

Give me little love from God's heart
(Marc Bolan, Beltane Walk, 1970)

I'll be your mirror
Reflect what you are, in case you don't know
(Lou Reed 1967)

The Sufi Ethics and the Spirits of Consumerism

A Preliminary Suggestion for Further Research

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Consumerism has spread rapidly across the Muslim world and it is seen to entail far reaching cultural transformations, such as an individualisation of Islamic spirituality and expression of faith through fashion (e.g. Sandıkçı and Ger, 2007). Although radical Islamism as modernist/rationalist project shuts itself off from and defines itself against “Western” consumerism, against the threat posed by individualisation and hybridisation to the pursuit of homogeneity purity (Turner, 1994: 90), this has not prevented the proliferation of consumerist mentalities across the Islamic world. Jafar and Süerdem (2012) emphatically make the case that Islam as such is no more avert to consumerism than is the faith most associated with the emergence of capitalism itself – Protestant Christianity. I have argued that consumerism cannot only be accommodated by Islam, but also is likely to lead to transformations bordering on a romantic commoditisation of religion (Varul 2008). The ethos of longing, day-dreaming and expressive individualism inscribed in consumer culture rub off onto the sphere of the sacral. I now have come to suspect that Islamic spirituality may play a more active role in the spread of consumerism. In particular, my suggestion is that Sufism played a role in inspiring a consumerist development in the Islamic world similar to that which, according to Campbell's (1987) now classic argument, Romanticism played in the West. Rumi's son, Sultan Veled (Gibb 1909: 2 and 1900: 159 – transliteration by me) gives us a first clue:

کندوزندن یوز صورت بر جان الر * شهر الر بازار الر د

Kendüzinden yüz surat bir cân olur * ehir olur, bâzâr olur, dükkân olur

Of itself a soul will myriad forms assume – City, market-place, or shop will it become

The commercial metaphor for the inspired Soul in medieval Konya is striking and suggestive. Yavuz (2003: 142ff.) argues that Sufi teaching, such as that of the influential Nak ibendi Gümü hanevi order, can act as a functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic igniting the capitalist spirit (Yavuz 2003: 142ff.), so it may make sense to search for a functional equivalent to the Romantic ethic that ignited consumerism. The available space does not afford a full elaboration – and neither does the existing research. I am therefore offering the following as a slightly adventurous hypothesis to inform further enquiry.

Let me begin with a very short outline of Campbell's (1987) argument regarding the Romantic legacy of consumerism. Campbell proposes and convincingly argues that the roots of modern consumerist mentalities lie in the Romantic movements of the 18th and 19th centuries, which yielded an innovative type of pleasure-seeking which he termed 'autonomous imaginative hedonism'. In contrast to the traditional hedonist who goes after sensual pleasures, direct stimuli, the autonomous imaginative hedonist gains pleasure from inducing emotionally charged states of minds. The traditional hedonist is a glutton – the imaginative hedonist reads novels. The scope for pleasure and fulfilment is greater in the latter as the imagination, unlike the stomach, is without limits. But the scope for frustration is also greater because the anticipated pleasures associated with consumer goods are always greater than what those commodities can deliver – so there is an inbuilt constant longing which, in true Romantic fashion, itself becomes an object of desire. Campbell (2003) argues that this sort of mentality is then furthered and selected in a secularised form¹ just as the secularised Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1992) is favoured in the capitalist labour market and business competition.

If we understand consumerism as a secularised descendant of Romanticism – i.e. if we do not see the Rolls Royce and the Rolex as ultimate consumer goods but the novel, the movie and the video game as the ultimate consumer commodities – then Sufism becomes immensely relevant as a philosophy of longing, desire and creative imagination. Longing is built into Sufi ontology, anticipating the Romantic philosophy of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel who

begin with an undifferentiated principle which at once manifests itself in the dual mode of subject and object, whose interactions (in and through individual human selves) bring into

¹ He actually fails to supply a plausible account how capitalist markets favour romantic consumer mentalities – but I have suggested that a recourse on Simmel's *Philosophy of Money* can serve to supply such an account (Varul 2009)

being the phenomenal world and constitute all individual experience, as well as all the history of mankind. (Abrams, 1971: 91)

That is – a notion that the Absolute emanates the world in an act of self-alienation for the sake of self-reflection, only then to yearn for reunion. In fact, the resulting inscription of desire into the world is even more radical in Sufism than it is in Romanticism. Rumi lets God speak to David about why he created the world:

مردِ زمان گنجی بدم من در نهان
که پیدا
نینه کردم عیان رویش دل و پشتش جهان

‘God said to him: O temporal man, I was a hidden treasure / I sought that that treasure of loving kindness and bounty should be revealed / I displayed a mirror – its face the heart, its back the world’ (Nicholson 1952: 15)

As Nicholson explains this reference to a famous *hadîs*² is at the heart of Sufi ontology. God does not create *ex nihilo*, but emanates the world out of a desire to see himself reflected in it. At the heart of creation thus is longing in which

‘a Divine Being alone in His unconditioned essence, of which we know only one thing: precisely the sadness of the primordial solitude that makes Him yearn to be revealed in beings who manifest Him to Himself insofar He manifests Himself’ (Corbin 1969:184)

Planting desire into the world like this gives immense meaning to the individual as divine mirror who’s both sides: the material and the spiritual are equally indispensable. The human being as mirror of the divine, as a particular reflecting the universal, emphatically is an *individual* (Corbin 1969: 95) whose experience and even whose *God* is different from everybody else’s. In the words of the Syrian poet Adonis (2005: 66) who suggests a parallel between Arabic Sufism and French Surrealism God ‘does not reveal himself in the same image twice nor does he reveal himself in the same image to two people.’ Further it can be argued that, in a social-ontological irony, radical mysticism with its aim to dissolve the individual soul in the divine (the death of the soul in Sufism: *fenâ*) presupposes or even constitutes the soul as that of an individual person – as Simmel (1910: 384) put it: ‘the being one with God is conditional in its significance upon the being other than God’. And it is part

² Islamic terminology is given in its Turkish transcription

of this irony that in the process of such search of dissolution in the articulation of the desire to lose one's identity in the One, the mystic's name is immortalised – like that of 13th century Anatolian Sufi/poet Yunus Emre (Bakırcio lu, 1981: 272):

Yunus adın sâdıktır bu yola geldin ise / Adın deg irmeyenler bu yola gelmediler³

Uniformity and homogeneity proposed by some forms of political Islam is at loggerheads with this sort of individual spirituality reminiscent of the cult of the Individual (Durkheim, 1898: 8) which is both a legacy of Romanticism (Berlin, 2000: 146f.) and the religious implication of consumerism. Sandıkçı and Ger's (2007: 197f.) observations bear out the transformative impact of this individualism:

'Religiosity operates as an equalizing and homogenizing factor that dissolves individual identity within a uniform and anonymous Islamic identity. But uniformity is difficult to maintain. While religious identity enables a woman to differentiate herself from "less" religious others, it alone is not enough to create distinction among those who are similar.' (Sandıkçı/Ger 2007: 197f.)

But while the influence of the inner dynamics of consumer culture are not to be dismissed, we may also be witnessing a reinvigoration of submerged aspects of Islamic spirituality through the aesthetic pursuits of fashion – the individualism of the creative imagination (also cf. Çayır, 2006).

As incorporation of divine desire, longing and imagination, the individual human being finds themselves confined in a material world that is never big enough. There is an elective affinity between the consumer constantly yearning to expand their world through imaginative experiences epitomised by the parallel worlds of the cinematic dream and the *dervi* in the open desert complaining about how confined this place is (Bursalı, 2006: 244).⁴ The unhappiness with the narrow world closely matches that of the Romantics in the West. Much like many of the young men of the newly emerging middle classes in Europe in the 18th and early 19th century (Hobsbawm, 1996: 314f.) iconic Sufi masters like *ems-i Tebrizi* have fled the existence of a school teacher or lawyer and took refuge in an artistic and spiritual

³ 'Yunus' name is "Friend" if you came down this Path / Those who don't change their name do not come down this Path' [my translation, MZV]

⁴ 'Bir gün, akı kıt bir adam sıkıntılı bir sûrette ko up dururken, çölde bir dervi e rastladı ve haykırdı: "Ey dervi , ne haldesin, ne yapıyorsun?" Dervi , ters ters baktı da dedi ki: "Ne soruyorsun yahu? Utan! ... Bu daracık dünyada sıkı ıp kaldım ... imdi bu dünya bana dar mı dar!" Adam busbütün hayret etmi ti: "Â dervi karde , dedi, sözün do ru de il! ... u geni ova, u uçsuz bucaksız vâdi dar olur mu?" Dervi fenâ halde kızdı: "Âh, dedi, e er burası dar olmasaydı sen bize nereden yeti ebilirdin? Nerden çatardin ki? ..." Gerçekten öyle!'

existence (Tabriz, 2004: 17ff.). The condition they flee is the mortal enemy of the Romantic and his heir, the consumer; it is *boredom*.

C'est l'Ennui ! L'œil chargé d'un pleur involontaire / Il rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka /
Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat / — Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon
frère! (Baudelaire 1959 : 16)⁵

As Williams (1973: 95) points out from a modern perspective '[n]othing less will do for eternity than something that makes boredom *unthinkable*.' While in the West boredom only becomes a philosophical concept in the late 19th and fully in the 20th century (associated with names such as Kierkegaard and Sartre), we may be surprised to find boredom taken care of as a potential problem already about 600 years before in Ibn Arabi's *Meccan Illuminations*. Chittick (1989: 105) summarises:

'God's perpetual self-disclosure to the creatures mean that creation is renewed at each instant. Hence, no one with any understanding of the nature of the things can suffer boredom (*malal*) whether in this world or the next.'

The desire to escape from boredom as motivation for spiritual endeavour may appear trivial at first sight – particularly as we tend to associate it with consumerism rather than with Romanticism or even Sufism. But it may also indicate unhappiness originating from the insight that we are 'infinite in spirit and finite in action.' (Barzun, 1975: 17) It is here that Sufism feeds into the consumer imagination.

As the Romantic Ethic filtered through into popular culture in the form of novels, but also fairy tales and song texts, so Sufi motifs are omnipresent in the diverse cultures of Turkey. Sufism-infused idioms of Islam were transmitted through 'narratives of the lives and pious deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, biographies of Muslim holy men, poetry and love stories placed in an Islamic setting' (Mardin 1989: 5). There is an unbroken tradition of popular Sufi inspired poetry and music, from Yunus Emre in the 13th to A ık Veysel Satıro lu in the 20th century, with lyrics of both these iconic poets being used in contemporary Turkish pop music, including the immensely popular stars Sezen Aksu and Tarkan. When expanding into countries whose religious history is as infused with Sufism as is Turkey (Yavuz 2004: 219ff.), then the secularised Romanticism that is consumerism falls onto fertile ground,

⁵ 'Boredom! He smokes his hookah, while he dreams
Of gibbets, weeping dears he cannot smother.
You know this dainty monster, too, it seems –
Hypocrite reader! – You! – My twin! – My brother!'
(Campbell 1952: 2)

accelerating the workings of the ‘structural romanticism of money’ (Varul 2009). It will find subjects used to the legitimate application of the imagination and to the idea of a virtual space beyond and in between material reality and everyday routine that is accessible through the imagination. The idea of experiences in a virtual world as offered by consumer culture is taken on readily in a cultural context that is saturated with accounts of encounters and travel in the imaginal world (*âlem-i misâl*), the active imagination (*hayal*) in an ‘intermediate reality’ (*berzah*) that is ‘intrinsically ambiguous and can best defined by saying that it is neither this nor that, or both this and that.’ (Chittick 1989: 117). An intermediate world in which spiritual experiences take place – beginning with the central event of the Prophet’s Night Journey or Ascendancy (*Miraç*) that serves as ultimate reference point, e.g. when Ibn Arabi (2006: 29) speaks of the *Burâk* of his ‘spiritual aspiration’ (*himmet*), referring to the Prophet’s mythical horse on that journey. This *himmet* allows, to name another example, the Sufi saint Hacı Bekta to transform himself into a falcon and fly into heathen lands to help out the Muslim armies (Gölpınarlı 1995: 10).⁶

I cited Sultan Veled’s lines as inspiration for this commentary – the town, market and shop as metaphor for the liberated soul. In Ya ar Kemal’s 1955 novel *Ince Mehmed* the protagonist’s resolve to leave his home village and escape the power of the local *a a* is triggered by a clandestine visit to the provincial town and particularly, to a shop (Kemal 2005: 80) – one could say that the English mistranslation of the title ‘Mehmed my Hawk’ (should be ‘Thin Mehmed’) is adequate given the metaphorical desire to fly omnipresent in Sufi song – as in Yunus Emre’s (Bakırcıo lu 1981: 102) oft-sung line:

Kuru idik ya olduk kanatlandık ku olduk / Birbir’imize e olduk uçtuk el-hamdü lillâh⁷

⁶ The idea of such transformations and flying carpets has inspired the Western Romantic imagination – to the extent that in one of the most popular science fiction novels of all time, Frank Herbert’s (1966) Sufi-inspired *Dune*, in which space travel is driven by mystical energy depending on drug-induced ecstatic states.

In a society where Islamic knowledge is not so much handed down in theological treatises but in stories, this could not fail to inspire the popular imagination in a melange of admiration and envy – best encapsulated in the folk tale of *Ali Cengiz Game* in which a young man is commissioned by the Sultan to find out about this game to add to the his court’s entertainment. He is spirited away by a malicious *dervi* who uses the game – which consists in magical shape shifting – to kill his novices. The young man manages to learn the *dervi*’s art and to outdo and kill him in a fight involving a sequence of magical transformations. On the one hand this story testifies to the suspicion that the apparent spiritual power of the Sufis evoked in the popular imagination. The *dervi* equipped with *himmet* and hence able to work transformative miracles (*keramet*) is dangerous. But the story also expresses the longing to possess these abilities, to be able to fly and explore. The *dervi* incorporates the desire to leave behind the shackles of local limitations and dependencies – and while the spiritual path is not open to all, consumer capitalism comes with the promise to enable the flight of the imagination.

⁷ We were dried out, but now we are replenished with water; we grew wings and became birds – We paired up and flew away, praise be to God.

Like Romanticism, Sufism speaks to the popular imagination, addressing a human condition emerging from what Plessner (1976) called the ‘eccentric positionality’ and which Luckmann (1967) in his sociology of mundane everyday and invisible religion described as the transcendent nature of human action. Ibn ‘Arabi (2006: 37) characterises the human being as ‘the most transcendent of limited beings’⁸. One of the symptoms of that aspect of the human condition is our love of stories, and Romanticism liberated story telling as did Sufism. One reason that Sufism was so powerful in extending the realm of Islam after the initial period of conquest is that the centrality of the Imagination in Sufi theology made story telling a privileged form of explanation. Celâleddin Rumi’s *Mesnevi* have often been called the “Persian Koran” (*Kur’ân-ı Farsî*) and it is through such collections of stories that many “learn Islam” beyond the more formal instruction around rites and tenets of belief, rather than from studying the *Kur’ân* which often is read without understanding its meaning. For example in Yusuf Tavaslı’s introduction to prayer for children, the fairly technical and formalistic description of obligations and rites includes relevant passages from the *Kur’ân* in Arabic with Turkish transliterations – but without translations. Teaching the rituals and laws of Islam, Tavaslı is unconcerned with content – the catechistic question ‘What is Religion?’ (*‘Din nedir?’*) is answered by a short: ‘It is God’s law.’ (*‘Allah’ın kanunudur.’*). (Tavaslı, w/o. year: 87) While such teaching provides for the more “outward” (*zâhir*) aspects of Islamic religiosity its “inner” (*bâtın*) meaning is provided largely by stories. While the outward side of Islam, in the first instance, may appear as mere set of limits and boundaries the more mystical currents in Islam provide for a more transcendent outlook.⁹ As Yunus Emre (Bakırcıo lu 1981: 272) famously said:

Hakikat bir denizdür eriatır gemisi - Çoklar gemiden çıkıp denize daldılar¹⁰

And plunge into a sea of dreams and alternative realities Sufi inspired culture does as soon as given the opportunity. The significance of this plunge is not just the potential for the development of consumer culture (encouraging as it may be for the marketing professional) – it is also intriguingly indicative for the imaginative energy resident within consumerism, a

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⁹ This is not to say that Sufis reject the rituals and laws of what they see as the outward face of religion. Most would see compliance to these as first condition for entering the spiritual path. The degree of compliance at various stages of spiritual development is contested between the vast variety of Sufi orders.

¹⁰ ‘The truth is a sea, the Law is its ship – Many will not dive into it’ [my translation MZV]

This is not to suggest that in order to have consumerism you need to jump of the ship of the *eriat* – as Jafari and Süerdem rightly point out, there always is a secular space in Islam, and the religious law as a set of obligations and prohibitions very clearly defines not only a realm of the sacred but by doing so also marks out a realm of the secular. However, the consumerism to emerge in such secular spaces is less Campbellian and, in the case of Saudi Arabia, very Veblenian (al-Dossry 2012)

capacity that forms part of a general intellect which has not only the potential for transcending the confines of individual existence, but of capitalism itself (Varul, 2013).

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