

The Issue of Faith and Infidelity in “The Rose Garden of Mystery” by Mahmud Shabistari (1288–1321)

Andrey Lukashev

Department of Philosophy of Islamic World
Institute of Philosophy Russian Academy of Science
12 Goncharnaya Street, Moscow, Russian Federation 109240
E-mail: andrew_1@inbox.ru

Abstract—The article deals with the problem of religious demarcation in the works by one of the most prominent medieval Sufi writers Mahmud Shabistari. His attitude to the issue cannot be well studied apart of the matter of intolerance, so we try to show the edge between the tolerance and intolerance in his main work — the poem “The Rose Garden of Mystery” (Gulshan-i Raz).

Keywords—Mahmud Shabistari; Tasawwuf; Sufism; tolerance; intolerance; Sufi; religious demarcation; monotheism; tawhid

I. INTRODUCTION

The statement that Tasawwuf has put forward the idea of ultimate religious tolerance is a common place in oriental studies. It's very easy indeed to find proofs for this point of view, because the Sufi poetry is full of examples of positive attitude to non-islamic religions representatives. The Shabistari's oeuvre is not an exception here. It became the reason to name one of the best researches in English on the Shabistari's writings “Beyond Faith and Infidelity” [1]. But in fact we can see a more complicated situation in the case of religious demarcation at the medieval tasawwuf. It shows, that the medieval Sufis had seen the difference between faith and infidelity very well, the matter is what they treated as faith or infidelity¹.

II. THE PROBLEM OF FAITH AND INFIDELITY IN THE WORKS BY MAHMUD SHABISTARI

The matter of faith and infidelity is expounded in detail by Shabistari at the answer to the fifteenth question of the poem (*mathnawi*) “The Rose Garden of Mystery” (Gulshan-i Raz) that deals with idol, *zunnar* and Christianity as poetical tropes. The fact that idol, *zunnar* and Christianity come altogether in the same context witnesses that Shabistari (like many other Sufi poets) doesn't see very much difference between them though they are the attributes and characteristics of different religions: Paganism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity. For him they are a part of one phenomenon – the infidelity, that is opposed to the true faith — Islam.

¹ More about this see: [2], [3], [4].

The fact that the non-islamic religions representatives were sometimes treated by Islamic traditionalists as infidels (though in Quran and fiqh that is based on Quran, Christians and Jews have a status of *ahl al-kitab*) is very well known. Shabistari also doesn't make any difference between *ahl al-kitab* and infidels (*kafir*). However his attitude (as well as the attitude of the majority of Sufi poets) to the infidelity attributes (i.e. idol, *zunnar* and ets.) is quiet positive, moreover he calls them the attributes of monotheism (i.e. Islam). He explains, that from the ontological point of view idol-worship by itself as a religious act (not a belief) does not contradict to monotheism:

867. Since infidelity and faith are both based on Being,
Idol-worship is essentially Unification².

Shabistari comments these words:

868. Since all things are the manifestors of Being,

One amongst them must be an idol.

869. Consider well, wise man

An idol as regards its real being is not vain.

870. Know that God Most High created it,

And whatever comes from the Good is good.

So these words can be treated as a witness of a metareligious identity of Shabistari, that is beyond faith and infidelity borders: if everything comes from the good God, everything is good, so there is no place for infidelity in the world at all. But is it really so? In the same chapter we can see, that Shabistari opposes metaphorical Islam (*Islam-i majazi*) and true infidelity:

877. That man is disgusted with metaphorical Islam³,

To whom the true infidelity has once been revealed.

² Hereinafter we use the classical English translation of the Shabistari's “The Mysic Rose Garden”, made by E.H. Whinfield [5] collated with the resent Persian critical and commented edition by Kazim Dizfuliyan [6].

³ Metaphorical Islam (*Islam-i majazi*) – in the translation by E.H. Whinfield: “superficial faith”.

So he does see some religious borders, and the metaphorical Islam is beyond his borders of tolerance. So what are the metaphorical (*majazi*) Islam and the true infidelity from the Shabistari's point of view?

Here we come to the point of the *majaz* and *haqiqa* distinguish. In Arabic philology *haqiqa* and *majaz* are respectively the literal and figurative meanings of the word. We deal with the literal meaning (*haqiqa*) when a verbalisation⁴ is used in its direct meaning. If it gains a meaning (*ma'ni*) of another verbalization (*lafz*), we have a figurative meaning — *majaz*. Hence, if we talk about a metaphorical Islam, Islam in a figurative meaning, we deal with something, that has the name of Islam, but does not have the meaning "Islam". In other words we have a false Islam that is opposed to the real Islam. And what is opposed to Islam? Its infidelity (*kufri*), and Shabistari at the same bait writes about natural disgust to it. So we can see, that he is far from religious indifference, he distinguish between faith and infidelity very well, the point is that his faith and infidelity are not the same faith and infidelity of the vulgar or base (*'amma*) Islam, but what are they?

Shabistari's Islam is equal to ultimate monotheism. Monotheism for him is the conviction, that there is no existent except for the necessary-by-itself being (i.e. the God, the first principle):

712. Cast away the saying "What is other than Allah",

By your own reason separate that from this.

713. How can you doubt that this is a dream?

For duality by the side of unity is a pure delusion.

The confession of being existent together with the God is a sin of association (*shirk*) for him, that contradicts monotheism (*tawhid*). So if a person realizes that there is no another being except for the God, he will be a Muslim even if he worships idols or makes any other acts that usually characterize a non-Islamic religion adherent. On the contrary if a Muslim believes that there are things besides the God, he is an infidel though he observes all the Islamic religious duties.

Now let's see what is the status of the one's, who doesn't except his ultimate ontological monotheism, whom he calls *'amma*:

902. If you consort with the base (*'amma*), you become an animal;

Nay, not an animal, but at once a stone.

903. Flee from connection with the base (*'amma*),

Lest you fall headlong from your natural rank.

So even a consortion, a company of *'amma* drops a person to the state of a stone and makes him totally lose his anthropological status. The Shabistari's infidels whatever religion they confess, are not just sinners, they are unhumans

⁴ Verbalisation (*lafz*) – lit. a "spit out". The external aspect of word, contradictorily to its internal aspect – the meaning (*ma'ni*).

and it's very important for the right estimation of the Sufi tolerance. Sufis were of course tolerant to other religions adepts: it's very hard to see the one's philosophical worldview if he doesn't expose it, and the information about the religion a person adhere, is not enough for this kind of estimation. But it's not right to state the ultimate religious tolerance of Sufism or Shabistari as its representative. The main value for him was monotheism and not the tolerance itself, so at the point of contradiction he chooses monotheism and shows an ultimate intolerance to the things, that does not match to his interpretation of Islam.

III. CONCLUSION

The study of the religious demarcation theme in the writings by Shabistari can be a good example of the tolerance dialecticity. The absolute tolerance is impossible; this impossibility was first described by Karl Popper at 1945 in his Paradox of tolerance [7]. Tolerance always goes side by side with intolerance, so if, for example, Shabistari shows tolerance, when he discusses the matter of religious demarcation, his tolerance will have its borders set by the resource of intolerance. Here the border is drawn by his interpretation of monotheism, and those, who does not believe the God to be the only existent being, are beyond the edge of his tolerance.

This example shows the importance of intolerance study as well as the tolerance one to form a complex picture of a thinker's worldview. We can witness as well that the matter of religious demarcation in the Shabistari's writings is closely related to his worldview in general and directly depends from the way he constructs the-God-and-the-world relations.

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