

Article

The Moral Dimensions of Sufism and the Iberian Mystical Canon

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Abstract: This study explores the shared spaces and common ground between the moral theosophies of Sufism and Christian mysticism in Spain. This article focuses on how Sufis, Carmelites and other mystical authors expressed spiritual concepts, establishing networks of mutual influence. Medieval and Golden Age mystics of Islam and Christianity shared a cultural canon based on universal moral principles. Both their learned and popular traditions used recurrent spiritual symbols, often expressing similar ethical coordinates. Spiritual dialogue went beyond the chronological and geographical frameworks shared by Christianity and Islam in the Iberian Peninsula: this article considers a selection of texts that contain expansive moral codes. Mystical expressions of Islam and Christianity in Spain are viewed as an ethical, cultural and anthropological continuum.

Keywords: St John of the Cross; Sufism; Ramon Llull; morality; mysticism

1. Introduction

Traditional scholarship presents the Carmelite giants of Spanish mysticism as a sort of late blooming of a spiritual current that had flourished much earlier in the rest of Europe.¹ Bernard McGinn's Iberian volume of his *The Presence of God* series (*Mysticism in the Golden Age of Spain, 1500–1650*) implicitly participates in this chronological axiom (McGinn 2017).² As a culmination of an exclusively Christian tradition, Spanish mysticism does look like an anachronistic phenomenon. This view is attractive when considered in its historical coordinates: it coincides with the cultural might of the Spanish Golden Age and with the political and imperial heights of Spain. This narrative introduces the Protestant Reformation as an element of disruption that would in turn prompt a reaction: the Catholic Counterreformation as a doctrinal, spiritual and political movement that required introspection, self-reflection and even historical vindication when considered in the context of the relatively recent culmination of the Reconquest and the establishment of the first global empire. Studied in isolation, Spanish mysticism of the Golden Age could appear as independent from the continuities that can be traced in previous centuries.

However, in the later Middle Ages, an ascetic spirituality was present in monastic and conventual settings, and some forms of popular devotion, religious syncretism and differential practices derived precisely from the interactions between the three religions of the Book in the Iberian Peninsula. The spiritual flowers of the three monotheistic religions in Spain were a relatively harmonious part of the *ornament* of the medieval world.³ Often expressed poetically, metaphorically or symbolically,

¹ See (Conde Solares 2019, p. 11).

² The fourth volume of this series (*The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 1350–1550*) had focused on earlier centuries when addressing English, Italian and Dutch vernacular mysticisms (McGinn 2012).

³ Spirituality is one of the lofty realms vindicating María Rosa Menocal's optimistic view of the *convivencia* (Menocal 2003).

mystical experiences and their different stages are a distinctive marker of religious coexistence in Spain's immaterial culture and in some of its material utterances.⁴ Interreligious porosity was reciprocal and derived in a circular pattern that included the Kabbalah of the Sephardim, the Sufism of the Andalusian Muslims and the mysticism of the Christians. Iberian authors were also prone to importing Oriental practices and mannerisms.⁵ For that matter, the late medieval period saw the rapid advance of the Christian Reconquest into formerly Muslim territories, and this would prompt more frequent contacts between Christian and Muslim spiritual practices, providing opportunities for mimetic phenomena. Early Humanism and Erasmism were indirectly influential in the transmission of this type of spirituality, which included manifestations that were deemed heterodox. Both found intellectual hubs in universities such as Salamanca, which a young St John of the Cross would later attend.⁶ These currents of heightened individualism were looked at sympathetically by members of the fringe, often secular mystical movements around the official religious orders, which echoed the influence of Sufi brotherhoods in Spain. While this paper will concentrate on some of the most striking similarities between the three spiritual traditions of the Abrahamic faiths, the specificities of the late medieval Iberian context cannot be glossed over.⁷ In fact, the essentialist model that largely informs this paper is compatible with a contextualist approach to Spanish mysticism: I will be focusing on the intersections between the mysticisms of Christianity and Islam and on the cultural contexts in which they flourished.

From its very origins, Sufism itself includes a primordial, Middle Eastern Islamic assimilation of pre-Islamic practices that incorporated pagan, Christian, Persian and even Hinduist rituals, amongst others. Yousef Casewit noted the following:

the beginnings of Andalusī mystical discourse can be detected in the writings of various ascetics or renunciants (. . .). Within approximately one hundred years, i.e., by the mid-Umayyad period, renunciants established their own rural convents (. . .) and flocked to cities such as Seville where they studied the works of Eastern Sufis such as Ma'rūf Karkhī (d. 200/815), Muhasibi (d. 243/857), Saqaṭī (d. 253/867), Tustarī (d. 283/896), Junayd (d. 289/910), and Abū al-'Āṣ ibn al-Rabī' (d. 341/952).

(Casewit 2017, p. 23)

When it comes to the channels through which a Neoplatonic type of Eastern theosophy reached Al-Andalus, Michael Ebstein recently proposed that "in the course of their political-religious struggle against the Fātimī is, the Andalusīs became exposed to Ismā'īlī conceptions and perhaps even to Ismā'īlī writings" (Ebstein 2013, p. 5). What these theosophies, Sufism, Kabbalah and Christian mysticism, had in common was a human desire to acquire divine and moral knowledge. This transcended the in-group of their respective faiths and included the out-groups as both legitimate sources and deserving recipients of moral righteousness. Iberian Islam had a moral component that was shaped by its proximity, physical and metaphysical, to other devotional systems and to their practitioners.

In a landmark article, Paul Heck presented Sufism as a series of spiritual practices, intellectual disciplines, literary traditions and social institutions that were integral to the formation of moral codes in Muslim societies (Heck 2006). According to Heck, Sufism aspires "toward a universal kindness to

⁴ This has been rigorously established by the critical tradition of Asín Palacios (1902, 1933, 1946, 1990) and López Baralt (1981, 1984, 1985, 1998, 1999, 2000).

⁵ Mercedes García-Arenal and Fernando Rodríguez Mediano explore the roots of Spain's Orientalism in the most appropriate chronological, social and historical coordinates: those coinciding with the finding of the Lead Books of Sacromonte in the late 16th century (García-Arenal and Mediano 2013).

⁶ In the 16th century, the Iluministas were victims of official scrutiny and eventual persecution, causing their fall into the realm of heterodoxy. The Inquisition condemned them as a heretical cult, linking them with Protestantism. This broke the natural line of evolution of Christian spirituality, especially after the death of Francisco Ximénez de Cisneros (1436–1517). Cardinal Cisneros had sponsored and encouraged highly emotive spirituality, incorporating popular practices into the canon and promoting the translation and dissemination of the works of European tertiaryaries (see Conde Solares 2017).

⁷ See (Katz 2000) (*Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*) for the most comprehensive monograph on the theory of contextualist mysticism.

all creatures beyond the requirements of Islamic law'" (Heck 2006, p. 253). This, in turn, yields "a lived (and not just studied) ethics" capable of embracing those of other faiths (Heck 2006, pp. 253, 258). Indeed, Iberian Sufism and new post-Bernardian mysticism both strove to find a balance between learned and experienced wisdom. This produced a moral ethos, an expected standard of conduct that was part of both religious systems but tried to reach beyond them.

Allegorical narratives with a moral purpose proliferated in both religions, from Sufi handbooks to Christian parables with their mystical commentaries. The stories and the moral instructions combined cultural genres, linguistic codes and devotional practices dating back to the early Middle Ages. These often used the universal language of nature and animals. The incorporation of mythical materials in the learned and popular repositories of both religions and in media, such as hagiography, also served the purpose of reinforcing the expansion of Sufism from Syria to al-Andalus, where it interacted again with the mysticisms of Christianity and Judaism (see Frazee 1967; Shah 1974; Cardona Castro 1984; Katz 2000; Ebstein 2013; Bellver 2013; Beresford 2018). These sophisticated systems combined experiential elements with the rationalism of the Averroists, Maimonideans and eventually, scholastic theologians.

In the cases of Iberian Islam and Christianity, love is the moral seed from which both their spiritual traditions emanate. Classical studies of early Sufism, such as those published by Louis Massignon and Hamilton Gibb in the 1920s, advanced the definition of Sufism as Islam's attempt to find a balance between doctrine and emotion (Massignon 1922; Gibb 1926). Interestingly, both scholars presented Sufism as an essentially experiential manifestation: a vital, spiritual and even unorthodox approach to the conceptual intricacies of the Quran. They also reconstructed some of Sufism's pre-Islamic components. Sufis found themselves at the same hermeneutic, emotional and intellectual crossroads that fuelled the frictions between Scholastics and beguines in Christianity or between Maimonidean moralists and esoteric Kabbalists in Judaism. For that matter, from the dark night of the apophatic approach to divinity to the bright light of its contemplation, the concept of "love" shared by courtly and Christian mystical codes finds its roots, beyond the Scriptures, in the theosophies of Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395) and the medieval theologian known as Pseudo-Dionysius (5th–6th century AD). Melquíades Andrés Martín defined the mystical act as an "anti-intellectual" and "anti-verbose" sensitivity that adheres to Augustinian nominalism (Andrés Martín 1976, pp. 22–24). In doing this, Christian mystics and Sufis follow the moral paths of love, virtuous actions and faith instead of the theoretical wordiness of intellectual devotion. Theirs is a collective endeavour: faith, similar to morality, can only be fully experienced as part of a community that, crucially, expands beyond one's immediate vicinity. The universality of moral behaviour transcends the in-group, and its positive effects benefit out-groups. Morality hence becomes a positive inclination towards the other, one that prompts mystics to communicate with their counterparts, even if these profess a different religion.

This article will focus primarily on dialogical and didactic expressions of these types of spirituality. Both intend to be relevant beyond their respective faiths and beyond their cultural, geographical, religious and chronological contexts. To illustrate this, I will first analyse the recurrence of a shared natural symbol: a solitary bird perching on a vine branch. This bird covers a range that expands from Damascus to Córdoba, travelling between Islam and Christianity, from medieval Persia to early modern Ávila. Explaining this mystical hybridity will require the intervention of bridge figures, catalysts such as Ibn al-'Arabi (1165–1240), Rūmī (1207–1273), Ramon Llull (1232–1316) or St John of the Cross (1542–1591). All of them shared a universal ethos that transcended their own religion, and they often expressed their moral coordinates with similar language games. This porosity also benefited from the many circuits of heterodoxy of medieval Spain, afforded by a moving Western border between Islam and Christianity that forced both sets of mystics to consider the other when defining their own spiritual ecosystems.

2. A Solitary Bird Perching on a Vine Branch

The traditional account of Sufism's initial spread from the Middle East to the Iberian Peninsula illustrates its expansive nature. The migration of Sufism from Basra and Persia to Córdoba and between the mystical systems of Islam and Christianity is best represented by the ubiquity of a bird that is capable of flying between distant regions. This bird, unlike the Biblical eagle, is never displayed in full flight: instead, it often appears perching on a vine branch. Leaving to one side the pre-Islamic components of Islamic mysticism, the semi-mythical origins of fully fledged Sufism go back to Mansūr-e Ḥallāj (c. 858–922) and his mystical vine. His ideas would reach Spain almost immediately, via Ibn Masarraḥ of Córdoba (883–931).⁸ Masarraḥ returned to al-Andalus after a pilgrimage to Mecca, bringing with him a copy of the *Risalat al-Huruf* (Epistle on Letters) by Sahl al-Tustarī (c. 818–c. 896). This would in turn influence Masarraḥ's own *Book on Letters, Their Essential Realities and Principles*. Ebstein textually demonstrates Masarraḥ's indebtedness to Oriental Neoplatonism by collating and comparing relevant notions in Shii-Isma'ili writings of the East and in the works of Ibn Masarraḥ and Ibn al-'Arabī (Ebstein 2013, pp. 51–55).⁹

The pioneering study of Masarraḥ's influence in Spain is Miguel Asín Palacios's *Abenmasarra y su escuela* (Asín Palacios 1914). Asín Palacios's masterpiece reflects how the novelty of the mystical vine introduced by these three early Sufis (Ḥallāj, Tustarī and Masarraḥ) permeates Christian devotional objects such as the "Cristo de la Cepa", carved in vine wood and guarded in medieval Spain by Benedictine and Dominican monks whose main mission was converting Jewish and Muslim souls to Christianity.¹⁰ Adding relevant context to this early exchange, Cynthia Robinson identified what she classed as a Castilian devotional pattern before the times of Isabel: a distaste for the explicit somatic detail of the Passion of Christ that was often camouflaged in metaphors of water, fire, fragrance and, crucially, trees (Robinson 2006 and 2013).¹¹ Robinson then makes the connection between the vogue of tree-related spirituality in Christian Iberia and at least two landmark events of Sufism: the adoration of Ḥallāj in Nasrid Granada and the influence of Ibn al-'Arabī of Murcia's *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* (Interpreter of Desires) of 1215 (Robinson 2006, p. 417). In the latter, the theme of love, in its human and divine dimensions, is often depicted through the metaphor of being planted in the shade of a moringa tree, a physical import from the Indian sub-continent that betrays deeper spiritual connections between East and West.

Neoplatonism and didactic intent are two of the key coordinates linking the spiritual traditions of Islam and Christianity across the Old World. This same ethos of harmonious remembrance of the soul expressed via recurrent metaphors that often include vines, trees and birds partially informs Rūmī's *Masnavi*. The Persian poet displays his trademark spiritual symbolism by referring to a prolific trope, that of the caged bird:

So elements can leave the way they came.

The elements are bound birds–injury,

⁸ Michael McGaha points to 8th-century Baghdad for the origins of Islamic spiritual systems prior to the consolidation of Sufism. He also agrees that Masarraḥ was responsible for the early voyage of Islamic mysticism to Spain (McGaha 1997, p. 37). He bases his theory on the mutually reinforcing evidence produced by text and biography (McGaha 1997, pp. 37–39).

⁹ According to Ebstein, the Isma'ili *Epistles of the Sincere Brethren* (Basra, late 10th century–early 11th century) "had a profound impact on mythic–philosophical thought in medieval al-Andalus. Many themes which are found in the Epistles—the Divine creative world in its Neoplatonic context; the hierarchal view of human society and of the universe at large; the figure of the perfect man; the notion of parallel worlds; or the perception of man and the cosmos as Divine books—resurface in the writings of both Ibn Masarraḥ and Ibn al-'Arabī, and thus point to the close affinity between these various authors" (Ebstein 2013, p. 235).

¹⁰ The "Cristo de la Cepa" is currently housed in the museum of the cathedral of Valladolid. There are other variations of the same theme, such as a 16th-century "Santo Cristo de la Cepa y la Salud", locally attributed to Isidro de Villoldo (d. c. 1540) and currently held by the Museo de Santiago in Carrión de los Condes, following the secularization of the Benedictine monastery of San Zoilo.

¹¹ Lesley Twomey and Andrew Beresford dispute the existence of such a pattern (Twomey 2019; Beresford 2018; Robinson 2013).

Disease, and death are what can set them free,
 Untying their feet from each other, so
 Each element's bird will be free to go.
 These sources' and derivatives' attractions
 Each moment gives our bodies new afflictions,
 To tear apart compounded forms by force,
 So each part's bird can fly back to its source.
 What stops this quickly happening is God's power,
 Which keeps them joined until the Final Hour.
 God says, 'It's not time yet, you parts, so wait!
 It's pointless to fly off before your fate.'
 Since every part seeks union, how much more
 The exiled soul seeks what it had before.
 (Mojaddedi 2013, p. 268)

When studying the origins of St John of the Cross's "pájaro solitario", Luce López Baralt followed this feathered creature to its very nest: the Eastern Simurgh, the benevolent, mythical bird of Persian mythology (López Baralt 1984, pp. 412–15). In Rūmī, Neoplatonism serves as a bridge between cultures, theosophical contexts and chronological frameworks; moreover, the common substrate of Andalusian Sufism partially explains the presence of a moral symbol shared between medieval Persia and early modern Spain. Shihabudin Suhrawardī al-Maqtī (1154–1191), Persian author of the *Philosophy of Illumination*, could hold the ultimate key to the origins of this elusive symbol. Form, content and doctrine seem to have travelled to the Iberian Peninsula, as had happened with the mystical vine, via 12th-century Almería: Hakam Ibn Barrajān (c. 1090–1141), Abbas Ibn al-Arif (1088–1141) and Abu Bakr al-Mayurqī (c. 1090–1142).¹² The moral flavours of the theosophies of Persia, Syria and Asia Minor established a firm foothold in Western Europe via al-Andalus. The dry, arid and austere heights of the soul, once released from its worldly burden, are the habitat of the solitary bird, a transculturation of the King Simurgh described by Suhrawardī. This is perhaps the most eye-catching of Sufi-Carmelite co-occurrences.

The third book of Rūmī's *Masnavi* describes the solitary bird as an embodiment of prudence and following the known rule of observing static reflection in order to reach ecstatic contemplation. This bird is one that does not react to the tempting lures of the hunters that use such techniques to trick other birds into perdition. Rūmī's bird is also one that is completely devoid of passions and sensorial and emotive perceptions. It is detached from arrogance and from worldly self-aggrandisement:

¹² The most comprehensive of studies on Ibn Barrajān, Casewit's *The Mystics of al-Andalus* highlights how this mystic has often been misunderstood, in no small part because his works have "remained scattered in manuscript libraries" until now, with the main thrust of secondary literature on him being biographical (Casewit 2017, p. 8). Casewit plausibly discredits Ibn Barrajān's supposed indebtedness to al-Ghazali (1058–1111), often simply attributed by his epithet of "Ghazali of al-Andalus" (Casewit 2017, p. 9; Bellver 2013). A direct influence of Suhrawardī on Ibn Barrajān is yet to be substantiated. Barrajān was an important advocate of Mahdism, the eschatological belief in the arrival of the redeemer of Islam (accompanied by Jesus). For Bellver, his biographical vicissitudes in late Almoravid al-Andalus were partially "the result of the growing tensions produced by the shifting of religious authority from transmitted knowledge to purity of heart and intimacy with God rather than the result of his leading or inspiring a Sufi uprising against the Almoravids, as was the case with Ibn Qasī" (Bellver 2013, p. 680).

Prudence means, on receiving invitations,
 You don't think 'They love me' and buy flirtations.
 They are like hunters' whistles used as bait—
 The hunter blows, then, camouflaged, he'll wait.
 He'll even show a dead bird to pretend
 It is the mournful calling of a friend.
 Foolish birds think it is one of their kin
 And gather round—he will soon flay their skin.
 The bird with prudence is the sole exception—
 It isn't fooled by flattery and deception.
 Imprudence leads to much repentance, friend.

(Mojaddedi 2013, p. 18)

The following passage illustrates, as expertly explained by Luce López Baralt, that St John of the Cross's solitary bird can only be fully understood as part of an Eastern tradition (López Baralt 1984, p. 410). This is how St John describes it in his commentary to song XIV of the *Spiritual Canticle*:

This knowledge [of the divine light] is what I understand David meant here: *Vigilavi, et factus sum sicut passer solitarius in tecto*; which means: "I remembered, and I was made similar to the solitary bird on the roof" (Ps 101, 8). It is as if he said: I opened the eyes of my understanding and found myself above all natural intelligences, alone without them on the roof, which is above all else below. Moreover, here he claims that he was made similar to the solitary bird because, when in this manner of contemplation, the soul shares the five characteristics of this bird: the first is that it normally stands on the highest vantage point; and thus the soul, at this stage, enters into a state of the highest contemplation. The second is that its beak is always pointing against the wind; and thus the soul turns its affection to the source of spiritual love, which is God. The third is that this bird is alone, and does not suffer other birds in its vicinity, but instead flies away when approached by others; the contemplative soul is detached from all things, devoid of them all, and does not seek anything but solitude in God. The fourth characteristic of this bird is that it sings very softly; and this is what the soul does when it sings God's praises with the most harmonious and loving prayers, the most delightful for the soul, and the most pleasing to God. The fifth is that this bird is of no particular colour; the perfect soul is not tainted by sensual desire nor ego, unaffected by any higher or lower considerations. It cannot be described, for it has become an abyss of the knowledge of God that it possesses, as has been said.

(my translation, from Ruano de la Iglesia 2005, p. 967)

This bird is evocative of not just the *Masnabi* but also Ibn al-'Arabi's anqa in his *Universal Tree and the Four Birds (al-Ittihad al-kawni)*.¹³ The anqa is "proverbially a bird that has a Name but no manifest

¹³ See Denis Gril's edition (Gril 2006).

Being” (Zabor 2004).¹⁴ This bird takes leave of its worldly ties and flies towards Platonic unity by means of negation, purgation and aspiring to perfection. The similarities found in St John’s *Código de Andújar* are unmistakable:

Twice the bird that perched upon the birdlime labours: that is, once to free itself and, once freed, to cleanse itself from that which still clings to it.

(López Baralt 1998, p. 75)

There are too many coincidences not to have come from an extraordinarily well-preserved tradition.¹⁵ Thus, St John’s commentary on song XIV of the *Spiritual Canticle* provides the most comprehensive and detailed description and analysis of the solitary bird in any Christian text. Its moral characteristics are distinctly Eastern, and Sufism holds the direct key to its transmission. St John’s bird is not just ecstatic but also static. In this, it departs from the Biblical eagle or from the spiritual birds described by Avicenna (980–1037) or al-Ghazali (1058–1111). Its traits are those of the *Philosophy of Illumination* (López Baralt 1981, pp. 21–91). Both birds (Suhrawardī’s and St John’s) are in constant search for the highest vantage point; both turn their beaks against the prevalent wind; both defend their spiritual solitude; both sing harmoniously; and neither is of any particular colour.

The weight of the evidence presented by the Asín Palacios and López Baralt tradition serves the purpose of partially accounting for the apparent novelties introduced by the Carmelite mystics in the Christian canon. However, formal transmission in the shape of direct and indirect borrowings studied with a comparative literature methodology is insufficient to explain the dynamics in all their sophistication. The interreligious exchange of moral codes and of spiritual theories and practices cannot be fully understood without reference to the *convivencia* in its entire complexity, from learned to popular contexts. This most powerful intercultural pipe provides a credible framework for the Iberian development of Sufism, Kabbalah and Christian mysticism. Spirituality, in all its richness and in its variety of expressions, transcended religious, geographical and social barriers. For instance, a culture of orality favours collaboration with out-groups of other mystical systems: the spoken word does not leave an immediate trace and allows less restrictive exchanges with those in the fringes of other faiths.

3. Following Ramon Llull’s Example: Sharing Cultural Materials

From Ramon Llull to the Carmelites of the Golden Age, Christian spirituality consciously borrowed formal elements from Islam’s learned tradition.¹⁶ However, in parallel, orally transmitted materials must have enriched these moral symbols. The vivid vibrancy of St John of the Cross’s verses contains an intuitive element of folklore. Indeed, some symbols seem to encapsulate the whole variety of potential sources. In St Teresa of Avila’s (1515–1582) Transverberation, the flaming arrows of paradoxical pain and pleasure of the *Book of Life* are reminiscent of Ḥallāj’s *Book of Unity* (see Childers 2009, p. 59). St Teresa’s own self-confessed guilty experience of popular literature partly overlaps with the Provençal flavour of her paradoxical love: both she and St John were avid readers of *cancionero* poetry and chivalric romance, with courtly love at their intersection. Their language of love also relates to Biblical (*Song of*

¹⁴ Zabor explores the biographical connection between the Persian Sufi and his contemporary from Murcia: “Rumi, recognized within the Sufi tradition as its ultimate exemplar of divine and spiritual Love, is not Ibn ‘Arabi’s opposite but his complement. Ibn ‘Arabi is alleged to have seen the child Rumi and to have remarked upon his future greatness, but the two are more substantially and convincingly linked through Ibn ‘Arabi’s adopted son and great disciple Sadruddin i-Konevi, who was a friend and collaborator of Rumi’s in Konya, the capital of thirteenth-century Seljuk Turkey; and it may be that Ibn ‘Arabi and Jelaluddin Rumi are ideally understood in terms of each other, one expressing explicitly what is implicit in his counterpart” (Zabor 2004).

¹⁵ However, this is not exempt from critical controversy. Domingo Ynduráin proposes that St John’s bird comes from the Phoenix, and he quotes Latin texts from the 16th and 17th centuries that display similar characteristics (Ynduráin 1990, p. 38). William Childers, on the other hand, follows Luce López Baralt’s lead to Suhrawardī (López Baralt 1981, p. 76).

¹⁶ Ángeles Cardona Castro explains how both Ramon Llull and St John of the Cross were able to adopt Sufi schemes because of their early relation with Christianity, linked to Syrian monasteries (Cardona Castro 1984, p. 156).

Songs), Hellenistic, Arab, Sephardic and Andalusian sources, to name a few.¹⁷ Paradoxical, cleansing pain, courtliness and mystical love are key expressions of the spiritual systems of the monotheistic religions. When analysing their interactions in Spain, it is easy to forget that some of their similarities respond to the universality of certain psychological processes and moral codes that are inclined to reaching out to others, including the devotees of other faiths. There are also political reasons that favoured this approach: Christian authorities prioritised conversion of those perceived as culturally Jewish or Muslim. This applies even beyond the efforts of Hernando de Talavera (1428–1507) to preach in Hebrew and Arabic whilst displaying a competent knowledge of Jewish and Muslim spiritual customs (Ladero Quesada 2008, pp. 249–75). It is also true of the Spain of the Carmelite mystics: St John of the Cross was present in Granada when, between 1595 and 1606, the Morisco forgeries of the Lead Books of Sacromonte were unearthed, in a context of social anxiety about the last remaining segment of the culturally Moorish population in Spain (Case 2002, p. 10).

The Iberian Peninsula had hosted a long tradition of conversion efforts serving as catalysts for religious dialogue. In the junction between Christianity and Islam, Ramon Llull had been the undisputed polymath who brought about the harmonisation of the cultural codes of courtesy and mysticism, human and divine love. His integration of complex moral and spiritual structures goes far beyond the superficial similarity between his arboreal system and that of Ibn al-'Arabi. Lola Badia highlights how Llull's additions to the Christian canon would have made immediate sense to his Muslim and Sephardic contemporaries (Badia 1997, pp. 16–17). His eclectic cultural profile manifested itself in his conscious hybridization of courtly and mystical inspiration in his *Ars amativa*: he reveals that his lay philosophical system had been relayed to him by the same level of inspiration that informed the sacred ("per lo saber que Déus m'ha dat"; "through the knowledge that God gave me"). This is further contextualised when Llull narrates that he experienced a vision of five crucifixes when attempting to compose a poem following the courtly love conventions (Badia 1997, pp. 15–16). Llull combines troubadour-inspired human love, Biblical materials and courtly paradoxes to produce what Guillermo Serés brands a "rational delirium that attempts to harmonise love and rationality" (Serés 1996, pp. 84–85).

The chronological, geographical and cultural connections between Llull and Ibn al-'Arabi go far beyond the symbolic intersection of the devotional tree. Spain's new mysticism of the 13th century cannot be fully decoded without Llull's intervention, and his openness to Sufi traditions is well established and documented. Llull travelled throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, his adventures coinciding with Ibn al-'Arabi's stay in Damascus. Llull visited the Islamic world and travelled as far as Ethiopia. He participated in Christian missions in Muslim territories and encouraged his fellow Franciscans to learn the Arabic language and culture.¹⁸ Curiously, in chapter 312 of *Blanquerna*, Llull acknowledges that he composed the *Llibre d'amic e amat* at the request of a hermit, a formula that was customary among his contemporary Sufis. Sufism is, in fact, fundamental to understanding the spiritual nuances of *Blanquerna* as a novel: the eponymous protagonist explicitly compares his own mystical experiences with those of the Sufis as he debates himself between monastic, hermitical and worldly pursuits. The 365 poems of the *Llibre d'amic e amat*, often presented as an interpolation within *Blanquerna*, openly celebrate the Sufis as masters of contemplation. Of them, Llull notes that "they have words of love and such stories that move men to

¹⁷ Of course, these are not disparate cultures: Roger Boase identified the many Arab, Sufi and Islamic elements of the troubadour tradition from its very origins (Boase 1977). Boase follows the learned lead, as well as those of Arab epic and lyrical expressions in the music and poetry of the early Muslim world. He also considers etymological clues to decipher the shared moral code of love (Boase 1977, p. 62). St Teresa's troubles with orthodoxy, which only ended post-mortem when Benedict XIII consecrated her feast day in 1726, were the same that once had plagued many Sufis: a perceived excess in their emotive, subjective experiences that she also shared with the tertiaries of her own gender. Early Sufis, as noted by Michael McGaha, had often been accused of Shiite extremism and of being prone to exaggeration and deception (McGaha 1997, p. 32). In her canon-defining *The Ornament of the World*, María Rosa Menocal studied the Iberian contexts in which these traditions interacted and thrived (Menocal 2003).

¹⁸ I am following Charles Frazee's biographical account (Frazee 1967, pp. 235–36).

great devotion” and that “those are words that need to be heard”.¹⁹ This is one of the most explicit formulations of a type of affinity that transcends the in-group to include the universal wisdom of the believers of a rival religion.

The *Llibre d'amic e amat* holds the key to Lull's syncretism as both a troubadour and a mystic, as the ultimate catalyst of all types of love, from the Provençal to the Sufi, from the courtly to the divine. The Franciscan's natural and allegorical imagery is a clear precedent to the aesthetics, and the poetic harmonies, of St John of the Cross's *Spiritual Canticle*. The literality of Lull's tropes seems almost a guide for the Carmelite's commentaries on his *Subida del Monte Carmelo*: “the paths through which the lover chases the beloved are long, dangerous, full of trepidations, sighs, and cries, and enlightened by love.”²⁰ Their definitions of the Lover and the Beloved adapt and transform the *Song of Songs*, incorporating their own cultural codes to their poetic practice, from Provençal love to spiritual nature: the landscapes of the *Spiritual Canticle* closely resemble those of the *Llibre d'amic e amat*.

Lull's scheme reproduces the Sufi stages and pathways, the *traigas*, which include gnosis, truth, negation and final union (see Cardona Castro 1984, p. 152).²¹ To be more precise, Lull's encyclopaedic *Arbor Scientiae* comprises seven trees, including the angelical, the maternal, Christological, divine and celestial (see Molina 1970).²² Lull's pathway operates in parallel to Ibn al-'Arabi's *Seven Days of the Heart*, not least in its numerical distribution.²³ Lull wrote his *Arbor* at the same time as Bonaventure produced his *Lignum Vitae* (Tree of Life). The Majorcan must have known, through his Franciscan affiliation, about the Italian trend of humanising Christ's somatic Passion, as shown precisely in the arborisation of the ecstasy.²⁴

Michael McGaha explains the natural inclination of many Christian authors to adopt Sufi mannerisms, symbols and narratives by referring to the perception that they had Christian origins.²⁵ Indeed, Christians often considered Sufi materials pre-Islamic, ascribing them to the shared monotheistic substrate of Christians and Muslims, from Bedouin poetry and Hellenistic thought to Christian monasticism in Syria. They held in common the classical concept of Logos as religious causality, the Biblical Word and Aristotelian Verb identified with the same God.

As a catalyst of religious syncretism, Lull's legacy remained vibrantly relevant in the 15th century. His name is omnipresent in controversies between secular and religious intellectuals, such as that of the *Cancionero de Baena* between Manuel Ferrán de Lando (c. 1380–1450) and the Franciscan Fray Lope del Monte (first half of the 15th century). The latter goes as far as questioning the validity of part of Lull's doctrine, branding it “dichos civiles”: “pero ty me fabla de rremon luliſta / ſofryr non me cuple ſus dichos ſeuiles” [“and if you talk to me about Ramon Lull, / I shall not suffer his statements as a lay Franciscan”].²⁶ Scholastics of the 15th century entertained the plausible suspicion that some of the most outlandish attributions to Ramon Lull were either apocryphal or not intended to be read as doctrinal materials, especially when they seemed to openly reproduce Sufi or Kabbalistic matter. Inevitably, syncretism and versatility introduce the concepts of canon and orthodoxy into the doctrinal debate, and those are the terms of most late medieval conversations. However, heterodoxy accounts for at least some of the continuities between Sufism, Lull and the Carmelite mystics.²⁷

¹⁹ My translation. Rodrigo Molina cites this quote as proof of the Muslim element in the development of Iberian Christian mysticism (Molina 1970, p. 246).

²⁰ “... les carreres per les quals l'amic encerca son amat son llongues, perilloses, poblades de consideracions, de sospires e de plors, e eluminadas d'amors.” My translation. I quote via Cardona Castro (1984, p. 149).

²¹ This is a Hellenistic structure, discussed in more depth by Cardona Castro (1984, p. 152).

²² See Molina (1970, p. 248) for an enumeration of Lull's natural motifs.

²³ (Beneito and Hirtensteinand 2000).

²⁴ Cynthia Robinson presents this as an early manifestation of the Passion and Piety of the Virgin as an ecstatic and mystical experience that would be later reproduced by Francesc Eiximenis in his *Vita Christi* (Robinson 2006, pp. 403, 412).

²⁵ (McGaha 1997, p. 49).

²⁶ This controversy can be found in Brian Dutton's catalogue, as transcribed by the University of Liverpool's *Online Cancionero Project* with the following Dutton nomenclature: Severin-Maguire, ID1407 R 1406, PN1-273 (90r), vv. 21–22 (Severin et al. 2007). This debate is studied by Julian Weiss (Weiss 1990, pp. 34–35) and by Conde Solares (2019, pp. 35–49).

²⁷ See (Conde Solares 2017).

4. The Christianity of Sufism

The popular belief that the emotive systems of the three religions of the Book were one and the same is recorded in disparate but entirely relevant chronological and geographical frameworks: from Abraham Maimuni's (1186–1237) view that Sufism was a form of Kabbalah wrongly rejected by the Jews, a theory that found ample oral echo in Egypt, to Hernando de Talavera's 15th century quest for converting Jews by means of using Kabbalistic texts, it is evident that a line of continuity that transcended the Iberian Peninsula and the canon of each of three religions existed. Ramon Llull, his works and his biography (as notable in his conversations with his fellow Majorcan Ibrahim Magaluf) often inspired dialogical exchanges between Christians and Muslims. At least three early modern *cancioneros* include the *Disputa que fue fecha en la cibdad de Fec delante del Rey e de sus sabios*, illustrating the early modern relevance of these medieval lines of thought.²⁸ In the *Disputa*, Llull and Magaluf star in a theosophical debate in which they use Quranic passages to explain the Passion of Christ and to confirm the humanity, divinity and prophetic truth of Jesus (see [Vendrell de Millàs 1957](#), pp. 371–76).

Performing the crucial task of conversion in the context of a reconquering Christian Spain required a working knowledge of Islam. This making contact with an out-group was normally executed by a learned, intellectual elite familiar with the transmission of classical wisdom by Iberian Islam. Christian preachers devoted to conversion became familiar with such intricacies, including Sufism, a branch of Islam with a moral code that was intuitively and psychologically compatible with Christianity. This partially determined the construction of a canon that was influenced by the cultural profile of those who built it: erudite, multilingual individuals with access to Latin, Arab, Hebrew and vernacular texts. They contributed to the development of a learned canon alongside popular spirituality and emotive, folkloric mysticism. St John of the Cross would eventually epitomise and culminate both sides of the canon, as noteworthy in both the matter and the form of his writings: they are the perfect blend between exquisite doctrinal detail and the agility and natural flow of popular lyrics, as is graphically illustrated by the juxtaposition of his poetry and his glosses.

The critical tradition initiated by Charles Frazee in 1967 placed Ibn al-'Arabi as a bridge figure between the Christian and Muslim canons that went all the way back to late antique and early medieval Syria. According to Frazee, mysticism was an inherent part of Christianity from its very origins (*Revelations*, *Letter of St Paul* and, of course, the *Song of Songs*). However, the development of spirituality in Islam was more gradual and based on the interpretation of Quranic passages that suggested a proximity, and even an identification, between God and Man (*God is closer to Man than his own jugular*) ([Frazee 1967](#), p. 229). Frazee validates the theory of Sufism's Syrian seeds, cultivated by Neoplatonic philosophy and Christian monasticism in the Middle East, developed by the Andalusian Sufis and culminated by the Carmelite mystics of the 16th century ([Frazee 1967](#)).

Later on, Idries Shah and Ángeles Cardona Castro went as far as detaching Sufism from Islam altogether ([Shah 1974](#); [Cardona Castro 1984](#)).²⁹ Their approach has since been largely rejected, especially after Steven Katz's work (see [Katz 2000](#)). However, according to their critical tradition, Sufism was neither a branch of Islam nor an exclusively Muslim spiritual practice. On the contrary, the universality and adaptability of Sufism meant that it could be redeveloped by Sephardim such as Abraham Maimuni and by later Christian mystics such as St John of the Cross.³⁰ Ibn al-'Arabi had recognised that Christian Sufis existed and that some even called themselves Jesus upon reaching a

²⁸ This piece has survived in the *Cancionero de Juan Fernández de Ixar* (Dutton MN6), the *Cancionero de París* (Dutton PN5) and the *Cancionero de Roma* (Dutton RC1).

²⁹ Shah's lecture series entitled *The Elephant in the Dark: Christianity, Islam and the Sufis* marked a watershed moment in our understanding of Sufism as a cultural phenomenon independent of Islam. Cardona Castro believes that European Sufism was founded in pre-Islamic Spain and that many of the soldiers that conquered the Visigoth kingdom were indeed Sufis. Her hypothesis points at Egyptian and Hellenistic origins ([Cardona Castro 1984](#), p. 149).

³⁰ The Western philological and theological canon shifted in the 19th century, when scholars began to study mysticism as opposed to studying the mystics. This entailed an almost universal recognition that the search for spiritual fulfilment was a core human trait that was shared by all religious codes, East and West (see [Schmidt 2003](#), p. 282).

state of apotheosis: Ibn Abbad of Ronda (born 1371 and read by St John of the Cross) corroborated this, with specific references to monasteries, hermits and Northern African dervishes, especially in Egypt and the Sahara.³¹

The Quran itself speaks of the rahbāniyya, a type of ascetic doctrine practised by Christian monks in deserts and cities of the pre-Islamic Arabic world. These were hermits and monks who wore a woollen robe called the sūf, which was also adopted by early Muslim mystics (Junceda 1982, pp. 100–1). Jesus himself often serves as inspiration for the Sufis, as in this passage by Rūmī:

Each Sufi is ‘the moment’s son’, but he
 Who’s pure is free from time’s grip totally.
 States are determined by his will and whim,
 And live through Jesus-like breath breathed by him.
 (Mojaddedi 2013, p. 88)

The Carmelite giants unapologetically based substantial elements of their mysticism on constructions that found their immediate precedent in Sufism. The paradoxical celebration of the dark night of the soul as both anxious suffering and joyful hope resembles the “qabd” and “bast” of the Andalusian Sufis (Cardona Castro 1984, p. 153; Childers 2009, p. 60).³² Ibn Abbad of Ronda’s commentaries to Ibn ‘Aṭā’Llah al-Iskandarī’s aphorisms include a formulation of the qabd-bast in sentences 89 and 91 of the *Hikam*, where he speaks of the breadth and width of the spirit and the heart in contrast with the narrowness of the worldly pathways and caves.³³ These are precisely the concepts used by St John of the Cross in his *Subida del Monte Carmelo*.³⁴

Miguel Asín Palacios highlighted how both Ibn Abbad of Ronda and St John of the Cross shared, in different centuries and religious contexts, an agenda of austerity in response to perceived threats to their respective faiths (Asín Palacios 1933, p. 232). They both noted the dangers of exaggeration and flamboyance, which were incarnated by Quietism in the case of the Andalusian and by the Iluministas and related groups in the case of the Carmelite. Their responses, in both cases, read like a very Iberian brand of Stoicism.³⁵ St John of the Cross’s interest in the language of Sufism can be traced in manifold credible ways. His biography provides plenty of opportunities for him to have engaged with the learned traditions of pre-Islamic, Islamic, Sephardic and Eastern spiritualities: we know of his culture, of his thirst for knowledge and of his studies in Salamanca. However, St John was also the ideal recipient of popular currents and their folkloric and oral expressions. The theory that St John would have been in direct contact with the popular expressions of not just Christianity but also other religions finds intuitive backing in his poetic works: the agile flow of his verses, conceivably those of most accomplished and natural beauty in the history of the Spanish vernacular, resemble anything

³¹ There is historical continuity in this, even after the fall of Granada, in Northern Africa. The geographical locations that received Andalusians, Mudejars and Moriscos established long-lasting Sufi practices and communities. Cardona Castro finds evidence of Ibn Abbad of Ronda’s importance in the academic canon and in the curriculum of Tunisian, Moroccan and Egyptian universities to this day (Cardona Castro 1984, pp. 155–56).

³² Ibn Abbad of Ronda’s *Letters*, today held in the library of El Escorial, confirm the relevance of his doctrine in at least St John’s works.

³³ “God provides you with width of spirit so that you do not abandon yourself when in anguish; He places you in narrow paths in order not to leave you when your spirit expands”; “the sensitive soul extracts its joy from the width of the spirit, but no solace is to be found in oppression” (my translations). See (Cardona Castro 1984, pp. 153, 156).

³⁴ Miguel Asín Palacios reconstructs the timeline of the paradox of width and narrowness from Ibn al-Arif to St John of the Cross via Ibn al-‘Arabi, Abu l-Hassan Shādhili and Ibn Abbad of Ronda (Asín Palacios 1933, pp. 243–326; Junceda 1982, p. 106).

³⁵ Junceda defines this brand of Hispanic Stoicism as “senequismo”. The Roman-Cordobese philosopher’s ethos had infused early Christianity, and his medieval reputation, both learned and popular, transcended his proto-Christian sainthood. Above all, a similar moral response came from a defence of their respective faiths based on the universal concept of truth (Junceda 1982, p. 106).

but a solely bookish knowledge of Sufism.³⁶ His is not an intricate pre-Gongorism, but his inspired imagery and automatism distil a refined folklorism only enhanced by the mathematical precision of his rhythm, rhyme, versification, doctrine and devotion. St John could have established prolific contact with the mystical traditions of the Musarabs and Mudejars, both of them of syncretic essence and oral transmission and often serving the purpose of cultural conversion.³⁷

St John of the Cross uses language as the only medium capable of blending doctrinal truth and emotive spirituality. The Carmelite does not use language in order to define the divine by logical means, whether positively or negatively. His use of language is unlike that of Averroes (1126–1198), Maimonides (1135–1204) or St Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and much more like Ibn al-‘Arabi’s: his spiritual repository multiplies the potential meanings of the same term, object, image or symbol. His uses of fire and water, to name two basic examples, often refer to contradictory meanings.³⁸ The function of mystical language here is not just to explain and clarify but also, paradoxically, to mystify in order to do justice to the ethereal essence of God.³⁹

St John must have also frequented doctrinal treatises in the context of conversion programs. This complementary experience of dialogue (however hostile) with the out-group of, in his case, the Moriscos, would have left a formal mark as well. Luis del Mármol Carvajal’s (1524–1600) *Rebelión y castigo de moriscos* of 1600 was just the culmination of a sustained effort that had been intense during St John’s lifetime. Anti-Muslim diatribes, some of which had been included in the *Gran Flos Sanctorum* of the previous century, had been easily accessible for decades in religious settings and beyond. The Carmelite’s moral topoi, with references to natural elements, gardens, trees and forests in particular, betray a Sufi rather than Provencal or Petrarchan inspiration. Devotional trees (beyond Ramon Llull’s ground-breaking work in the 13th century) in the Castilian Christian canon only begin to appear in their numbers in the 15th century, as noted by Cynthia Robinson (Robinson 2006, pp. 389–90). In these later cases, such trees were linked, again, to conversion efforts, based on an honest knowledge of the mystical rudiments of Judaism and Islam.⁴⁰ Castro (1962) famously and persuasively speculated about the possibility that late medieval Spanish Moriscos disseminated the very prolific idea of the shared origins, spaces and developments of Sufism and Christianity and that St John of the Cross probably partook in that belief as part of an oral tradition.⁴¹ Sufis and Mystics believed that there was a common origin to their respective faiths and that the spiritual realm was a place of encounter. Ultimately, they knew they shared not just a common God and a common land, but a common moral code too: one that stemmed from the *convivencia*, and one that went far beyond, and far deeper, than the political vicissitudes of their respective times.

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³⁶ Serafín de Tapia Sánchez studies St John of the Cross’s Morisco environment in “El entorno morisco de San Juan de la Cruz en tierras castellanas” (Tapia Sánchez 1990, pp. 43–76). St John spent time in several villages and cities that hosted significant communities of former Mudéjares, such as Arévalo, Medina del Campo, Salamanca, Pastrana, Ávila, Segovia or Granada (Tapia Sánchez 1990, p. 43). Tapia Sánchez is sceptical about religious dialogue between communities as a potential explanation for St John’s familiarity with Sufi imagery. He argues that relationships between religious communities in the places frequented by St John were probably similar to those in Toledo and Cuenca, where his archival research suggests that daily interactions were of a socioeconomic nature and rarely ideological or religious.

³⁷ Paradoxically, Cardinal Ximénez de Cisneros could have been one of the most influential catalysts of the popular survival of these practices. Cisneros officially restored the Mozarab liturgical cycle when the *Missale secundum regulam* and the *Breviarium secundum regulam* were sent to print in 1500 and 1502 (see study by Sáinz Rodríguez 1979, p. 54).

³⁸ Edward Howells has recently analysed the *Spiritual Canticle* to illustrate how human desire transforms into divine desire in St John’s theosophy (Howells 2019). This builds on a prolific tradition of interpreting Carmelite symbols in light of the Scriptures (see Dubay 1989).

³⁹ See (Childers 2009, p. 60.) Johan Huizinga explains how the field of play for saints and mystics is above rationality and inaccessible to speculation based on logical concepts (Huizinga 2012, p. 212).

⁴⁰ This programme included the translation into Spanish vernacular of “tree-shaped” continental volumes such as Pseudo-Bonaventure’s *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, Bonaventura’s (1221–1274) *Lignum Vitae* or Ludolph of Saxony’s (1295–1377) *Vita Christi*, as translated by Ambrosio Montesino (c. 1444–1514) (see Robinson 2006, pp. 389–91).

⁴¹ Michael McGaha also gives credit to this theory (McGaha 1997, p. 49). The Lead Books of Sacromonte are highly evocative of a Christianity that is compatible with Islam, and vice versa.

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