Andrey Lukashev[1]
Russian Academy of Sciences
Russia

FAITH AND INFIDELITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NOTION SYSTEM IN THE WORKS BY MAHMUD SHABISTARI

Abstract

The main thesis of the article is that the matter of religious tolerance in the works by a concrete author shall be researched in a wider context of his world-view. An author's worldview can be reconstructed at the basis of his texts, and the consistency in the main notions' propositions can unveil the consistency of his thought. The research is based mainly on the works by one of the most prominent medieval Persian Sufi writers – Mahmud Shabistari (1288–1321). For the matter of religious tolerance is a very important part of his worldview, the research of general logic of his worldview structure will help us to see the reason of his special approach to interpret the matter of faith and infidelity. Hence, in the first part of the paper we show the propositions that link the main notions of Shabistari's worldview together and reconstruct in general the consistence of his worldview on the basis of the researched notion system. In the second part of the paper, we use the obtained results to interpret the poet's idea of the faith and infidelity relation in the context of his worldview.

Keywords: Tasawwuf, Mahmud Shabistari, tolerance, notion system, faith, infidelity, iman, kufr, Gulshan-I raz

Introduction

The thesis of the *tasawwuf's* ultimate tolerance has been a common place in numerous oriental researches since the XIX century[2]. This interpretation of *tasawwuf* is not baseless, but it is not full either, because in the works by Sufi *shaikhs* we can find intolerant statements as well as the tolerant ones[3]. The matter is that tol-

---

1   Research fellow at the Institute of Philosophy Russian Academy of Sciences (Department of Philosophy of Islamic World). Contact E-mail: andrew_l@inbox.ru

2   We even can find examples of such a position in modern papers. See for example: Monika Prabhakar, "Hindu Support of Sufism against Islamic Terrorism", in: *Responses of Mysticism to Religious terrorism Sufism and Beyond*, Oud-Turnhout, 2020, pp. 213-226, or: Seema Manzoor, Nasreen Aslam Shah, Asma Manzoor, Sufism as a Global Highway to Peace, *Iḥyā'al'ulūm - Journal of Department of Quran o Sunnahin*, Vol. 19, 2019, pp. 1-19.

3   The critique of the Sufi tolerance stereotype also appears in scientific researches: Mark Woodward, Muhammad Sani Umar, Inayah

erance and intolerance like matter and form never exist separately, they always go side by side, and the aim of intolerance is just to draw the borders of tolerance, to tell acceptable from not acceptable. So the question of the tolerance degree or a person rating as a tolerant or intolerant seems to be a senseless one, the matter is how an author draws the border of his tolerance and what is located beyond this border.

It is very easy to find some kind words addressed to Christians or Zoroastrians, or Jews in Sufi works and to state the religious tolerance of *tasawwuf*. Nevertheless, this interpretation does not explain other intolerant passages, that we can also find in the works by these very thinkers, neither it explains their real point of view on the faith and infidelity division. To explain the apparent contradictions in the Sufi *shaikhs* interpretation of the faith and infidelity matter (it is very important for Islamic culture), we shall analyze it in the context of the whole system of an author's worldview. The works by a famous medieval Sufi poet, thinker and philosopher Mahmud Shabistari (1288–1321) gives us a brilliant material for such an analyze, for they explain the main Sufi concepts and allegories ("*Gulshan-I Raz*", "*Sa'dat-nama*") and unveil the logic of the author's philosophical constructions ("*Haqq al-Yaqin…*").

Mahmud Shabistari: to Explain System of Thought through the Notion System

It is obvious, that we cannot speak about a system in the philosophical worldview of Shabistari in the same meaning as we do it for the Hegel's system for instance. However, at the same time, it is not an unsystematic one, and his system of thought can be seen through the system of the basic notions, which we can find in his works.

We can show the logical links between the key notions, he explains in his works in a quote from his poem "*Gulshan-I Raz*"[4]:

633. Know Absolute **Existence** is that *part*, which is greater than its *whole*,
Because the **existent** is the *whole* and it is an inverse.
634. The **existent** bears plurality on its outward,
For it contains no oneness inwardly.
635. Every **existent** thing is manifested through plurality,
That is as a veil of the oneness of *part*.
636. For the *whole* as an outward is plural,

Rohmaniyah and Mariani Yahya, Salafi Violence and Sufi Tolerance? Rethinking Conventional Wisdom, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 7, No. 6, 2013, pp. 58–78.

4   Hereinafter we quote the "*Gulshan-I Raz*" translated by E.H.Wienfield [Sa'd ud Din Mahmud Shabistari, *Gulshan-i Raz: The Mystic Rose Garden*, London, 1880, 175 p.] edited in accordance with the Persian text, published by K.Dezfuliyan [Shaikh Mahmud Shabistari, *Gulshan-I raz. Matn wa sharh bar asas-i qadimtarin va muhimtarin shuruh-i Gulshan-i raz*, Tehran, 1389, 656 pages].

It is smaller in quantity than its own *part*.

637. But in fine [the *whole*] has not become a *part* of the Necessary **Existence**,

It is Necessary **Existence**, who made it his vassal.

638. This *whole* has not true **existence**,

For it is as an accident of the Truth.

639. The **existence** of the *whole* is both plural and one,

And it appears as plural through its plural aspect.

640. **Existence** became an accidence for its conjunction,

The accidence is ever hastening by itself to **non-existence**.

641. In every *part* of this *whole*, as it becomes **non-existent**,

This *whole* itself is becoming **non-existent** for its possibility.

We marked uniformly the main notion oppositions here, which can be found in the works by Mahmud Shabistari to see them linked to each other. We can see, that Existence is opposed to the existent and non-existence, and the latter ones are identical to each other: existent = whole (verse 633), whole = non-existent (verse 641). The same way are opposed a part and a whole, a one and a plural, an inward and an outward, necessary and possible. The oppositions themselves are identical for the similarity of contradiction between the sides of every opposition. Moreover, the sides of different oppositions appear to be identical to each other, as we can see in the first verse, where Existence is identical to the part and existent – to the whole. This identity and contradiction between the main notions of the Shabistari's discourse helps us to make a table of notions, which has contradiction in rows and identity in columns:

Table 1. Notion oppositions in the *Gulshan-i Raz* by Mahmud Shabistari

=	V	
	existence	**existent/ non-existence**
	part	*whole*
	oneness	plurality
	inward	outward
	necessary	possible
	truth	[false]

Source: author

Table 1 shows that the logical propositions between the main notions are systematically reproducing in the text and unveil a systematized worldview, that is hidden behind it.

The basis of this worldview is *tawhid* – the Divine Oneness, which is the root of Muslim faith. We even can say, that *tawhid* is the common center for the whole Islamic culture. Nevertheless, it was interpreted in many ways and this diversity of interpretations causes the diversity of the Islamic thought as a whole.

The most famous *tawhid* statements in the Sufi thought belong to al-Hallaj: "*ana al-haqq*" (I am the truth) and the lesser known saying: "*ana min ahwa wa min ahwa ana*" (I am a loving and I am my beloved), which show the state of annihilation (*fana*) the mystic's self in the One God. It can be called an extreme form of *tawhid* – the worldview with only the God present. Statements like the mentioned ones can be easily interpreted as a simple pantheism, the same kind with the one we can find in the works by Parmenides or Spinoza. The same way, for example, the concept of unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*)[5] was interpreted by Muhammad Iqbal in his main works as pantheism identical to the Spinozian one. But the matter is much more complicated than its interpretation by Iqbal or later orientalists, who repeat this easy interpretation. Though Ibn Arabi writes about the state of *fana* and though the existence (*wujud*) is some kind of unification factor in his system of thought, he states the difference of the God and the world. While interpreting the mentioned Hallajian words "I am the loving and I am my beloved" he writes, for instance, in the chapter 507 of the "Futuhat al-Makkiyya" about the importance of seeing difference between "I" and "the beloved"[6]. Al-Ghazali also in the "Mishkat al-anwar" says, that unification (*ittihad*) of the God and the mystic can be interpreted as a metaphor, for the unification itself takes place just in the mystic's mind[7]. So for these very mystics we can not speak about any kind of pantheism for their belief in the God's and the world's existence, and difference between their existences is that the God is existent by himself and the world is existent by the God. Existence is common for both of them, but all the same it does not annihilate their difference.

Tasawwuf has never been dogmatic as well as it has never been homogeneous, so we can find there many approaches to solve the problem of divine unity and the creation of the multiple world. The Shabistari's approach is much closer to pantheism, then the Ibn Arabi's and al-Ghazali's ones. In his pursuit of the divine oneness Shabistari asserts the illusion of the world's existence. The same way like al-Ghazali says that the unification of the God and a mystic can take place just as a metaphor, Shabistari affirms, that the world (and a mystic of course as it's part) can be existent just metaphorically:

> 484. The world has no existence but the metaphorical one,
> Its state is all over a game and a farce.

---

5   The doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* is frequently originated in a number of works to Ibn Arabi, though the term *wahdat al-wujud* was first used by Ibn Taymiyya in his critique of the Ibn Arabi's doctrine.

6   Ibn Arabi, *Izbrannoe,* tr.by A.Smirnov, Moscow, 2015, pp.394-395.

7   Ibid, p. 390.

The idea of the possible existence originated to Ibn Sina and accepted by Ibn Arabi faced a rough critique in the works by Shabistari. The letter identified possibility and necessity with existence and non-existence. Hence from his point of view a real existent thing, which was possible by itself and necessary by the other (the God) in the Avicenna's teaching, was absurdly at the same time existent and not existent: "The possible is a speculative matter, which appear while a reason alone is cognizing existence and non-existence and compose them in mind"[8]. Moreover this kind of thinking would accept the presence of another existent along with the God, that is The One. For Shabistari it was some kind of the polytheism sin mentioned in Quran (16:86), so he tried to make a system of perfect *tawhid*, and the solution was to assert the illusionary state of the world opposed to the reality of the God.

"Gulshan-I raz", the Shabistari's masterpiece, was written as an answer to a number of questions of Husaini Gharavi Haravi (XIII–XIV) about different aspects of tasawwuf, so in fact he has to explain the tawhid matter from different points of view. So came a wide synonym row for both the God and the world. The God came the one, the existence, the inward, the part, the necessary, the truth and ets. So the world being opposite to him came the plural, the non-existent, the outward, the whole, the possible, the false and ets. The Shabistari's assurance that total *tawhid* can be stated just through the confession of the God as the only one present matter caused the non-existent and illusion state of everything besides him in the poet's worldview. That is why he begins the chapter about a part and the whole from the absurd statement:

Know Absolute Existence is that part, which is greater than its whole,
Because the existent is the whole and it is an inverse.

His part is greater than the whole because the whole consists of existence (i.e. the God) and *a'yan thabita* – the possible non-existent things. *A'yan thabita* are nothing by themselves and they are everything with the God's existence. Without existence they immediately become void. So, all the multiplicity is nothing more, then a figment of the imagination and false.

The truth of the one existence of God is hidden inwardly behind the outward multiplicity of the illusionary world and the aim of a mystic is to find the One over this illusionary multiplicity. As it was mentioned above for al-Ghazali it was just a gnoseological act which does not imply substantial unity of the God and a mystic. For Shabistari the world is nothing more than a virtual image:

172. You sleep, and what you see is a dream
All you see there is an image.

---

8   Mahmud bin 'Abd al-Karim Shabistari, *Haqq al-yaqin fi ma'arifat rabb al-alamin*, Tehran, 1380, P.65.

Faith and Infidelity

The Faith and Infidelity opposition easily find it's place in the system of other notions from the Table 1. It is paralleled to the "truth and false" opposition. For Shabistari alike for Aristotile truth is the acceptance that the existent exist and the negation of that non-existent exist. So the God's existence is the truth for him and existence of the world is false for the reason explained in the former paragraph. Thus the faith (i.e. the true faith) for Shabistari implies the confession of truth (i.e. the God's oneness, *tawhid*), and infidelity, identical to the false is the negation of that. Here is the edge between faith and infidelity in the Shabistari's worldview. The only thing, that is important for him, is the affirmation of the God's alone presence, which means the perfect monotheism to him.

How rough Shabistari can be in drawing the border between faith and infidelity we can see in the following verse:

> 898. All your regard is set on creatures; Beware
> That you fall not into captivity of this disease.
> 899. If you consort with the ignorant, you become an animal;
> Nay, not an animal, but at once a stone.
> 900. Lest you have a connection with the ignorant,
> For you will fall headlong from your nature.

"Ignorant" for Shabistari is a synonym of infidel for the unawareness of such a person about the God's oneness (i.e. monotheism). Such kind of people are even not human from his point of view. So we can talk about his zero tolerance in that matter.

The outward confessional differences between religions are illusional to him for their "outwardness", which place them to the right column of the Table 1 together with other false and illusionary matters (plural, whole, existent and ets.). He dedicates a noticeable part of his poem *Gulshan-i raz* to Christianity and we even can find there very positive characterizations of Christianity, for instance:

> 928. The aim of Christianity I saw as abstraction [from self] (*tajrid*),
> Deliverance from the yoke of imitation.

But it is not for his love to Cristian religion or even Abrahamic religions which adepts were called in Quran *ahl al-kitab*. In *Gulshan-I raz* in one chapter there come altogether Christianity, idol and *zunnar* (special Zoroastrian belt) as one kind of things. What do all these things have in common? They are all not Islamic. We should not lie to ourselves reading such the verses as the mentioned above and talking about the author's religious tolerance. The reason for such statements is not in the author's religious indifference, Shabistari distinguishes faith

and infidelity very well, and his distinction in this matter is even more hard then the Quranic one. In Quran we can find the distinction of Muslims, polytheists and Abrahamic monotheists (*ahl al-kitab*). Shabistari draws the border between Islam and everything else opposed in contradiction. There is no doubt, that Islam is the only true faith for him:

> 965. Every moment renew your faith
> Become a Muslim, become a Muslim, a Muslim!

The matter is how Shabistari interprets Islam. As it was shown above, the true faith for him is Islam as a perfect monotheism. The concepts of faith and infidelity even can find their places in the Table 1, as identical to the oppositions "truth–false", "existence–non-existence", "oneness–plurality" and ets. It's not by chance that Shabistari uses the oppositions "interior-exterior" and "Islam–infidelity" in one context:

> 964. For our soul is inwardly infidelity,
> Be not satisfied with this outward Islam.

We have seen in the first quote from *Gulshan-I raz* the link between the oppositions "inward–outward" and "oneness–plurality", that are correlated with such oppositions as "existence–existent" and "part–whole". So the notions "faith" and "infidelity" are the parts of the Shabistari's notion system, shown at the Table 1. Faith (i.e. Islam) will correlate with the one, existent, inward, true God; and infidelity will correlate with the multiple, non-existent, outward, false world for infidelity (*kufr*) is identical in Islam with idolatry and idolatry is a worship of things instead of the true God.

It is an easy and right explanation, but it should be added by another one detail, to explain also a number of contexts from the same *Gulshan-I raz*, that can seem controversial to what we said about faith and infidelity, such as the following verses:

> 874. That man is disgusted with metaphorical Islam,
> To whom the true infidelity has once been revealed.
> 875. Within every idol is hidden a soul,
> And within infidelity is hidden true faith.
> 876. Infidelity is ever giving praise to the Truth
> And "All things praise God," proves it. Who can gainsay it?

In these verses we can see another opposition: "metaphorical (*majazi*) – true (*haqiqi*)", which came here from philology. *Haqiqa* as a philology term that means the direct match of the word's verbalization (*lafz*) and its meaning (*ma'ni*) i.e. the

direct meaning of the word. Verbalization adopts in *majaz* the meaning from another verbalization and for instance the verbalization "a star" can mean "a good singer" instead of "a natural luminous body visible in the sky especially at night". If we consider the concept of "metaphorical Islam" in this context, we must say that the metaphorical Islam is the thing, which has just the name, verbalization "Islam" but means something else. If we recall the way Shabistari draws the border between *tawhid* (i.e. Islam) and everything else, and if we also recall the fact that he does not make difference between any of non-Islamic confessions, would it be an idolatry or an Abrahamic religion, we will see, that there is only Islam and idolatry (*kufr*) in his worldview. Therefore the meaning of the matter that has Islam just in its verbalization, but means something else (not Islam itself), can be nothing but idolatry (*kufr*).

On the contrary in the state of metaphor the matter, that has idolatry as its verbalization, can mean nothing except for "faith" (*iman*, i.e. Islam). It explains how within infidelity there can be hidden the true faith. Shabistari as well as the most of Persian sufi poets can praise Christianity, Zoroastrianism, idolatry as metaphors that have the meaning "faith", "Islam" and never accept them as religious teachings.

We can find that even in the poetry by a hanbalite Ansari Haravi, who says in one of his poems:

So much selfish men go to the Hell from mosque,
And so much poor men suddenly were taken to heaven from a synagogue[9]!
[p.87]
and
How can be a Sufi the one, who on the way of Islam and religion
The one, who lies like Christian and hates like Jew[10]?!
[92]

in another one. But it is not for some special attitude he had to the Christian or Jewish religion. He never accepts the Christian or Jewish belief, for Ansari Christians and Jewish are liars and haters, but even from such a place like synagogue a man can be taken to heaven.

Shabistari like 'Attar, Baba Kuhi Shirazi and many other Sufi writers uses Christianity, *zunnar*, idol as just outward (i.e. false) attributes of *kufr* and does not make very much difference between them and the outward attributes of Islam for their common "outawardness" that brings them together to the right column of the Table 1, where the group of false and illusionary notions is gathered.

The dialogue between shaikh San'an and his disciples from the Attar's "*Mantaq al-Tair*" is very significant in this context. We can see there how shaikh Sana'an

---

9   V.A. Jukovskiy, Pesni Heratskogo startsa, in: *Vostochnie zametki*, Saint-Petersburg, 1895, p. 87.

10   Ibidem, p. 92.

consistently replaces the attributes of Muslim faith by the non-Muslim attributes:

> One of them pleaded: "Rise up, great sheikh! Perform ablutions against this satanic temptation."
> But the sheikh replied: "You fool, tonight I have performed a hundred ablutions with my heart's blood."
> Another reprimanded: "Where are your prayer beads, sheikh? How can you find yourself again without them?"
> He replied: "I threw them away to free my hands to wrap infidelity's belt (*zunnar*) about my waist."
> Another cried: "Oh ancient one, if you have committed a sin, repent."
> The sheikh replied: "I have renounced modesty and all states of Sufi trance. I have repented being a sheikh, repented waiting for soul-ecstasy."
> Another said: "Wise one, get up and reconcile by reciting prayers."
> He replied: "Where is the face of that idol so that I can turn in her direction and pray?"
> Another pleaded: "How much more of this talk? Get up and prostrate yourself before the Almighty."
> He replied: "I will prostrate, but only before that idol's face."
> Another asked: "Have you no regrets? No longing for the faith you have abandoned?"
> He replied: "My greatest remorse is that I haven't been in love before"[11].

The actions of San'an in these verses are not the act of any kind of religion change or rebellion against Islam. He gets rid of outward attributes of Islam and preach the adherence to the One Beloved which means the true *tawhid*.

The idol he speaks about has been a poetic metaphor of beloved in Persian poetry since long ago before the Attar's lifetime and it was very well known as such. Verbalization "idol" has the direct meaning "a false god, worshiped by infidels". But as a metaphor it shall have another meaning, which must me a contrary meaning in the context of Shabistari's worldview, meaning "the true God". The God, which shall be seen according to Shabistari "hid in the idol":

> 871. If the polytheist only knew what idol is,
> How would he be wrong in his religion?
> 872. He didn't see in idol naught but the outward creature,
> And that is the reason that he is legally (i.e. in *Shari'at*) infidel.
> 873. You also, if you see not "The Truth" hid in the idol,
> In the eye of the law (i.e. in *Shari'at*) are not a Musulman.

---

11   Farid ad-Din Attar, *The conference of the birds*, tr. by Sholeh Wolpe, New York, London, 2017, p. 70.

Conclusion

The two basic theses we have put over in this article were: (1) The resources of tolerance and intolerance are the essential parts of every worldview, the matter is what is located beyond the border of tolerance?, and (2) It is not enough for the religious tolerance research to gather a number of quotes, which relate to religious minorities, for instance. We shall study the matter in a wider context, unveiling the general logic of the author's reasoning. That will help us to see the links between related concepts and to find the place of the study object in the system of the author's worldview.

The approach described above let us see that the contexts, which are frequently interpreted as religious tolerant are in fact just another way to state the truth of Islam as the only perfect monotheistic religion. And the recipe of being Muslim, from the Shabistari's point of view, is not just to have outward attributes of Islam, it is the kind of worldview that denies existence of any other matter except for the one God.

References

Attar Farid ad-Din, *The conference of the birds*, tr. by Wolpe Sholeh, New York, London, 2017.

Ibn Arabi, *Izbrannoe,* tr. by Smirnov A., Moscow, 2015.

Jukovskiy V.A., "Pesni Heratskogo startsa", in: *Vostochnie zametki*, Saint-Petersburg, 1895.

Woodward Mark, Sani Umar Muhammad, Rohmaniyah Inayah and Yahya Mariani, Salafi Violence and Sufi Tolerance? Rethinking Conventional Wisdom, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 7, No. 6, 2013.

Prabhakar Monika, "Hindu Support of Sufism against Islamic Terrorism", in: *Responses of Mysticism to Religious terrorism Sufism and Beyond*, Oud-Turnhout, 2020.

Shabistari Sa'd ud Din Mahmud, *Gulshan i Raz: The Mystic Rose Garden*, London, 1880,

Manzoor Seema, Aslam Shah Nasreen, Manzoor Asma, Sufism as a Global Highway to Peace, *Iḥyāʾalʿulūm - Journal of Department of Quran o Sunnahin*, Vol. 19, 2019.

Shabistari Mahmud bin 'Abd al-Karim, *Haqq al-yaqin fi ma'arifat rabb al-alamin*, Tehran, 1380.

Shabistari Shaikh Mahmud, *Gulshan-I raz. Matn wa sharh bar asas-i qadimtarin va muhimtarin shuruh-i Gulshan-i raz*, Tehran, 1389.

Андреј Лукашев

ВЕРА И НЕВЕРСТВО У РАДОВИМА
МАХМУДА ШАБИСТАРИЈА

Сажетак

Главна теза овог чланка јесте да се проблем верске толеранције у радовима персијског писца Махмуда Шабистарија (1288 – 1321) мора истраживати у ширем контексту његовог погледа на свет. Шабистаријев поглед на свет може бити анализиран уз помоћ његових радова. Како је верска толеранција веома важна у његовом погледу на свет, истраживање логике његовог погледа на свет помаже да се његов приступ верницима и неверницима исправно интерпретира. У складу са тим, први део рада повезује главне теме Шабистаријевог погледа на света. У другом делу рада, анализирамо како ове идеје утичу на његове ставове о вери и неверницима.

Кључне речи: Тасавуф, Махмуд Шабистари, толеранција, појмовни систем, вера, неверство, иман, куфр, Гулшан раз