

ERIC GEOFFROY

The “cosmism” of Islam as a possible response to the current ecological crisis
Cosmic praise

In the Islamic view, the whole creation is endowed with life because it comes from “the Ever Living”, which is a major divine Name. The fundamental unity of the universe stems from the Islamic principle of Oneness (*Tawhîd*), as does the awareness that all creatures are interdependent. We can find evidence of Islamic “cosmism” in the titles of the 114 suras of the Koran, which refer to all the realms of Universal Manifestation:

- the astral (Star, Moon, Thunder, Storms, the Sundered Sky, the Zodiacal Constellations, the Sun...);
- the mineral (the Cave, Mont Sinai, Iron...);
- the vegetable (the Fig Tree – but in the Text, the tree and the ear of wheat are the favourite parables); the animal (the Heifer, Cattle, Bees, Ants, the Spider, the Elephant...);
- invisible beings (Angels, jinns...); and of course the human realm.

A celebrated passage from the Koran stresses the dignity accorded to Nature in the divine economy: “Surely We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to be unfaithful to it and feared from it, and man has turned unfaithful to it; surely he is unjust, ignorant” (33:72). Koran exegetes fail to agree on the meaning of “trust’ (or “deposit”). Does it refer to faith, knowledge, universal consciousness and the responsibility in managing the planet? In any case this trust (deposit) must be given back in the best condition, clean and completely intact, since man is only a tenant of the Earth and the whole Creation will return to the original primordial Oneness. But to come back to sura 33:72, which I just quoted, what matters here is that far from being reality with no consciousness or simply inanimate objects, the skies, the earth, the land and the mountains are worthy of being God’s partners. In reality everything is a “sign”, as the Koran often reminds us . Indeed: “Surely Allah is not ashamed to set forth any parable [such as] that of a gnat” (2:26).

All the realms are summoned to universal consciousness, for they are united in cosmic worship: “And whoever is in the heavens and the earth makes obeisance to Allah only, willingly and unwillingly, and their shadows too at morn and eve” (Koran 13:15). “Do you not see that Allah is He, Whom obeys whoever is in the heavens and whoever is in the earth, and the sun and the moon and the stars, and the mountains and the trees, and the animals...” (22:18). “And whatever creature that is in the heavens and that is in the earth

makes obeisance to Allah (only), and the angels (too) and they do not show pride” (16:49). “Do you not see that Allah is He Whom do glorify all those who are in the heavens and the earth, and the (very) birds with extended wings?” (24:41). “And the thunder declares His glory with His praise” (13:13).

This cosmic worship comes from *Fitra*, “pure primordial nature”, whereby all creatures know God immediately because they have come from a divine world.¹ Clearly, primordial nature not only concerns Muslims, since *all* human souls have agreed to the Pact (*mîthâq*) with God in the spiritual world, before incarnation.² As one of the early Muslim theologians points out, “*Fitra* is the absolute permanence of the knowledge of God” in man, who is thus devoted to worshipping God innately but often unknowingly. This a-dogmatic or pre-dogmatic primordial Tradition, of which the only principle is the awareness of the Oneness of God (*Tawhîd*), is the subject of a sura: “Then set your face upright for religion in the right state (*hanîf*) – the nature made by Allah [*fitrat Allâh*] in which He has made men [literally “natured” men]; there is no altering of Allah's creation; that is the right religion, but most people do not know.”³

The Prophet was very responsive to the living universal consciousness, because he experienced it every day, in his relations, for instance, with the mineral realm. He tells that the stones greeted him during the period before the first Koranic revelation, and he heard the stones invoke God. “That mountain loves us, and we love it”, he said of Mount Uhud. As for the vegetable realm, there is the episode of the moaning palm trunk, which is celebrated because heard by all the onlookers: the trunk began to moan when the Prophet ceased to lean on it to turn to address his followers; the Prophet then comforted the trunk and the moaning ceased. The order was then given that the trunk was to be buried in the right and proper way, as if it were human... Animals are greatly respected in classic Islam because like man they have a soul-consciousness (*rûh*), albeit to a lesser degree than man of course, although the Koran specifies that human beings can fall to a degree of consciousness lower than that of an animal. According to Islam, all animals know pleasure and suffering – few Muslims are aware of this – and they will be judged and resurrected, naturally in their own ways. This is not so surprising, considering that God made a “revelation” to the

¹ “Surely we are Allah's and to Him we shall surely return” (2:156).

² Cf. Koran 7:172 : “And [remember] when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their backs, their descendants, and made them bear witness against their own souls [by asking them]: Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes! we bear witness. Lest you should say on the day of resurrection: surely we were heedless of this.”

³ Koran 30:30.

bees (Koran 16:68). The same Arabic term is used for the revelation made to the Prophet.

‘The earth, the seven heavens and their inhabitants celebrate God; there is nothing in the creation that does not proclaim His glory...’ Here the Sufi Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240) started from verse 17:44 in affirming that all the realms are living and are expressed. “God can only be praised by that which is living and has a consciousness. The Prophet said in this sense that all creatures, dry or wet, are witnesses to the call of the muezzin.”⁴ Since “all things are living and look to their Lord”, we must be respectful of all that which surrounds us.⁵ Although Ibn ‘Arabi clearly states that “the beasts possess skills which God has set in them [and to which man has no access]”,⁶ he claims that the highest quality in man is the *mineral*. In fact the mineral is totally subject to God. It is ontologically transparent: if you let a stone fall, it makes no resistance, as man might. It never cheats. Thus the Kaaba at Mecca, a stone cube, although empty inside, is the “House of God”. As Ibn ‘Arabi points out, the mineral knows God and speaks through Him. In the Koran the mountain fears God (59:21), the rock crumbles out of fear of God (2:74), etc. This is not only a vision pertaining to Sufism: the theologian Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) claims that “minerals were created to praise God in a language which no one can comprehend other than He who bestowed it upon them.”⁷

We understand why, then, that according to the great Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), man carries in himself the life of all the realms. Listen to what he has to say: “He [Man] came first into the realm of inorganic things, and from the realm of inorganic things he passed into the vegetable realm but did not remember his previous condition. And when he passed into the animal state, he did not remember his state as a vegetable, save only for the inclination which he has towards that state, especially in the season of spring – like the inclination of babes towards their mothers: they do not know the secret of their desire for the maternal breast, or the novice’s like inclination towards his spiritual master... the disciple’s particular intelligence is derived from that Universal Intelligence... Then Man comes into the human state; he does not remember at all his earlier souls and he will be changed again starting from his present soul.”⁸ Thus far from being in opposition to cosmic reality and Nature, the human not only incorporates the various realms of Nature, but goes

⁴ *Al-Futûhât al-makkiyya*, I, 147.

⁵ *Al-Futûhât al-makkiyya*, Chap. 357.

⁶ *Al-Futûhât al-makkiyya*, III, 489.

⁷ On the *Fitra*, see his *Letters from Prison*.

⁸ *Masnavi*, IV, 3637 ff. (English translation by R. A. Nicholson).

beyond them by going beyond himself, according to a principle of infinite evolution across the various worlds.

The divine is thus not outside the cosmos, because *Rahma*, Mercy, “encompasses all things” (Koran 7:156). This *solidarity* between God and his creation clearly implies the same solidarity between all creatures: “the whole Creation is the family of God’s family”. In Sufism the experience of the “Oneness of Being (*wahdat al-wujûd*) impedes any division between spirit and matter – precisely that dualism from which the modern environmental crisis has arisen.

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Can we mobilize the transformative energies of religions in order to cope with the ecological crisis?

As God’s representative on Earth (Koran 2:30), man has a crucial responsibility in the management of the planet. Yet, the “God” of the Koran himself is pessimistic at the prospect: in the same sura, the angels, although obedient to God, question the wisdom of entrusting this mission to man: “What! wilt Thou place in it [the Earth] such as shall make mischief in it and shed blood, and we celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy holiness?” The verse ends, however, with God’s reply to the angels: “I know what you do not know.” This is the same paradox and the same ambiguous position of man on earth as in the sura quoted above: “Surely We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to be unfaithful to it and feared from it, and man has turned unfaithful to it; surely he is unjust, ignorant” (33:72). If we remain fixed on the axis of the horizontal, it appears that God knows man is not capable of doing what is asked of him. At horizontal level, therefore, there is no solution, and that is what we are experiencing at the moment. Only a “vertical” kind of consciousness – but which doesn’t separate transcendence from immanence – may, in the Koranic view, bring a solution. For the time being, however, this is beyond us. Here we find the test of the “voluntary submission to God”, the approximate translation of the term *islâm*. There is a divine design for man that is beyond his ordinary or current consciousness. The picture described by the Koran is thus for the time being dramatic. We don’t know what future touch the Koranic “God” may add.

Moreover, we can’t dodge the issue of the dominion of nature entrusted by God to man in the monotheistic religions. This has become very common in certain quarters, and especially in Western Europe. In fact, as in other monotheistic religions, in Islam God gives the dominion of the creation to man

(*al-taskhîr*). See, for example, the following sura: “And He has made subservient to you whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth, all, from Himself; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect”(45:13). But the *taskhîr* has two complementary faces: freedom and responsibility. What kind of “man” does God give this power to? To today’s degenerate humanity? In this case the Koran admits the angels are right: “Corruption has appeared in the land and the sea on account of what the hands of men have wrought...” (30:41). No, we are talking about primordial Adam, about the “completed man” (*al-insân al-kâmil*) which the *principal* Islam would seem to aspire to fashion at the end of the cycle that we live in and naturally with the aid of other spiritualities. In their condition of ordinary consciousness, men, as the Sufis stress, live in a state of perpetual distraction. This is illustrated in the above-cited verse 17:44, which ends as follows: “The seven heavens declare His glory and the earth (too), and those who are in them; and there is not a single thing but glorifies Him with His praise, *but you [men] do not understand their glorification...*” It would thus appear that only human beings become aware and, regenerated in spiritual terms, they will effectively and reasonably be able to manage the planet: “Allah has promised to those of you who believe and do good that He will most certainly make them rulers in the earth” (Koran 24:55).

In the Islamic vision, man occupies a broad spectre: once he is “completed”, he will be superior to the highest angels and archangels, but he is inferior to the animals when he is in his most fallen state. It was in this sense that although Emir Abdelkader (d. 1883) supported the technical progress made by the Europeans in the mid-19th century (he campaigned to convince the Near East peoples to open up the Suez Canal), he also warned them that the “Heavens would close up again” above them.

Out of respect for life and in line with the moral project of “pursuing the middle way” the Koran mentions economic concerns and the rejection of wastefulness: “Surely the squanderers are the fellows of the Shaitans [evil spirits]” (17:27); “Eat and drink and be not extravagant; surely He does not love the extravagant” (7:31). “The whole Earth is a pure temple”, the Prophet used to say. The mosque is primarily a meeting place for men, but the ultimate temple is Nature, or rather the whole cosmos, since the mullahs have already raised the issue of which direction they will have to pray in once they are on the Moon or Mars... And when Muslims perform their ablutions, they should bear in mind the Prophet’s words when recommending using water sparingly, even on a river bank. What is highlighted in this case is primarily ethics, a conduct to be passed on by the generations.

"No fish is caught and no bird trapped without some of the glory of God leaving this world." It is as if the Prophet were warning us that the divine protection and blessing (*baraka*) would gradually dwindle as the animal species became rarer. And that is what we are experiencing in our own age. Since the various realms are interdependent, the *baraka* flows between them. "The ant in its hole and the fish in the sea', he continues "call down grace on he who teaches good to men."

The cultural decay of so-called Muslim societies has led to the Islam faithful almost completely forgetting these matters. You only have to travel in these societies to realize how far their cultural practice is removed from essential Islamic teaching. Nowadays, the religious obsession with laws and ritual and the concern of many people to meet their immediate needs, combined with the utilitarian relationship with nature created by rampant globalization, has dimmed any universalist environmental form of consciousness in these societies. Muslim experts, thinkers and some sections of the general public have only recently rediscovered the founding lesson and now wish to place the emphasis on the essential rather than on secondary matters.

Are there possible solutions? What do the Muslim thinkers, the ulama suggest? They mainly propose reintroducing an essential notion, a mediaeval Islamic discipline, that may be translated by the "ultimate aims of Sharia". This is not the Sharia as depicted in the media. The Sharia is a cosmic code of law. It is the equivalent of the Hindu term Dharma. But what is the ultimate aim of the Sharia? Human happiness. Five principles of respect are stated: respect for human life, religion, reason, procreation and private property. The contemporary ulama propose using what is technically speaking a science to promote the protection of life in all forms. They have reinstated this science to respond to the current situation of the planet and humanity. Personally I feel that this is not enough, because it is still a "horizontal" type reform. I believe that the solution must be *vertical and horizontal* and therefore will rely on what I call the spiritual revolution, now ongoing here and there in Islam and also outside of Islam. This spiritual revolution appears especially in Islamic liberation theology, which borrowed from Christian theology but gave it a much more metaphysical meaning: only the worship of the One, the single God, will free man from all kinds of idolatry in consumerism, nationalism, politics and even religion itself.

But let's turn to the Sufis. For many of them today, there can be no authentic spiritual journey without environmental awareness. In the Sufi view, the state of the planet cannot be separated from our spiritual state, and the modern ecological crisis stems from the division of mind and matter. We thus see brotherhoods working hands-on in this area. At Mostaganem (Algeria) 'Alawiyya, for instance, has recently created the Djanatu-al-Arif Foundation ("Garden of Knowing"), which describes itself as a "Mediterranean Centre of Sustainable Development". Its current director Sheikh Khaled Bentounès often speaks out in agreement with renowned environmentalists such as Jean-Marie Pelt and Pierre Rabhi.

"If one of you holds a sapling [palm tree] and hears the Hour [of the Last Judgment] sound, he should rush to plant it in the ground!" I was recently told that this wise saying of the Prophet has anticipated what is now called sustainable development. Whatever the case, it gives hope a grounding and suggests that life on Earth will continue, with or without today's humanity.

In several passages in the Koran we find the idea that God could easily make humanity as we know it disappear and replace it with other forms of life – human or otherwise. For example: "Do you not see that Allah created the heavens and the earth with truth? If He please He will take you off and bring a new creation" (14:19). The Islamic tradition – the Koran and the Prophet's sayings – moreover teaches us that there is an extraterrestrial and extra-human way, but this is little-known by Muslims.

[Reading and translation of sura 99, *The Earthquake*]

Here we find the specially significant passage: "When the earth is shaken with her (violent [/final]) shaking, And the earth brings forth her burdens, And man says: What has befallen her? On that day she shall tell her news, Because your Lord had inspired [revealed to] her."⁹ Meanwhile the tsunami has raged on the north-east coast of Japan and the Earth has continued to quake in Japan, even though there's no longer any mention of it in the Western media. Clearly, the significance of these verses is above all eschatological. As such, the increase in earthquakes recorded by scientists (at the worldwide Seismology Bureau at Strasbourg, for example) leads many Muslims to hasty conclusions, because they echo the current situation: the Earth would seem to be in revolt. They then link this up with the teachings of the Prophet on the "end of the cycle" that we would seem to be experiencing and that will inevitably be accompanied by various cosmic and psychological upheavals. Yet, according to one leitmotif in the Koran, God is constantly sending signs to humanity so that

⁹ Note that in this verse God "inspires" (or "reveals to") the Earth, just as the Earth "reveals"/"tells her news" to the prophets; the Arabic terms is similar.

it can look after and manage itself. According to Ibn 'Arabî, God permanently discloses Himself. From an Islamic perspective, there can be no question of God abandoning his creation (cf. Bruno Latour's idea: "Frankenstein abandoned by his creator"). But if humanity fails to grasp this, if it doesn't reach the right level of awareness, the signs become trials. In this sense, the ecological crisis is just one of the symptoms of the lack of awareness in man.

DEBATE

PHILIP VALENTINI

La différence entre les hommes et les montagnes c'est que les montagnes sont déjà soumises à Dieu alors que l'homme a la libre choix de se soumettre ?

01.51.36

ERIC GEOFFROY

According to Islam, the "completed man" (*al-insân al-kâmil*) is superior to the highest angels and archangels, but is inferior to the animals when in his most degenerate state. From the Islamic point of view, the human condition can extend in an immense spectrum of consciousness.

01.52.32

MICHAEL SCHELLENBERGER

Okay I think I understand that. The other thing I don't understand is, "Surely he is unjust, (comma) ignorant." Now, those are two different things. In other words if I defile my nest because I don't know how to keep it clean that's different than defiling my neighbor's nest because I am unjust and I want my neighbor's wealth. Is the Koran saying that this unfaithfulness is due to both ignorance and injustice or are they equating injustice with ignorance?

01.54.09

ERIC GEOFFROY

Here we would have to consult the Koranic exegesis: why is the word "unjust" placed before "ignorant"? In our logic we can accept that it is through ignorance that man becomes unjust. According to the Muslim wise men, no word in the Koran is placed by chance. So I can't answer your question here; I would have to consult the commentaries. It's an extremely complex verse which echoes the verse on the *Khilâfa* in sura 2:30. In both cases there's ambiguity about man. According to our human logic – also according to the angels' awareness mentioned in the verse – it's incomprehensible why God chose man for the

Earth, when He knows that he will shed blood, cause corruption, etc. But at the end of the sura, everything is resolved when God says: “I know what you do not know.” Here we find a superhuman logic belonging to all religious revelation: there is a divine design for man that is beyond us and which gives hope because in situations of acute crisis, like the current ecological crises, God may have the solutions for us, but we are still not aware of them.

MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER

Okay. So, that’s what Izabela said but Eric said something very long, that I understood none of.

I mean, I think what I guess –what I’m trying to get at is that it seems to me that what is at stake here is that in the traditional green and Christian telling ecological problems are a consequence of human greed which is a kind of injustice and cruelty or insensitivity. When there is an alternative narrative, which is that ecological problems are a consequence of essential human imperfectability, of ignorance of this kind of this argument that we’ve been making and I’m seeing here both. And I’m trying to figure out is that because it’s actually one term that’s been defined two ways or is it that they’re defining the unfaithfulness as a consequence of both? I’m trying to get at, you know, I think there’s implications for these environmental movements which you describe being supported by Soufi movements.

01.58.55

ERIC GEOFFROY

Yes. Rereading the Arabic terms mentioned in sura 2:30, we can say: man is firstly unjust because he is unjust unto himself, he is unjust in his inner world against himself; he does wrong to himself and then he goes on to do wrong to the outside world.

What is my personal outcome from this *Dialogue* ?

Eric Geoffroy

The very title of our Dialogue as well as the assumptions and statements in some of the papers reveal a dichotomy or even conflict between religion and science. This contrasts with the Islamic point of view that I was called to illustrate here. The Koran often urges man to search for “signs” both in the world and in himself, in scientific experimentation and in inner experience. That’s why in our own time, the ulama and the Muslim scholars address ecology by referring to the famous *Sharia* – so misunderstood by many Muslims and non-Muslims – and by reviving the ancient science of “the ultimate aims of the *Shari’a*” (I will no longer spell it according to the popular media form). In actual fact the *Shari’a* is

the cosmic law; and *mutatis mutandis* the equivalent of the Hindu term *Dharma*. This science enunciates five principles whereby all theology in Islam must aim at the well-being of humanity and all the other realms of the creation. The first principle is absolute respect for life, in all its forms.

Personally I feel this reviving of an ancient science is not sufficient because it is still a horizontal-type reform. In any case, it echoes the idea put forward by Bruno Latour that Christianity may be revitalised by the ecological crisis. I would say that only a spiritual revolution, both personal and collective, would seem to be able to meet the challenge. The Islamic liberation theology would appear to be more relevant: it is radical in the sense that it aims at the worship of the One, and aims to free man from all kinds of idolatry, such as religious materialism (to use the expression of the Tibetan lama Chögyam Trungpa but it can be applied to all religions), scientism, consumerism and irresponsible ethical and ecological behaviour.

Similarly, the story of the ecological movements seems to have been greatly inspired by a certain perception of the Christian narrative. There are other, very different narratives (Buddhism, Hinduism, etc) which could broaden the scope of this seminar. Is there not a contradiction between opening up to other traditions (such as those of the Amazon) while clinging – at times unconsciously – to a strictly Christian narrative? Our desire for universal understanding is thus reduced and rarefied in a particular form. Islam was the only non-Christian religion represented in our discussion. Why did no others feature? So during the Dialogue there was a strong emphasis on the historic specificity of the convergence of three areas: a certain kind of Christianity, native traditions and modernity. The question of modernity (especially the acceleration in the transformation of knowledge and techniques) was raised during the first three centuries of Islam – religion and civilisation – but obviously in different contexts.

I feel religious phenomena are analysed in an ideological way when, as Michael and Ted argue, religions disappear but we are witnessing the rise of spirituality in many different manifestations. This difference must be taken into account, if we wish to influence the ecological debate. We must insist on the various dialogic levels between religious forms and the question of Meaning: the latter goes way beyond the former, albeit while underlining its relevance.

The debate between the “modernists and pro-technologists” and “anti-technologists and anti-modernists” I feel was outmoded. For the “aware” person technology may have a transforming or even transfiguring power. It may lead to living for the Instant (in the Sufi sense of *waqt*) in a dimension that is spiritual, political, ecological, etc.

Several times I mentioned the eschatological tone of the Islamic message, and I also noted with interest a “pessimistic–speculative” conclusion in this direction from a non-religious participant, Eduardo, when he alluded to an “imminent Parousia”. He believes that only a post-human messianism may be able to

change the conditions of our life significantly. I should also like to mention here some elements from my own text: in several passages in the Koran there is a reference to the idea that God could easily make humanity as we know it disappear and replace it with different forms of life – human or otherwise. I quoted to this effect from the Koran (14:19). We must remember that the Islamic tradition teaches us that there is extraterrestrial and extra-human life.

I'm increasingly convinced, at the end of this dialogue but also after wider reflection about what is going on in the world, that the crisis is global. It has various symptoms: cosmic, climatic, ecological and – on a human scale – psychological, moral and religious. Fundamentalism and terrorism, of a religious, but not only, nature, are particularly sensitive areas. The integral or integrative vision of reality is typical of Islam and is founded on the principle of Oneness – not only divine *stricto sensu*. This principle enables us to give a meaning to the infinite complexity and diversity of life. “Post-modernity”, if we wish to give some credit to this term which characterises the globalised information age we live in, means that we know everything, that pretence and facades are shown up for what they are and that the world's hypocrisy – be it religious, political, academic or otherwise – becomes increasingly clear. We live in an age of “revelations”, and the ecological crisis is indicative of other indicators. Only it can have major irreversible consequences on the future of humanity.

I go along with Bruno Latour in certain peregrinations of his thought, especially when inspired by Whitehead, and I'm happy to borrow the expression “panentheism” used by some of Whitehead's disciples: it is completely in line with what the Sufi Ibn 'Arabî (d. 1240) and his school called the “Unity of Being” (*wahdat al-wujûd*). These Sufis don't profess a primary monism, and even less pantheism, but the awareness that everything that is created possesses only a relative ontological degree of existence, which is “borrowed” – to use Ibn 'Arabî's expression – from the only “Real Being”, God. The term “cosmotheism”, used by Bruno, also fits in with the Sufi/Islamic vision. I can assure that, according to a little-known Muslim teaching, Islam asserts that the animals – an important category of non-humans – will be judged and raised up, obviously in line with their own level of awareness.

On the other hand, I do not follow his statements when they are too generic – or marked by a specific Christian background, such as: “Where nature enters, religion has to leave”, or “When religion encounters nature, one of them has to go”. Here I refer the reader to what I wrote in my paper on the Islamic notion of *Fitra*.

How the *Dialogue* with other religious traditions affected my thinking, what I learned from it, what new methodological perspective aimed at coping with the ecological crisis can be inspired – if any – by this experience?

In considering our topic, I felt a great affinity between the visions of Eastern Christianity and those of Islam. Here I'm thinking of the talks given by two speakers in particular: Elizabeth Theokritoff (especially her discussion of the theme of universal praise; her attempt to distinguish the levels of being, and therefore the levels of analysis; and a shared metaphysical view of the purposes of the creation) and Izabela Jurasz (the Fall as only an incident; God as creative "poet" of the universe). We can clearly refer to the historic relations between this form of Christianity and the Muslim world, but I think that here we are actually exploring the issue of constant spiritual features in human experience more deeply. Incidentally, this corroborates my previous personal experience of discussions on comparative mysticism.