to make religion purely a rational, logical thing aren't only shallow but would, if they could succeed, destroy religion.<sup>49</sup> He also notes that this conception of the divine nature as incapable of being apprehended by the logical intellect is identical with the conception of God as the 'utterly other', as wholly outside the natural order. He dismisses the interpretation of this 'utterly other' or utter transcendence of God (that the Qur'an so emphatically asserts) that takes it to mean as only another exaggeration, because in that case we should think of God as one among other things in the universe, although a vastly greater, nobler, more powerful being than any other. He advocates a second interpretation:

He isn't a part of the universe, one thing among others, but that His being lies in a plane, order or dimension, wholly different from the system of things which constitutes the natural order. This is exactly the same thing as asserting that God isn't capable of being apprehended by concepts. For the concept is, in its very nature, that power of the mind by which it traces relations between one thing and another in the universe. And if God isn't one among these things, then the logical intellect can never find Him.<sup>50</sup>

He rightly asserts that a contradiction in the ultimate is itself a religious intuition as evidenced by the mystic's utterances. He also notes that philosophies based on mysticism also contain irresolvable contradictions.<sup>51</sup> He cites the Upanishadic statement that God is both being and non-being as direct and literal repudiation of the logical law of contradiction.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Stace, W.T., op.cit., p.9.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.155.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.158.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.159.

Contradictions arise in the ultimate because mysticism and all the philosophies based on it assert the proposition that the Ultimate is one and infinite. This proposition necessarily leads to the precise contradiction that the world both is and is not identical with God. This contradiction is ultimate and irresolvable. He explains that it arises from the very logic of the Ultimate Reality:

[The] Ultimate being infinite, can have nothing outside it. Therefore the world can't fall outside it. There can't be any difference, any otherness, as between the Absolute to the world. Therefore the world is the Absolute. But the ultimate, being one is relationless without parts, without division, without manyness. The world, on the other hand, is the arena of manyness, division and relation. Therefore it isn't the Absolute, isn't contained in it, falls outside it.<sup>53</sup>

Stace links this issue of contradictions and inability of the conceptualizing intellect to apprehend God to the symbolist character of religion:

For our view, that God is utterly other, is also identical with the interpretation of religious truth as symbolic. For if we take any religious proposition, such as 'God is love', the literal interpretation of it will imply that there is a comparison between God's love and that of men. God's love is then greater only in degree, not in kind. And God himself is only one loving personality among others. If, on the other hand we take the proposition to be symbolic, then this will imply that there is no comparison at all between God's love and ours, that His love, and He himself, belong to a wholly different order from that in which we, in our natural moments in the time order, live and move.<sup>54</sup>

Stace thus shifts the formulation of theodicy to a different plane. If we grant the symbolist character of such propositions as 'God is love' and 'God is good' and 'God is wise' and deny application of the logical law of non-contradiction to the Absolute, we could easily refute the premises of Epicurus. However, Stace makes it explicit that the Ultimate itself can't be either self-contradictory or self-consistent:

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, pp.161-162.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.155.

It is an indivisible one, without parts; whereas self-contradiction means the logical opposition of one part to another, while self consistency means the logical opposition of one part with another. The ultimate can be neither self-consistent nor self-contradictory. For both of these are logical categories. It is neither logical nor illogical but alogical. What we should say, rather, is that the contradictions are in us, not in the ultimate. They arise from the attempt to comprehend the ultimate by logical concepts. The Ultimate rejects these concepts, and when we seek to force them upon the only result is that our thinking becomes contradictory.<sup>55</sup>

It is the heart that perceives God as Good, as Love, as Bliss, as Eternal, as Infinite. There is *a priori* intellectual intuition of God's goodness in us that is the basis of all theodicy. The logical argument has only secondary function for a believer, it will never convince us if we weren't *a priori* certain through an intuitive perception of Being's goodness, as Schuon says. Oshu, repeatedly emphasizes the vanity and futility of all theology and critiques its reliance on logic in ultimate questions. He too, more boldly than Stace, rejects as patent fraud all theodicy. It is heart that knows and is intuitively convinced of the blessedness of life and the goodness of Being. Such Sufi metaphysicians as Ibn "Arabi have well argued the case of theodicy and there is an elaborate metaphysics that deals with the problem of evil. It is to this that we now turn, borrowing heavily from Dr. Valiuddin's account of the same in his book *The Qur'anic Sufism*.

We need to know the traditional doctrine of essences and attributes as presented by the Sufis. According to the Sufis, the solution of all problems, including the problem of evil can be had in understanding the simple words of knowledge, the knower and the known. They hold that God Almighty is the knower, knowledge belongs to Him alone in reality and in itself; the essences of created beings are all His objects 'known' or ideas. The attribute of knowledge is in reality peculiar to God alone, it is solely ascribed to Him alone. The Qur'an confirms that "It is He who has knowledge and power." The attribute of knowledge is inseparable from the Being of God who is the knower since eternity. Since knowledge without objects known is impossible the things known to Him too are eternal. God creates things with knowledge as the Qur'an says. Therefore, it is proved, that everything is essentially a

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.153.

known object and from eternity subsists in the Divine knowledge. In the terminology of the Sufis, the created things which are, from eternity, objects of God's knowledge, are called the "essences of things" (*'ayan thabita*). They are also termed the "ideas of God." They are the modes of the Divine knowledge. They are termed as non-entities as they are the forms of knowledge and don't possess external independent existence. The Sufis regard these essences as other than God. The essence of God and the essences of the created things are totally the 'Other' of one another. The Qur'an implies their "Otherness" when it asks: "There will you fear other than God?" They are relative non-entities and not real non-entities because they don't have a permanent being of their own. God alone is self-existent. As they don't have 'being' of their own, it is clear, they don't possess real 'attributes' of their own since in God the real being is His own; He alone possesses existential attributes viz. life, knowledge, power, will, hearing, sight and speech and all of these have no existence in the essences of the created beings. The absence of existential attributes in created beings is synonymous with the presence of non-existential attributes.

Now we come to the basic Qur'anic assertion that God is the creator of man and his actions as well. He is the only real Agent or Doer. Whatever happens, happens because of His will and permission. He is thus the creator of both good and evil. Action, in the real sense, isn't attributed to created beings. As we saw above that the essences of the created beings are devoid of being and attributes, so we could well ask how can action be ascribed to them? Actions are committed through attributes and attributes subsist in being as existence. When the attributes of existence are negative, actions too are negated. Effects (*athar*) too couldn't be produced by such a being. As there is no being there would be no effects of being too.

The 'known' of God, which are the essences of things, or external realities, together with their concomitant peculiarities or aptitudes, or in the terminology of the Qur'an, *shakilat*, have subsisted in the knowledge of God since Eternity. As they don't have external existence, so they aren't termed created; on the contrary, they are uncreated. When God's knowledge is eternal, His ideas, the objects known, too, will be necessarily eternal, and when these are eternal, their peculiarities or aptitudes too will be eternal and immutable.

It is the Sufistic doctrine of creation that qualifies or reinterprets the traditional theological idea of *creatio ex nihilo* that is crucially important in understanding the Sufistic perspective on evil. We now turn to it. The question is how are the essences of things, latent in His Being, created in the external? It is clear that things aren't created out of nothing, because nothing or not-being doesn't exist at all, and out of nothing will come nothing. Creation is only the external manifestation or actualization of the ideas of God, or the essences. In manifesting Himself God remains unchanged as ever He was, is, and shall be. He manifests Himself according to the 'aptitudes' of the things in which He is manifesting Himself. He bestows His attributes on His ideas or forms and they become things. These remarks suggest an answer to the problem of predestination vis-à-vis freedom. There is really nothing in existence except God. Valiuddin quotes Jami's formulation of the whole idea:

The Beloved takes on so many different forms

His beauty expresses itself in varied artistry, Multiplicity is there to heighten the charm of unity.

The One delights to appear in a thousand garbs.<sup>56</sup>

Valiuddin refers to a key Qur'anic verse in this connection, "God created the heavens and the earth from *Haqq*." All the ideas or essences of things have appeared from *Haqq*. The root of "*Haqq*" (God) and "*Haqiqat*" (Reality) is one and the same. This is the secret of "He is the outward" which is explained by the verse "God is the manifest truth" i.e., God alone is manifest or God alone is "*Haqq*" that is manifest. This is further supported by the verse: "God is the light of the heavens and the earth." These are profound statements of the Qur'an in connection with the relation of God to the world and thus His attribution to Himself the 'Is-ness' of things. God is the most Real. He is the Truth. Whatever is, or whatever partakes of the reality, is in a way God. God isn't some abstract utterly transcendent principle that sees the world from outside. I quote Iqbal's Sufistic view of creation that we could well deploy in approaching the tricky problem of evil:

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<sup>56</sup> Valiudin, Mir, op.cit., p.138.



Finite minds regard Nature as a confronting ‘other’ existing *per se*, which the mind knows but not make. We are thus apt to regard the act of creation as a specific past event, and the universe appears to us as a manufactured article which has no organic relation to life of its maker, and of which the maker is nothing more than a mere spectator.... From the Divine point of view, there is no creation in the sense of a specific event having a ‘before’ and an ‘after’. The universe cannot be regarded as an independent reality standing in opposition.<sup>57</sup>

From this perspective the existence of evil appears in a very different light. Pantheistic and Christian responses to evil (God “suffers” and “dies” to redeem his sinful creation) too could be appropriated in this light. We are all because of Being’s perfection. *Iblis* too can’t be excluded. Hell too is an expression of God’s Mercy, as Ibn ‘Arabi, al-Jili and other Sufis have understood it. Evil needn’t be excluded, marginalized. God ‘owns’ it. The saint owns the sinner.

The Sufis call God *al-Haqq*, who is pure existence the absolute good; His Being is perfect, His actions are perfect and His attributes are perfect. That is why He is the Absolute Good. Being *qua* Being is Good. Non-being is evil. Things or created beings don’t possess either existential attributes or actions of their own and due to this non-being they are absolute evil. The Sufi’s assertion that “Being is absolute good and non-being is absolute evil” has the same meaning. As real being is absolute good, it necessarily follows that all the existential attributes too are good. “God is Beautiful and nothing but beauty comes out of Him” and conversely, if non-being is absolute evil all the non-existential attributes would be evil; therefore, evil will always be evil. Evil isn’t good.

As absolute non-being doesn’t exist, so also the absolute Being or Pure Being or Beyond-Being (*Zat i bati*) or in Vedantist terms the Unmanifest *Brahman* (which is pure objectless consciousness) is not made manifest, because for manifestation a form or determination is necessary. It is only the Being that creates or is manifested. Now only some aspects of Being can appear in forms and most of them can’t make their appearance. The aspects which manifest themselves are the same whose aptitude the forms possess.

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<sup>57</sup> Iqbal, M., pp. 52-53.

The Absolute Being manifests itself according to the real aptitudes of forms. Jami has clarified this point thus: “Essence were like glasses variegated in colour: Red, Yellow and Blue/The sun of Being spread its blaze over them, and came out through them in their colours.”

Evil and pain and ugliness which appear in the manifestation are due to their aptitudes and receptivity only. This is the aspect of non-being. The attributes of Being will appear according to these aptitudes of the essences only, in consequence of which most of the attributes of Being will not be able to manifest themselves. The evil which is being fancied in things is due to non-existence of the attributes of Being (aspects of not-being); otherwise, attributes of Being as being existential aptitudes are good (aspects of being). The whole of this philosophy has been expressed by Jami thus:

Wherever Being’s ambit doth extend,  
Good and naught but good is found, O friend,  
All evil comes from non-being, to wit,  
From ‘other’ and on ‘other’ must depend.

The following prophetic tradition could thus be understood: “All good is in Thine Hand and evil is never related to thee.” The following Qur’anic verse, that otherwise appears so hard to comprehend, thus becomes quite clear: “Whatever good (O, man!) happens to thee is from God but whatever evil happens to thee is from Thy own soul.” The word “thy soul” implies, as Valiuddin says, the aptitudes or receptivity of essence. Jami’s following couplets elucidate this verse. “All good and all perfection that you see/Are of the “Truth” which from all stain is free/Evil and pain result from some defect, some lack of normal receptivity.”<sup>58</sup>

We can now also understand the verse: “God created you and what you make,” because action is a necessary concomitant of Being and the same Being is called God. The metaphysical conception of *Tamhid* as the Unity of Being dissolves the problem of creation and evil. Valiudin refers to the oft-quoted Light Verse of the Qur’an to shed further light on the issue. Since creation means manifestation, i.e. the external revelation and manifestation is

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<sup>58</sup> Valiudin, Mir, op.cit., p.141.

a concomitant of light (*Nur*), which reveals itself and reveals others— and light is an attribute of God, therefore, light is nothing but Being itself. “God is the light of the heavens and the earth.” To manifest all ‘ideas’ together with their real aptitudes or peculiarities from the unseen stage is a peculiar characteristic of Being which is called Allah. Hence the Qur’anic verse: “Say, all things are from God.” This explains the doctrine of Islam: “Every good and evil comes from God.”

It is our intuition of God as eternal or unchanging that provides the clue for a solution to the problem. As the Being of God is eternal, therefore the ideas or essences can’t be but eternal, and since we can’t separate the essences from their aptitudes or real concomitants they too are eternal and uncreated. But for these essences to appear with their real aptitudes and effects, *Haqq* (God) is needed; that is why the relation of manifestation is ascribed to Absolute Being. As Valiuddin puts it:

All matters go back to God. The origin of evil is due to our essences which are relative non-being; evil is a concomitant of the relative non-being because determination denotes distinction, hence some one or other aspect of Being is left out, which is not being and that alone is evil.<sup>59</sup>

It is the conception of God as a mind or a person and the inevitable contradiction between a positive and a negative divine in religious consciousness as apprehended by the conceptual intellect that creates the problem of evil.

God’s goodness or love taken anthropomorphically - without considering His impersonality or Beyond-Being (that is well emphasized in the tradition of a negative divine) - is the root cause of the theologian’s perplexity. We examine the traditional notion of a personal God that is unqualifiedly taken by many Muslim and Christian theists. We start by discussing the proposition that God is love understood literally. What the literalist view implies and why it is not true, Stace thus answers:

Taken so, the doctrine implies that God is a person, a mind, a consciousness, and these words, too, must be taken in their literal

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<sup>59</sup> Stace, W.T., op.cit., p.58.

meanings. Love is some kind of emotion or feeling or attitude or desire or at least a purpose— perhaps the purpose to act in a certain way, for instance, to achieve the happiness and good of created beings. But, can any of this be literally true of God? Only, apparently, if God be thought of as a finite center of consciousness, one mind among other minds. This mind, God, loves that mind, a human soul. But apart from this, to attribute emotions to God conflicts with the very definite religious intuition that God is unchanging. He is “without shadow of turning.”

This critique of a literal interpretation also applies to other psychological terms we use of Him, such as ‘mind,’ ‘consciousness,’ ‘purpose,’ ‘love’.

It may be the overemphasis on the positive divine in monotheistic theologies, especially that of Islam, that makes the problem of evil apparently unanswerable. “It is the part of the positive divine to affirm activity of God, the creative activity which results in the existence of the world, as well as those activities which are involved in guiding and controlling the world and in the loving care of His children.” This is the dynamic conception of God which has been foregrounded to the extent that the equally essential concept of a passive God, God as an unchanging Absolute, has been marginalized and almost totally excluded by mainstream theology, ignoring the protest of the mystics who have been the guardians of the tradition of negative divine. What the Sufis refer to as Pure Being or Beyond-Being Stace calls Non-Being. As Stace points out, God’s unchangeableness and inactivity conflicts with the dynamic conception, yet both the dynamic and the passive are equally necessary elements in religious consciousness.<sup>60</sup> The conception of God as a mind or a person in a literal sense not only conflicts with His unchangeableness but also contradicts His infinity:

For no mind can be infinite, in the ordinary sense of the word infinite, which means the mathematical infinite. For a mind... necessarily changes. But that which changes can’t be infinite. The notion of change implies that the changing thing possesses a character at one time which it lacks at another .... But that which lacks anything isn’t mathematically infinite .... The activity of God conflicts just as much with the conception of a religious infinite. For change is the passing from this to

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.59.

that, and in the unity and infinity of God there is no distinction of this from that.<sup>61</sup>

The mystical philosopher Stace boldly concludes that “all propositions about God are false, if they are understood literally. This will apply to the proposition that “God exists” as well as to any another. It will also apply to the proposition that “God doesn’t exist.” God is above both existence and non existence.”<sup>62</sup> This conclusion is forced upon us because all propositions are a work of the logical intellect. We have already seen that to the conceptual intellect, the road to God is barred. However, there must be a direct vision or apprehension of the divine, otherwise religious symbolism will be mere verbiage.

Religious symbols aren’t mere metaphors. They aren’t non-sensical as the logical positivists would like to believe. God is the manifest truth. He is not just a hidden or veiled inward but the outward and the manifest. So it isn’t the case that God, the positive God, the God of love, can’t be apprehended at all, that we can’t speak of the goodness of God in any meaningful sense. The only problem is this:

[God] can’t be apprehended by the concept. This is the very meaning of “incomprehensibility” of God, as also of the negative divine, God as Nothing, the Void. But He does reveal Himself to man, not negatively but positively, in that form of human consciousness which, for lack of a better term, we have called intuition.<sup>63</sup>

Stace further elaborates:

The symbolic proposition about God doesn’t stand for another proposition— a literal one about God. It stands for and represents the mystical experience itself. It isn’t a proposition about God which is symbolized but God Himself as He is actually found and experienced “in the heart,” that is, in the mystical vision.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp.59-60.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.,p.61.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p.65.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p.65.

It isn't that there is irresolvable conflict between faith and belief, that the head and heart are eternally pitched against one another. The contradiction between the Being and the Non-Being is resolved by this discovery:

[God's] positive nature is revealed in religious intuition, but is veiled to the conceptual intellect, and that it is this blankness and nothingness to the intellect which, as the negative divine give rise to those expressions of God as the void or as nothing, which are familiar in the literature on mysticism. This implies that all religious and theological language is symbolic, since any literal application of words and concepts to the 'nameless' God is blocked by the conceptual character of all thinking and speaking.<sup>65</sup>

The problem of evil in Islamic perspective is closely tied to the issue of determinism and freewill. It may well be argued that the fatalism of Islam expresses— in more popular language and idiom (that could be understood by the masses)— the Sufistic doctrines that we have discussed. We are responsible and yet it is God's eternal decree that such and such a thing should happen. Psychologically, the effects of belief in *karma* (and some sort of rebirth) are similar to the belief in fate or God's decree. Both inculcate an attitude of acceptance and submission and cure the malady of despair. Both posit belief in something which we just can't ignore, nor somehow do away with. We must own our actions and whatever evil befalls us. God is exonerated as our essences or aptitudes are natural bearers of our actions. Both posit some sort of a metahistorical covenant with God of which we are the witnesses. There is no room for any complaint against God. The doctrine of karma and reincarnation has been hailed as the most logical and rational explanation of evil (though not believable on certain other grounds according to some). However, we could argue that the Islamic doctrine of fate, combined with its doctrine of hell and *barzakh* and emphasis on orthopraxy is no less rational explanation of evil. Indeed it could be read in reincarnationist terms as the perennialists like Schuon argue. The essence of Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic perspectives on karma or fate and salvation is similar. This is not to justify the orthodox credentials (from both the Hindu and Islamic perspectives) of the popular Hindu belief in reincarnation that the perennialists reject, as does Rumi, but only to show the essential

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p.67.

similarity on psychological and metaphysical planes of Hindu and Muslim answers to the problem of evil.

The Islamic theological doctrine of *iktisab* (acquisition) both reconciles the binary of free will and determinism as well as rationally solves the problem of evil. Valiuddin thus states the doctrine of acquisition and appropriates it in his account of Sufi theodicy:

...actions are being created exactly according to the essential nature of things. In other words, whatever there is in the essence is being manifested through the agency of the creator. When all the incidents are happening according to my aptitude, and nothing is imposed on me against my nature, I am, then free in the true sense of the word. That is why Shaykh al-Akbar says: “Whatever has been definitely determined about us is in conformity with our nature, further we ourselves are determining it according to our aptitude”. This tallies verbatim with the commandment of the Holy Qur’an– “And He giveth you of all that ye ask for.” At another place it is stated more explicitly. “Lo! We shall pay them their whole due unabated.” “For God’s is the final argument.” The author of *Gulshan-e-Raz̤* makes God say: “The good and evil in thee, /Owe their being from thine own nature (*a*)”/ It is my grace that gives a form/To what is implicitly therein.”<sup>66</sup>

The Qur’anic reference to the Preserved Tablet has been very difficult to comprehend for Muslim theologians. The most difficult part of the Qur’an is its views on predestination and resurrection of the dead in afterlife. We could better understand them in the light of the oriental perspectives– and certain difficulties in the latter are better understood from the Qur’anic perspective.

The essence of every person is, as it were, a book in which are recorded all his real aptitudes and characteristics. God is creating things exactly in accordance with it. Valiuddin quotes Jami again:

Thy nature is but a copy of the original book

It discloses what there is in the book of eternal secrets.

Since it contained all preordained decrees,

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<sup>66</sup> Valiudin, Mir, op. cit., pp.123-124.

God has but acted in accordance therewith, and

In accordance with the demand of the known action follows,

If it demands pain, pain is measured out, if grace, grace is given.

Thus the decree of predestination applies to essential natures (*ayan*), i.e. the creation of God is in accordance with the aptitudes of Essences. That is why it is asserted that “You are the Destiny” and “It is for you to decree.”

We feel calm and contented and our relations from others are severed. We regard our own being as the source of good and evil; and the meaning of the saying “whatever has befallen us is the outcome of our own acts and attributes.” Neither do we regard God as a tyrant, nor do we blame and deprecate our fellow beings, or speak ill of the environment. On the contrary, we take the responsibility on our own shoulders and addressing our own self, say “Thine hands only have earned, and thy mouth only has blown.” True it is “whatever of misfortune striketh you, it is what your right hands have earned.”<sup>67</sup>

The psychological effect of reincarnationist doctrines and the consequent attainment of resignation is similar. Predestination, perhaps the most misunderstood doctrine of Islam, is best understood when approached from the perennialist point of view.

It is Sufism that shows us how we can transcend the good-evil binary and how the perfect man is beyond good and evil, like God. The Sufi is in a state where neither good nor evil entereth. The most fundamental binaries of good and evil or Satan and God are deconstructed in the great moment of Self-realization. When we apprehend the Absolute we realize the relativity of good and evil. It is at this level that we can answer Dostoevsky’s Ivan. One realizes the vanity of phenomenal life, both its good and evil. One experiences the unreality of evil. One becomes a witness to the death of death, of the illusion of evil. “Verily the truth has become manifest and the untruth (*batil* or evil) has been noughted; indeed the *batil* is doomed.”

In the first place, evil isn’t absolute. It has no independent existence. It is doomed. At the origin and at the end, there is no evil. It is only after the Fall

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.125.



and thus in the cycle of creation that we encounter evil. The lost innocence and bliss could be regained. Religion's *raison d'être* is showing us the way to home, to arrange our return ticket to God, to regain for us our lost paradise. Religion establishes the sovereignty of the Kingdom of God or the Good. It shows how evil is there because of our passions or desires – the tempting of the evil one (*nafs*, Eve, serpent, Satan). It shows us the path to Enlightenment, the Bliss of heaven or *nirvana*– the state of absolute bliss untouched by evil or sorrow. To the blessed one, the enlightened one, being is revealed in its most beautiful form. He sings the songs of universal love and beauty. The Beloved's imprint is seen on every blade of grass, on everything in the realm of manifestation. One sees existence as a blessing and the attitude of gratitude to existence is what is called a prayerful attitude. One celebrates the holiness of life, of the self or Divine Spirit which is Bliss. Religion is the realization of Self's essential goodness, innocence and bliss. The Sufi sees through God's eyes and thus comprehends everything good or evil. On everything is God's Mercy. God's perfection demands diversity and distinctions– both good and evil. God's *akhlaq* or attributes are appropriated by a Muslim; he sees from God's perspective and from that vantage point there is no problem of evil in the traditional sense of the term. The Sufi appropriates the whole universe with all its good and evil, nothing being external to the Self. Heaven and hell are in us, Satan too is in us. Whitman approaches very close to the cosmic mystic vision as he owns everything, celebrates everything. Nothing or no good or evil is external to or excluded from the mystic's consciousness. Rumi identifies with the whole realm of manifestation and thus appropriates the whole created order:

The two and seventy creeds and sects in the world  
Don't really exist: I swear by God that every creed and sect it is I  
Earth and air and water and fire, nay body and soul too– it's I  
Truth and falsehood, good and evil, ease and difficulty, from first to last  
Knowledge and learning and asceticism and piety and faith– it is I  
The fire of hell, be assured, with its flaming limbos  
Yes, and paradise and Eden, and the Houris– its I

This earth and heaven with all they hold/Angels, Peris, genies and Mankind— it is I.<sup>68</sup>

The mystical vision of God as Love resolves all conflicts between good and evil as it transcends all dualities or dichotomies.

God is the ultimate source of all good and evil, faith and infidelity and all other contraries. In Sufism all these contraries are nothing more than the reflection of His attributes, such as beauty, power, mercy and their contraries, through which God reveals Himself to us; but in reality they have only apparent basis in the world of phenomena. Both the good and the evil that are in us are to be transcended or surpassed and then we shall reach the Origin, the one unity of everything where there is no contradiction. The real nature of bitterness and sweetness can't be understood by this eye; they can be seen through what Rumi calls *darichie aqibat*<sup>69</sup>, the window of the ultimate. *Talkh-o shirin xi nazar napadeed/Az dareiechai aaqibat daned deed.*<sup>70</sup> Only the perfect soul knows the real nature of good and evil and sees them like the two sides of a coin or different waves of the ocean. The contraries of good and evil have any existence only in the brief duration of the creation of the world, after the fall of Adam. He will be returned back to God after a lapse of time and then there will be no good and evil. In the Edenic Garden Adam didn't know of good and evil until he approached that Tree of Good and Evil. It is with the contraries that the edifice of creation is built. Otherwise, there is no good and evil, no element of contraries which is the basis of creation. There is only One— the Great Truth, where reigns Eternal Bliss. As Rumi says: "The world is established from this war (of contraries)— think of these elements, so that it (i.e., the source of all difficulties) may be solved."<sup>71</sup> The eternal Bliss is the original or natural state of the Self. As long as we don't see it or are debarred from this ideal, we are to suffer from these contraries. This is because we cling to desire. The world is burning with the fire of lust, the fire of desires. Thus there can be no realization of the inward Bliss, the Bliss of heaven that we had tasted and lost but could regain.

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<sup>68</sup> Quoted and translated by Nicholson in *The Mystics of Islam*, London, 1975, p.161.

<sup>69</sup> Rumi, Maulana Jalaluddin, *Mathnawi*, Vol.I, v. 297.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.,v. 2582.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., VI/248.

The esoteric interpretation of the legend of the Fall helps us to clarify the origin of evil. At first Adam knew no evil. But he was destined to be more than an angel, to be the vicegerent of God. So he was given the faculty of choice. This however also implied his capacity of doing evil, which he was to avoid by the training of his will, and he was warned against this danger. But he fell and thus realized the evil. Yet God gives him the chance on a lower plane to make good and recover the lost states of Innocence and Bliss. This is the predicament of being human.

There are two aspects of the one Truth or God— the good and evil. The relative good, (as, for example, represented in Adam) is proceeding stage by stage, slowly but surely, towards the Eternal Good and Bliss and when that will be regained there can't be any relative good and evil. It is all Truth. With this consciousness of the ultimate destiny and state of man, one clearly sees that the divine destiny or the will of God is for his good. So he patiently endures all suffering and overcomes all obstructions in the path. But to a person who doesn't feel like that (as the modern man, the alienated rebellious, exiled, fallen man) any suffering will prompt him to blame the Divine destiny as the cause of his sufferings.

Islam's most profound theological insights concern its scheme of salvation, its eschatology. All souls count in the Islamic scheme of things. God takes account of all of us. He ensures that all souls, all creation returns to Him, willy-nilly. God is the Origin and the End. The Qur'an is emphatic about our ascension, stage by stage, towards God. Man can't escape Him. Even if it necessitates hell's tortures, man must pass through it. The dross in his nature will be made gold. "And God knows how to accomplish His ends," the Qur'an declares. We will conquer evil and death. The vision of God will be our final refuge, our ultimate destiny. Hell will be emptied, declared the Prophet of Islam. Islam ensures that evil is conquered and it comes to nought. Hell isn't eternal in the Islamic (Sufistic) scheme of things. A majority of the Sufis have reinterpreted the doctrine of hell in such terms that qualify its eternity as well as the theologian's interpretation of it as punishment. Salvation for all and sundry is somehow ensured. This is implied in the Islamic vision of apocatastasis and reabsorption of all things in God. The modern man having confined his perspective to this territorial plane feels overwhelmed by the presence of evil in the world. He doesn't know either the origin or the end of things. That is why despair has overcome him.

He is unable to see how his own salvation is being accomplished every moment; how he is expiating for his wrong-doing and sin. The Qur'an is emphatic that the man will not pass unaccounted for and untried. He will have to pass through the tests and trials. God will not leave him as such. God, through us, is accomplishing His purpose. We are condemned to choose the hard climb of the straight path. Not choosing or living inauthentically leads us to hell and we must find the exit. There can be no annihilation or defeating the God's purpose. Even *Iblis* is an accomplice of good; he acts as God's agent. The fact that some Sufis have praised *Iblis* is understandable in this context. The Sufi doesn't fear evil or *Iblis*; he befriends *Iblis*. Through Divine dispensation even poison may become digestible to the God-intoxicated saint—evil doesn't prove injurious to him.<sup>72</sup> The Sufi views suffering as spiritual test and trial leading ultimately to God. Even loathsome things become lovely since they form the pathway to God. The purified soul isn't afraid of any evil; it comes out like gold more brightened than ever in fire. Rumi says:

O brother, don't flee the flames of Azar, what if you enter them for test  
By God they willn't burn you (instead) they will illuminate your face  
Like gold, for you belong to the race of Abraham and you have been  
familiar (with fire) since olden times.<sup>73</sup>

Following the Qur'an, Rumi regards all privations, like hunger and loss of property, as 'tests' which develop the soul and bring out its real worth.<sup>74</sup> In the realm of pure Being, the vision of which they enjoy there is no opposition between good and evil; the rose springs from the thorn and the thorn from the rose.<sup>75</sup>

Iqbal also gives the same analogy of rose and thorn and affirms his belief in the unity of good and evil at their source.<sup>76</sup> However, Iqbal leaves

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., v.2599-2600.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., v.75-77.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., II/2963-65.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., I/2472.

<sup>76</sup> Iqbal, M., *Payam i Mashriq*.

unsettled the question how has one evolved into many. In the God's heaven all desires are fulfilled. Rumi explicitly makes the point that the righteous men living for God's sake attain whatever they desire.<sup>77</sup> The Upanishads declare that evil is an illusion and that it is real. Evil is unreal in the sense that it is bound to be transmitted into good. It is real to the extent that it does require our effort to transform its nature.<sup>78</sup> The Sufis see this point clearly. For Rumi "Nothing is vain that is created by God – of anger, clemency, good council and stratagem."<sup>79</sup> Everything works for the good. The Sufistic analysis of the origin of evil echoes Buddha's analysis of the same. To quote Rumi: "Know, then, that any pain of yours is the result of some/deviation (from the truth) and that calamity of your affliction is due to (your) greed and passion."<sup>80</sup> "All these sufferings that are within our hearts arise from the dust of vapour of our existence."<sup>81</sup>

Like the Buddhist "pessimism", the Sufi's apparent pessimism mostly hides something else— exposing the absurdity of selfishness and an ego-centred alienated life. Richard Burton in his *Kasidah* puts this point succinctly: "And this is all, for this we are born and weep and die/So sings the shallow bard whose life labors at the letter 'P'."

It is the narrowness of the straight path or difficulty of salvation, of defeating the stratagems of *nafs* or Satan, or escaping the viles of *Mara* and the consequently poor moral record of man that makes the Sufi pessimistic. The Buddha's famous fire sermon laments the sorry state of man. The world is burning with the fire of lust. Man clings to this and that thing (*shirk* or idolatry could well be taken as this clinging to non-God), and that creates suffering. He gives his soul to Satan rather than to God more easily. The heaven is surrounded by thorns and the hell crowned with flowers. The man succumbs to temptations and falls. Very few indeed are blessed. Only the sacred few are chosen as Shelley notes in his great poem *The Triumph of Life*.

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<sup>77</sup> Rumi, op.cit., IV/6

<sup>78</sup>Quoted by S. Radhakrishnan in *Indian Philosophy*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, Vol.I, p. 242.

<sup>79</sup> Rumi, op. cit., I/ 2606.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., V/3988.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.,v. 2966.

The vast multitude is condemned to hell fire. It needs prior purifying experience of hell for a vast majority of men to enter heaven. The soul-making ordeal is indeed hard and most men are incapable of it without suffering tremendously in hell. Man can surrender everything but his ego. Islam demands a very hard thing indeed from Muslims— to surrender their will, to submit without questioning, to be ready for *fana*. Most men, regrettably, chose to disbelieve. Very few can face squarely the nothingness at the heart of existence. Everything (to which man clings) is liable to be destroyed (except the face of God) and God isn't a thing, an object. He doesn't even exist in the ordinary sense of the term. God is above existence. He is not of this world and that world. No one can behold God. Only God can see God. When 'I' is annihilated, only then could God be experienced. The Sufis have emphasized various evils of the world, evils of the *nafs*, and evils of life as ordinarily lived. Crossing the dark night of the soul isn't easy. Man is indeed created in trouble, and most men are disbelievers (incapable of seeing God or realizing the divinity of the Self) and thus condemned to hell, according to the Qur'an. No prophet has had too sanguine an estimate of man's moral worth. God is indeed a hard taskmaster, as Jesus said. Laws of karma are indeed inexorable. God respects our moral decisions. The Prophet has wept more and laughed less. The Sufistic "pessimism" is thus fully warranted. An existentialist's pessimism is warranted from the objective facts of human life. No great philosophy has subscribed to facile optimism. Ours is a fallen world. The desiring self cannot be easily got rid of and thus the fact of suffering is there to stay. Religion's is an objective estimate of the situation although it is animated by the hope of ultimate victory of good and convinced of the essential goodness, beauty and bliss of life.

We now refer to al-Jili's discussion of some aspects of the problem in this connection. Our discussion is primarily based on Nicholson's discussion of the same in his *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Adam Publishers, 1998) in the chapter titled "The Perfect Man."

When God created the soul of Muhammad from His own Essence, which comprises all contraries, He created from the soul of Mohammad both the sublime Angels in respect of His attribute of Beauty, Light, and Guidance, and *Iblis* and his followers in respect of His attributes of Majesty, Darkness and misguidance. *Iblis* refused to bow down before Adam as he didn't know that to worship by God's command is equivalent to worshipping God; *Iblis*

was banished from the divine presence until the Day of Judgment, i.e. for a finite period. After the Day of Judgment the creatureliness which hinders the spirit from knowing God as He really is will be counted amongst its perfections and *Iblis* will then be restored to his place beside God.<sup>82</sup>

The Perfect Man is the lord of both the worlds. He mirrors God and universe; he manifests all the attributes of God. Nothing is 'other' to him. He can thus own evil in a way. Nicholson quotes al-Jili in this connection:

Mine is the kingdom in both worlds. I saw there is none

but myself, that I should hope for his favour or fear him.

I have made all kinds of perfection mine own, and lo, I am

the beauty of the majesty of the whole. I am nought but It

Whatsoever thou seest of minerals and plants and animals, together with Man and his qualities,

And whatsoever thou seest of elements and nature and original atoms (*baba*) whereof the substance is (ethereal as) a perfume

And whatsoever thou seest of spiritual forms and of thing, visible whose countenance is goodly to behold,

And whatsoever thou seest of thought and imagination and intelligence and soul, and heart with its inwards,

And whatsoever thou seest of angelic aspect, or of phenomena

Whereof Satan and the Spirit. Lo, I am that whole is my theatre. It is I not it that is displayed in its reality.

Verily I am a providence prince to mankind; the entire creation is a name and my essence is the object named,

The sensible world is mine and the angel-world is of my moving and fashioning; the unseen world is mine and

The world of omnipotence springs from me

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<sup>82</sup> Nicholson, R.A., *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, Adam Publishers and Distributors, 1998, p. 120.

And mark! In all that I have mentioned I am a slave

Returning from the essence to his Lord.

Poor, despised, lowly, self-abasing, sin's captive, in the bonds of his trespasses.<sup>83</sup>

For Al-Jili every Name and Attribute (of God) produces its own characteristic effect. For example, God is the true Guide (*al-Hadi*); but He is also the Misleader (*al-Mudill*). If any one of His Names had remained ineffectual and unrealized, His self-manifestation wouldn't have been complete. Al-Jili also says that all God's creatures worship Him in accordance with His nature. Infidelity and sin are effects of Divine activity and contribute to Divine perfection. Satan himself glorifies God; in as much as his disobedience is subordinate to the eternal will.

So the point that al-Jili makes is that the perfect man is both omnipotent and omniscient and one needn't ask God the whither and whence of evil. The question of God's goodness and wisdom doesn't arise for a perfect man. One realizes the need of fighting evil rather than discussing its origin and questioning God's goodness and omnipotence. The problem of evil is the problem of crossing the dark night of the soul.

We will now discuss specifically Rumi's views on evil from his *Mathnawi* and *Fihri ma fihri*. Rumi interprets the famous tradition that speaks of God as a hidden treasure in what appears to be his rendering of metaphysical notions of All-Possibility and God's Infinitude. The universe is a manifestation of His infinite creative power and desire for self-revelation. Every creature by virtue of its very existence proclaims the glory of God and manifests God to Himself, regardless of whether it is aware or unaware of itself being a locus of divine manifestation. All men are revealing God; though some are unaware of this.<sup>84</sup> It has been quite a hard task to understand God's attributes such as *Qabar*, Wrathful for the theologians. However, what is needed is an objective understanding of Divine Nature and transcending the popular theological notion of a personal God. The Divine Attributes are divided into two categories: Attributes of the Essence and Attributes of the Acts. The

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp.107-108.

<sup>84</sup> Rumi, 1961. *The Discourses of Rumi*, trans. A.J. Arberry. London: John Murray, p. 185.



Attributes of the Essence are all the Names (*asma'*) whose opposites are not applicable to God, for example, God is the Living (*al-Hayy*), the Knowing (*al-'Alim*) and the Holy (*al-Quddus*). As for the Attributes of the Acts, both the Names and their opposites are applicable, for example, God as the Exalter (*al-Rafi*) and the Abaser (*al-Khafid*), the Life-Giver (*al-Muhyi*) and the Slayer (*al-Mumit*). In Rumi's view, the positive qualities denote God's Gentleness (*lutf*) and their opposites, God's Severity (*qabr*). Gentleness (*lutf*) is equivalent to the divine Mercy (*rahmah*) and Severity (*qabr*) to divine Wrath (*ghadab*).<sup>85</sup> Echoing the notion of All-Possibility and the Real as Infinite, Rumi explicates the famous tradition 'I was a hidden Treasure, and I desired to be known' thus: 'I created all the world, and the object of all that was to reveal Myself, now gracious, now vengeful.' God is not the kind of king for whom one herald is sufficient. If every atom in the world should become a herald, they would be yet incapable of proclaiming His qualities adequately.<sup>86</sup> Rumi asserts on the basis of the Hadith, 'My Mercy is prior to My Wrath', that the Gentle Names of God take ontological precedence over the Severe Names. Zailan Moris quotes Rumi's view regarding the ontological precedence of divine Mercy over divine Wrath:

...the Severe Names function merely to contrast the Gentle Names in order to enhance the divine Mercy and ... the divine Mercy, ultimately annuls the divine Wrath: The fire (of Hell) in sooth is (only) an atom of God's Wrath; it is (only) a whip to threaten the base. Notwithstanding such a Wrath, which is mighty and surpassing all, observe that the coolness of His Clemency is prior to it.<sup>87</sup>

Rumi relies heavily on the familiar principle of contrast. Rumi asserts, "by their contrast are things made clear."<sup>88</sup> Everything in creation needs an opposite to manifest itself. "Behind every nothingness, the possibility of

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<sup>85</sup> Chittick, W. 1983. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983, p. 45.

<sup>86</sup> Rumi. 1961. *The Discourses of Rumi*, p.185.

<sup>87</sup> Moris, Zailan, "Rumi's view of Evil," [www.sufism.ru](http://www.sufism.ru) (I am indebted for certain quotes from Rumi to Moris.)

<sup>88</sup> *The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi*, trans. by R.A. Nicholson. London: Luzac and Co, 1982, IV/ 1343

existence is concealed; in the midst of Wrath, Mercy is hidden like the priceless cornelian in the midst of dirt.”<sup>89</sup> Without the two apparently contrasting divine aspects of Mercy and Wrath, nothing can come into existence. “This (divine) Maker is He who abaseth and exalteth/without these two (attributes) no work is accomplished.”<sup>90</sup> In the *Mathnawi* Rumi writes: “Wrath and Mercy were wedded to one another/From these twain was born the world of good and evil.”<sup>91</sup> “Thou do not know evil till thou knowst good/(Only) from (one) contrary is it possible to discern (the other) contrary, O’ youth!”<sup>92</sup> Thus, evil as the contrasting manifestation of good indirectly helps in the realization of good. Rumi considers the existence of evil in creation as a demonstration of God’s true greatness and power rather than a defect in His perfection. In the *Mathnawi*, Rumi compares God to a masterful painter who demonstrates His infinite creative power in both beautiful and ugly paintings. To quote him:

And if you say that evil too are from Him (that is true),

but how is it a defect in His Grace

His bestowing this evil is even His perfection.

Both kinds of pictures (beautiful pictures and pictures devoid of beauty) are evidence of His mastery

Those ugly ones are not evidence of His ugliness, they are evidence of His bounty.<sup>93</sup>

In Rumi’s view, since the world is relative and not Absolute there exists no absolute good or evil in God’s creation. God as Absolute is *coincidentia oppositorum* (*jam’-i azdad*); in the absolute and infinite Being all the tension involved in the opposition of phenomena is transcended. God is Absolute Unity. He transcends all opposition as He has no opposite to make Himself clear. Ibn ‘Arabi’s elaborate metaphysical scheme with his distinction

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., v. 1665.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., v.1854.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., II/ 2680.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, IV/1345.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., II/ 2535-42.

between *abdiyyat* and *wabidiyyat*, pure Being and its determinations is an elaboration of these points.

But the question is how one can understand God as beyond good and evil, as Absolute Unity, as pure Essence. How can one smell the unity of sugar and poison? The divergent aspects of creation which arise from the dramatic interplay between the contrasting divine attributes of Mercy and Wrath, Beauty (*jamal*) and Majesty (*jalal*), naturally can't be reconciled at the rational plane by means of conceptual intellect. The problem with scholastic and philosophical approaches to theodicy is their very methodology of approaching the problem rationally or philosophically. The metaphysical meaning of *Tawhid* as oneness of Being is not realizable at the rational plane at all. God is not a thing, a phenomenon, an entity to which categorical framework, the language of propositions would apply. "He who speaks becomes silent before the Divine Essence," as al-Jili has said. The Absolute has not been defiled by human thought or language as Ramakrishna said. As the Buddha has said, "Don't dip the string of thought into the unfathomable: he who questions errs and he who answers errs." Nothing can penetrate the Mystery of God which is absolute. As Abu Bakr has said, "Glory be to Him who made the very incapacity to know Him to be the only path by which creatures may know Him." God isn't this or that; He is transcendent to all categories, to existence. He is beyond existence and non-existence. God as non-Being, as No-thing, as Emptiness, is how the tradition of negative divine describes Him. This is how Ibn 'Arabi describes the Essence.

In this context Rumi's view that reconciliation of the contrasting aspects of the Divine in creation cannot be obtained through reason or discursive thought is quite understandable. For no matter how much Reason "perpetually, night and day, is restless and in commotion, thinking and struggling and striving to comprehend God,"<sup>94</sup> it cannot arrive at a resolution. God is incomprehensible: "If man were able to comprehend God, that indeed is not God."<sup>95</sup> The hope for a higher vision which reconciles the contrasting aspects of the divine Attributes of the Acts can only be sought when man transcends himself, after he experiences *fana*. Stace has been

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<sup>94</sup> Rumi, *The Discourses of Rumi*, p. 47.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p.48.

quoted above to foreground the same point. Only when man achieves subsistence in God by surrendering the ego and fleeing “from this phenomenal world” will he be able to be a witness (*shahid*) to the divine Unity veiled behind the multiplicity of phenomena. In Rumi’s view, the manifestation of divine Mercy and Wrath is not only necessary to reveal God’s Greatness and Perfection (Divine Infinity), but also necessary for the spiritual development of man. The role of a discipline of pain and suffering in calling man back to God is emphasized in the Qur’an as well as in many traditions of the Prophet. In fact rationalistic and naturalistic philosophies are unable to account for the presence of so much pain and suffering in the evolution of life and consciousness. In fact, as Underhill has argued in her classic *Mysticism*, only mysticism can understand the significance of pain and its role in soul-making. The greatness of mysticism lies in harnessing the fact of pain in transmutation of a beast into an angel. The presence of pain and suffering in this perspective becomes an argument or evidence for God rather than against Him. As Ghazali has said in his *Kimyae Sa’adat (Alchemy of Happiness)*, suffering is God’s instrument or lasso of mercy through which he calls his friends back home.<sup>96</sup> Greater the stature of God’s friend, harder may be the kiss of suffering from the Beloved. There are numerous accounts that relate the Sufi’s willful acceptance of suffering. The Sufis don’t differentiate between gifts and taunts, blessings and torments as everything comes from God (God is the creator of both good and evil). In fact this is what the Unitarian perspective of Islam implies. As none exists save God or the Beloved, a Sufi can’t be but utterly grateful for whatsoever he receives. The exemplary patience of the suffering Job is relived in the Sufi’s life. *Tawakkul* (trust in God), as some Sufi authorities understand it, demands that the Sufis should not ask for withdrawal of suffering that afflicts them. (It does not mean what the Buddha calls suffering but only the temporary pains that body suffers and the worldly misfortunes that are our lot.) *Tawakkul* also implies that one may never question anything but celebrate whatever happens to be God’s will. Ghazali has quoted Ba Yazid’s explanation of *tawakkul* that it is the state wherein one sees denizens of hell in discomfort and sees heaven’s denizens in bliss and doesn’t feel any difference between the two in his heart. Ghazali explains that it means that

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<sup>96</sup> *Akseer-i-Hidayat* (Urdu translation of Ghazali’s *Kimyae Saadat*) trans. M. Saeed Naqshbandi, Adbi Dunya, Delhi, 1996, p.76.

one has perfect trust in the justice, wisdom and mercy of God and thus sees no point in remoulding anything according to the heart's desire or suggesting any change here and there in the scheme of things.<sup>97</sup>

Ibn 'Arabi provides one of the most profound analyses of the issue of evil. He is the most consistent metaphysician in Islam who has dealt with the issue of evil vis-à-vis God from a strictly nondualistic *wujudi* perspective. It anticipates important modern views that, though developed in a nontraditional atmosphere of modernity, converge with the traditional mystical-metaphysical position. Khalifa Abdul Hakim has good reasons to consider Rumi as a forerunner of Nietzsche. With greater warrant one could argue for Ibn 'Arabi in a similar vein. Ibn 'Arabi's contribution in other departments of Islamic thought and spirituality is increasingly being recognized, although his extremely important contribution to clarification of issues related to theodicy is yet to receive due attention. At the risk of oversimplification, we may sum up his understanding in the following points:

There is no such thing as evil; what we call evil is only evil from our perspective, the perspective of a finite self.

The Divine Will overrides the good/evil binary. The revealed law designates as evil something which is nevertheless approved by the more primordial Divine Will.

Everything is perfect when looked from the viewpoint of the Absolute.

Everything happens in accordance with archetypal constitution or possibilities. God doesn't determine or influence archetypal possibilities. His Goodness can't be affected by the evil in creation which is acquired by things/individuals as per their nature.

There is no such thing as going astray or ignorance and consequently hell. Everything, every creature is under the tuition and influence of divine decree. God is monitoring everything. Nothing is outside His control. Everything is perfect at every moment

Human evaluations and categories of good and evil are purely arbitrary and based on self-interest. They are projections, anthropocentric rather

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp.893-894.

than Reality-centric or Theocentric. There is no such thing as virtue and sin (and thus moral evil) at the deepest level. Moral evil appears so from the perspective of law only. God is beyond good and evil and so is the sage. Nietzsche's idea of beyond good and evil converges with Ibn 'Arabi's.

As nothing is outside God or Reality (as God is Reality) so nothing is against His will or His control. The realization of God/Truth implies the realization of perfection of everything. Time, history, becoming, progress, struggle and thus evil all lose their traditional importance in the absolutist perspective. The world is a play of God rather than something that involves real tragedy. Tragedy is unknown to the Eastern/mystical worldview. There is no waste, no loss, no suffering, no evil in the real sense. Problems arise when the categorical, conceptual view is imposed on a Reality that transcends all binaries, although it manifests itself to the mind or thought in terms of binaries. All questions that the mind asks, that the essentially dualistic thought asks, are misformulated or unwarranted. This is what Zen so forcefully argues. We as the questioning selves are not. Only God is. We aren't outside God though we believe otherwise as long as we identify with the separating principle of ego. In the Infinite there are no boundaries, no categories that delimit, no concepts that encompass. We need to scrutinize our right to ask questions. Religions demand submission or transcendence from the kingdom of the self that seeks justifications, that evaluates, that imposes its categories on what transcends it. A believer has no questions because he has risen above the level of the mind where questions arise. Islam as a religion of submission demands that man is nothing outside God or apart from God.

Mystery or wonder (*Hairayah*) is what the traveler on the path to Reality discovers at the last station. There is no explaining away of the mystery of Existence. It is the rational faculty that demands somehow subsuming the mystery at the heart of everything. The religious attitude is to revere the mysterious ground of existence as sacred. There is no reason for anything. God is Mystery, *al-Ghayyib* in the Qur'anic phrase. Love and contemplation of wonder and mystery are what religion demands. Love doesn't ask questions. It celebrates. Everything is from the beloved alone as God (the Beloved) has no associates. All divinities other than Allah are fictions.

Whatever comes from the Beloved for a lover is enjoyed and welcomed with gratitude. Reason fails to solve the mystery of existence. There is no answer to the question why is there anything and not nothing. Hafiz has famously advocated the attitude of gay abandon and celebration in contrast to the rationalist's or logician's approach to the riddle of existence. Men have wrongly imagined that they have untied the knot of existence, the why of existence. The gnostic is too absorbed in the contemplation of the Good, in the bliss of Beatific vision to mind at all the suffering of the world as Rabia of Basra said. The notion of God, especially the idea of a negative divine that certain theologians and most mystics have advocated, signifies the impossibility of arriving at a rational solution to the problem of existence. The Being escapes all rational appropriations. The timeless can't be captured in the net of thought that presupposes time. When the Sufi reaches the end of path, he comes to perceive the impossibility of perceiving the Holy Mystery, of penetrating the Dark Abyss of Godhead. The wings of reason are scorched as they come closer to God. The vision of essences or of Supraformal Essence is only possible when the knower ceases to be a separate entity from the known, when it is dissolved in the known or object. The knower can't be known. All these things mean that the vision (of God, The Good) is ineffable; it can only be experienced or enjoyed. Western philosophy, as Heidegger pointed out, is oblivious to the ground of being. It is not open to the sacred mystery of Being. It is not the philosopher but the poet who can show the track of the holy. Experiencing God demands annihilation of the self and all its conceptual baggage. Nothing in the known world can express the Divine Darkness. God is the Totality and nothing is outside Him so all the fragmentary views (which human views characteristically are) cannot make sense of Him or His doings. If man knew all the karmic causes he would be immediately outside the *samsaric* trappings and thus one with the Unborn, the Unconditioned. In fact there is no karma for the *jnani*, the one who truly knows, the Perfect Man. Our true self is outside all the karmic determinations; it is uncorrupted by evil. It is beyond all determinations, all binaries including the binary of good and evil. There is no unresolved problem, untied knot for the Awake, the Buddha. The Buddha, always serene, dissolves all questions in a smile. In fact religions are not primarily interested in metaphysical questions but in leading people to the other shore where these questions lose their importance. One could well argue that all religions have been oriented towards the goal of

salvation/deliverance and doctrines and beliefs are meant to make this possible and are subservient to the truth that saves/liberates. It is the attitude of wonder that all religions endorse and which makes for a properly philosophical life. Socrates, an exemplary philosopher and sage, knew he knew nothing and that was why he was the wisest man. The Highest Good isn't rationally knowable. One has to be it. All quests end in wonder. In the last analysis man knows nothing. From the structure of matter to the constitution of spirit nothing is ultimately known. All human knowledge is a progressive unveiling of the ultimate impenetrability of the veil that disguises Reality. Existence is a mystery. The questions of good and evil, freedom and determinism, time and eternity- all show the incapacity of rational/categorical/conceptual frameworks in divulging the basic metaphysical questions. The sages don't deal with abstractions and have no business with mere ratiocination. Rational metaphysics is not their obsession – the Buddha represents the typically mystical attitude in his avoidance of (rational) metaphysical questions. Ibn 'Arabi's great metaphysical system ends in advocating dissolution of the rational attempt to unveil the deepest core or ground of being, the Essence.

God is *what is*, to use Krishnamurti's phrase (that beautifully translates the Sufistic doctrine of God). To accept what is ordained by the decree of God and not to demand any explanation for anything from God is *tawakkul*. This is what the rebel in the modern man will hardly understand. The Promethean and Faustian man that humanism worships is the antithesis of the traditional pontifical man who bridges heaven and earth. Camus' rebel and the *mutawakkil* Sufi are poles apart in their approach to evil. One finds no reason, no justification for the universe or life of man and most things under the sun. That is why he calls it absurd. And the absurd is something that the intelligent rational man cannot afford to be comfortable with. He cannot accept what is or surrender to a God who is the totality of existence, both transcendent and immanent. He cannot accept life as he cannot accept its culmination in death. He cannot accept pain that the flesh is heir to because that pain has no reason to be there; that is not a kiss from the Beloved. He shows his fist to the world. Heidegger's assertion that the world is that in the face of which one experiences anxiety, Beckett's key statement in *Endgame*: "You are on earth and there is no cure for that", Sartre's characterization of life as futile passion, Camus' reference in *The Myth of Sisyphus* to "this world



to which I am opposed by my whole consciousness”— all these show this discomfort, this inability to accept what is or trust in God and His creation. The problem of evil disappears if we are somehow reconciled to the world and life and could declare that all is good. This is possible only if we designate the Existence as God and celebrate life as a God-given gift. The saint laughs like Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and does not resent anything and is able to love fate and even would have no grudge against eternal recurrence. This is so unlike Kant who said that he could not accept, if given a choice, to repeat this life on any conditions whatsoever. How unlike the Sufi who is ready to die an infinite number of times for the pleasure of God as a martyr and even go to hell if it pleases Him. The Sufi thanks God for every breath. For him life is a gift for which God needs to be glorified and thanked. He humbles himself in penitent submission before God. He has no demands. His prayer is love. He prays to be made steadfast in accepting the Beloved’s dispensations. He affirms life and his God signifies the Eternal Life. He has no grudges against existence; he doesn’t wish to register any complaints on the day he was born or the day he would die. He, following the Prophet, doesn’t vilify time because God is Time. Life is a song and death is a great and wonderful adventure, a lifting of the veil that separates him from his Beloved. He is a satisfied soul (*nafsi mutma’ina*) pleased with God, and God is pleased with him. And he enters the garden of bliss that his Friend has made for him (more precisely, God is Bliss, the vision of God a Bliss Everlasting). After experiencing God as Goodness and Bliss, no sorrow can exist. One is on the other shore. One’s perception changes for good and one sees the Beloved’s Face everywhere. Heaven and hell are here and a matter of perception. The Sufi after having experienced God sees the world in a different light. It appears far more beautiful. That is why such splendid nature-poetry has come from the Sufi poets. Here are just two examples which may be contrasted with the above-quoted statements of Heidegger, Sartre, Camus and Beckett. Saadi said: “I am joyous with the cosmos for the cosmos receives its joy from Him/I love the whole world, for the world belongs to Him.” Yunus Emre, a Turkish Sufi folk poet who heard the invocation of God’s Blessed Name in the sound of flowing streams that brought to him a recollection of paradisaical realities and so he sang:

The rivers all in paradise

Flow with the word Allah, Allah

And every loving nightingale

He sings and sings Allah Allah<sup>98</sup>

The absurdist Man's pagan affirmation of this worldly life, a life condemned to the realm of finitude and horizontal plane and cut off from any meaningful relationship with or belief in transcendence conceals at heart the great pain of the fall from Heaven and too deep a gloom to allow for the Nietzschean joy of becoming or celebration of the dance of life. Alienated from himself, alienated from God— his ultimate concern, the Being of being, his "Centre", his is an empty revolt against Heavens and he is condemned to mourn his nightmarish existence. For him this vale of tears is not the vale of soul-making. No eternity or heaven is there to be won either here and now or in the "other world" to make life worth living. Man is condemned to endure, although not without resentment in the Beckettian world, this hell of a life which offers nothing except misery and tears and sometimes a meaningless laughter. There is no saving grace and no such thing as salvation. The modern Western man cannot be but hopelessly pessimistic after 'killing' God and being unable to install a new one in His place or take his place himself. Nietzsche's dream of the superman who can afford to contemplate eternal recurrence and love fate and laugh away all suffering has remained just a dream. The man, having abandoned super-terrestrial things, has not been able to be true to the earth as Nietzsche had wished. Rather he stands opposed to it despite his wishful thinking that he is a life-affirmer and loves the fruits of the earth. In contrast Ibn 'Arabi and Al-Jili have explicated the idea of the perfect man who is a microcosmic God's mirror and appropriates the divine attributes. He is beyond good and evil as he has overcome all categorization by transcending the dualistic mind by virtue of *Tawhid*. He is not a subject who encounters the world as the other, to which he could be in any antagonistic relationship. He sees the world as a theophany, an externalization or manifestation of the Self. The Nietzschean-existentialist pessimism is the logical dead end of the secular Faustian-Promethean humanistic ideology to which the post-Renaissance Western man is committed.

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<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Nasr, S. H., "Islam and the Environmental Crisis" in MAAS *Journal of Islamic Science*, Vol.6, No.2, July-Dec 1990.

The post-Nietzschean hope and vision of innocence and joy of becoming, without the background worldview of traditional metaphysics that is the common possession of traditional civilizations including the pre-modern traditional West, has not been realized. The works of Camus and Beckett depicting the absurd life of the hopeless godless man are a testimony to this assertion. Their absurdist pessimism represents the crisis of humanistic anti-traditional outlook of the modern West.

As the Sufis have killed their pleasure-seeking self, nothing matters for them; no suffering can disturb their calm and repose as they eternally rest in the lap of God. If one takes the belief in God of Mercy and Love seriously, in a God who certainly accomplishes His ends and whom nothing can defeat, there is no scope for any complaint, any anger against the heavens. The question of returning the ticket of life to God doesn't arise at all. One is joyous with the whole of existence and blesses everything including himself. That is what *durood* and much of *zikr* is all about. A Sufi puts absolutely no conditions on God; his acceptance of the divine decree is total and absolutely unconditional. Camus' Dr Rieux and Dostoevsky's Ivan cannot accept any scheme of things that necessitates putting innocent children to torture. The Sufis in contrast could accept any scheme of things because he knows beforehand (though he may not rationally understand) that God is ultimately in full control of everything and that He is Love and Mercy personified. He has experienced the goodness of God. He has seen by means of the eye of the heart that all is good as God had declared after completing the creation. All this is simple to understand if we see that consciousness is of the nature of bliss (*anand*). God is Pure Consciousness. The Spirit doesn't belong to the phenomenal world which is the realm of impermanence, change and thus suffering. In the inner space, in the depths of the Self there is no consciousness of any object, either pleasant or unpleasant. Living in God's presence (*seerum min-Allah* or traveling within God) or God-consciousness or subsisting in God (what Sufism calls *baqa*) means objectless consciousness. And there is no dominion of evil or death or any separative principle there. For God as Unmanifest Consciousness there is no evil as nothing really exists at that level. The Sufis are the people of the path; they have a method of perceiving the world and transforming the self. And those who reach the other shore find themselves delivered from all suffering though of course the suffering to which a flesh is heir to may continue. Complete deliverance from

suffering is possible only posthumously when there is nothing left that is subject to time and the Spirit is wholly itself. The Sufis have a practical method to pass beyond the dominion of suffering and experience the goodness of God. One can find for oneself if God is good or not, if heaven or eternity is realizable here and now or not. If theodicy means justifying God's wisdom and demonstrating His goodness, then Sufism approaches this issue empirically. It is open for everyone to see how far it works. We have learnt from Kant that pure reason cannot resolve metaphysical problems. In a way we could well argue that all philosophical theodicy is doomed. There can be no irrefutable theodicy at a purely and exclusively rational plane that employs only rational argumentation.

Sufism does not worry about theodicy; it has focused on making man see that God is good. It doesn't advance any rational arguments for God's goodness. It clears the perception that veils the face of the Good, the Beautiful, the Beloved. When man disappears, the whole universe appears blissful. The aching, anxious, time-imprisoned self is no longer there. There is only the face of God wherever we turn. The universe is aglow with divine splendour and the Sufi sings and dances. He is pleased with his Lord and sees the whole universe as the Garden of Eden decked by the flowers of love and gratitude. God invites him to this garden and in fact for the Gnostic, God is this garden that lies planted deep in our hearts though our passions and the ego may have made a desert of it. God's rain (remembrance of God or remembrance of our own nothingness so that the seed of pure consciousness, which is bliss, blossoms) is ever there to be revived. The Beloved is smiling all the time and the passional self is turned away from it. Everything is celebrating the great feast that God is perpetually preparing for His grateful servants. We are all invited to share and it is the gnostic, the Sufi, who pays for the ticket that costs no less than the ego. We are to realize our own goodness, our bliss and thereby we will best justify God's goodness which in the last analysis is the goodness of Life or Self.