FOR KNOWLEDGE AND LOVE: THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE OF SUHRAWARDI AND SAN JUAN DE LA CRUZ

Master’s Thesis

Presented to
Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department
Brandeis University

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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May 2009
Abstract

FOR KNOWLEDGE AND LOVE: THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE OF SUHRAWARDI AND SAN JUAN DE LA CRUZ

A Thesis Presented to the Near Eastern Judaic Studies Department

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This thesis compares the mystical experiences of Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz as an extension of the traditional devotion to God. Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz believed that both knowledge and love was established in the path to mystical experience. While religion is seen as a necessary foundation that imbues both particular pre-experiential virtues and technologies that establish the methodological conduit for the purification of the soul, the personal journey of the mystic ventures beyond tradition to focus on intense devotion of ritual mysticism. For Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz ritual mystical practice enabled the decomposition of the material self by means of purification and perfection. Once this material self was stripped from the mystic, the true ontological human form would be present to perceive the epistemological truth of the absolute reality of existence. Yet even though this process seems similar in the writings
of both Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz, ultimately, these mystics viewed the final unveiled concept of mystical union with subtle discrepancies. Nevertheless, Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz maintained a universal post-experiential rendition of mystical experience as a transcendent realm of absolute understanding and discernment. This transcendence was phenomenologically based on the soul’s proximity to the Absolute.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. Pre-Experiential Foundations in Mystical Experience</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. Knowledge by Presence</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3. Unio Mystica</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4. Post-Experiential Comparisons in Mystical Experience</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Mystical experience maintained an enigmatic prominence among certain theologians and philosophers during the medieval era of Western Europe and the Near East. These theologians and philosophers, who were ensconced in traditional monotheistic religions, sought something extraordinary to explain the pertinent questions which they felt their particular religions had not fully answered. Such intellectuals questioned the contemporaneous understandings of spiritual devotion, metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, and even cosmology since the incontrovertible labels of traditional monotheistic religions no longer were able to vindicate these concepts. Moses Maimonides, Avicenna, al-Ghazālī, Averroes, and Teresa of Ávila were some of these intellectuals who ventured into alternative methods to facilitate the realization of absolute truth. Therefore, many of these intellectuals endeavored into the past to verify the textual concepts and understandings of the ancients.

Arguably, two of the most influential intellectuals of the ancient world were Plato and Aristotle. Plato’s understanding of the intuitive philosophy coupled with his cosmological schematic influenced an immense number of philosophers in the ancient world. In the third century C.E., Plotinus expounded on the Platonic philosophy with the incorporation of methodological approaches and technologies to induce epistemological experiences. Plotinus’ Neoplatonics manifested fundamental
metaphysical concepts that coincided significantly with Judaism, Christianity and Christian Gnosticism, and even Islam.³

On the other hand, Aristotle established a more logical approach based on the deductive reasoning of the physical senses. Aristotle’s methods were based on syllogisms founded by the demonstration of the senses and articulated through the logic of dialectic reasoning.⁴ The Peripatetics trained in the physics, or ancient sciences that included mathematics, diatribe, astronomy, and philosophy, before delving into the metaphysics. Hence, Peripatetic philosophy demonstrated a rational approach for the medieval intellectuals to incorporate within their sojourn for truth.

During the medieval era most intellectuals retained a traditional foundation in religion, albeit they assimilated Neoplatonics, Peripatetics, or both as methodological approaches to bolster spiritual and philosophical inquiry. In particular, the medieval intellectuals, Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz were both first trained in the Peripatetics or logic. Yet they found Neoplatonic philosophy as a more authentic, epistemological approach in providing answers to the questions they asked. Both Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz expanded Neoplatonic philosophy and amalgamated it with traditional religious practices to enable a mystical approach to truth. This combination enhanced their spiritual devotion and induced mystical engagement that resulted in phenomenological experiences of supernatural proportions known as mystical experience. Suhrawardi, as a Muslim, and San Juan de la Cruz, as a Christian, perhaps, approached mystical experience with different traditional expectations; nonetheless, both mystics described similar transcendent scenarios concerning mystical experience. The conviction of these mystical experiences was so vehemently axiomatic that both
Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz accepted imprisonment as an alternative to displacing their integrity.

Yet this thesis does not attempt to investigate the veracity of these mystical experiences. The aim of this thesis is to comparatively analyze the textual renditions of Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz to determine the significance and context of mysticism in the medieval era. In summary, Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz expanded mysticism in regards to their appropriate religions. Suhrawardi sought mystical experience to attain absolute knowledge of the reality of existence. While San Juan de la Cruz used mystical experience to stimulate a relationship based on mutual love with the Absolute. Notwithstanding, and by means of critical comparative analysis, this thesis aspires to prove the vast similarities in the mystical experiences defined and practiced by both Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz.

Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz believed religion to be an essential foundation for mystical experience because it provided the essential pre-experiential virtues and technologies to provoke this phenomenon. In addition, both mystics believed it was also vital to expand beyond the traditional practices of their appropriate religions to emphasize their devotion and evoke the purification of their material propensities. This methodological approach, for Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz, ultimately enabled mystical experience. Yet even though their religious backgrounds may have been different, or even their post-experiential interpretations, both mystics described a similar transcendent experience in the proximity of the Absolute. Consequently, this path to mystical experience provided Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz with the answers they originally sought in the form of knowledge and love.
End Notes

Chapter One

Pre-Experiential Foundations in Mystical Experience

Since the publication of Aldous Huxley’s, *The Perennial Philosophy*, in 1945, scholars have continuously debated whether each mystical experience is uniquely diverse, or if these experiences are derived universally from a “common core.” Scholars such as Peter Moore, Robert Gimello, and Steve T. Katz argue that the reality of mystical experience is fundamentally diverse contextually, methodically, and epistemologically. These arguments dispute scholars like Fritz Staal and Aldous Huxley who believe, in juxtaposition, that mystical experience may be simplified into being universally defined as “common core” mysticism or even *philosophia perennis*.

Another dimension of this contestation derives from the fundamental importance of religious doctrine and traditions as a foundation that enables mystical experience. For instance, Huxley and Staal both dispute the relevance of religion within mystical exploration. In fact, for these two scholars, religion may actually dissuade mystics from obtaining universal truth through mystical experience. Yet in contrast, Katz bases his argument for contextual mysticism on the fact that religion is not only necessary, but religion is the pre-experiential reason for diversity within mystical experience. Finally, Reza Shah-Kazemi also confirms the importance of a religious context as the basis for mystical experience. But his argument is even more complex, for Reza Shah-Kazemi
believes that even though many religious traditions are diverse, the absolute reality of mystical experience is in fact universally and epistemologically transcendent; if the Absolute is one, so is the transcendental mystical experience of the Absolute. This chapter ventures to explore these different arguments to propose, first, the necessity of a religious tradition in leading to mystical experience; and second, to focus on the similarities of pre-experiential technologies utilized by both Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz to enable the process of purifying the soul for mystical experience.

**Religion as a Superfluous Institution for Mystical Experience**

Within the last century, a number of scholars have been quite prolific in the phenomenological study of mystical experience. Scholars like William James, Evelyn Underhill, Dean Inge, Baron von Hügel, Rufus Jones, Aldous Huxley, Charles Bennett, J. Marêchal, James Pratt and Rudolf Otto were some of the most prominent initial authors to study mysticism as well as the varieties of religious experiences in the modern era. These scholars significantly influenced the critical study of mysticism and inspired some of the more recent scholars such as W.T. Stace, R.C. Zaehner, Steve T. Katz, and Reza Shah-Kazemi. Of these initial manuscripts, Aldous Huxley wrote one of the most influential works within the study of mystical experience with his expansion on *philosophia perennis*.

According to Huxley’s work the ultimate truth is a metaphysical mystery that connects all humankind, within the cosmological existence, to a divine Reality. Huxley writes:
The metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal.2

Furthermore, Huxley explains that the aptitude to obtain this ultimate truth is based on humankind’s ability to obtain knowledge by means of moral practice. The combination of knowledge and moral practice may enable human beings to vertically advance their metaphysical understanding, in which they may ultimately obtain the divine truth. Huxley explicates:

The Perennial Philosophy is primarily concerned with the one, divine Reality substantial to the manifold world of things and lives and minds. But the nature of this one Reality is such that it cannot be directly and immediately apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfill certain conditions, making themselves loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit.3

Nonetheless, Huxley instills the sense of difficulty maintained in following this transcendental path as well as obtaining divine knowledge therein. Thus, the typical human being is not only unable to maintain the moral purity necessary to achieve mystical experience, but the typical human being is also unable to offer a sufficient commitment to ascertain a pure (i.e. unmediated) mystical experience. Those who are able to reach this peak of human ascendency, for Huxley, are the prophets, sages, saints, and enlightened ones.4
Huxley further articulates this concept with his discussion and dichotomy of two possible religious paths in which human beings are classified. Huxley describes, in biblical terminology, that human beings either follow “the way of Martha,” which is a path towards salvation through action; in contrast to, “the way of Mary,” which is a path through contemplation. It is quite clear in which path Huxley aligns the most prominence. Huxley believes that the way of Martha is merely a system in which human beings are bound primitively in polytheism. Therefore these human beings prescribe actions to various inexplicable phenomena, in which primitive practices are enacted in accompaniment to their deistic pantheons. In contrast, men of contemplation, or the way of Mary, have derived superior concepts of monotheistic religions, which influence those who are not capable in harnessing the conduit of mystical experience. Huxley argues:

The Higher monotheistic forms of primitive religion are created (or should one rather say, with Plato, discovered?) by people belonging to the first of the two great psycho-physical classes of human beings—the men of thought. To those belonging to the other class, the men of action, is due the creation or discovery of the lower, unphilosophical, polytheistic kinds of religion.

The majority of human beings are susceptible to following the path of action, religious leaders have thus constructed paths that their followers could follow and obtain salvation by means of their actions. In the early first century of Christianity, besides the initial conversions of the Jews in Palestine, the “Good News” burgeoned among the Gentile polytheists. The apostle Paul adapted his proselytizing message to convince Greco-Roman polytheists of the universal truth of monotheism, as well as to ease their transition within. A similar scenario can also be attributed to the early proliferation of Islam in the early seventh century. Muhammad, who is believed to be a hanif or of the
primordial monotheistic tradition,\textsuperscript{7} reaffirmed a message for all polytheists in Pre-Islamic Arabia to recognize and submit to the oneness of God, or in Arabic, \textit{tawhīd}. So Huxley sees these religious leaders, the prophets, sages, and enlightened ones, as a mediating path in which inferior human beings may grasp parts of the universal, divine Reality. Consequently religion is not necessary, but merely a contingent of the religious leaders. 

Moreover, Huxley sees religion as a matrix, created to develop human beings in order for them to receive salvation by means of actions; these morally and epistemologically inferior beings cannot perceive unmediated mystical experience. As a result, these human beings are completely dependent on their religious leaders for truth. Huxley explains that religion is not necessarily true in itself, but just a means to the ultimate end of all religion, the “common core,” or Absolute.\textsuperscript{8} Thus there is an extreme danger for those who consider a particular religion as singularly true. Huxley writes:

\begin{quote}
In the course of history it has often happened that one or other of the imperfect religions has been taken too seriously and regarded as good and true in itself, instead of as a means to the ultimate end of all religion. The effects of such mistakes are often disastrous. For example, many protestant sects have insisted on the necessity, or at least the extreme desirability, of a violent conversion.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

Ultimately Huxley argues that through a vertical progression of knowledge and practice, extraordinary human beings, or the religious leaders, are able to determine universal truth from a divine Reality by means of mystical experience. Even though Huxley demonstrates an imperative impetus on moral righteousness, religion is ultimately devised for those who cannot discover this universal conduit as an unmediated endeavor.
Thus morality, for Huxley, may be sustained without religion, making religion an unnecessary commodity to mystical experience.

The concept of *philosophia perennis* has generated vast interest from a myriad of scholars because of its idealistic nature in regards to the assimilation of a united religious front. However for scholar Steve T. Katz, this “common core” philosophy as a phenomenological and epistemological analysis has evoked his astringent opposition. In lieu of “common core” mysticism, Katz’s polemic is based on pre-experiential contextualism.

**Religion as an Essential Institution for Mystical Experience**

Katz believes mysticism maintains an immense diversity within each individual experience. Thus by claiming that mystical experience is universal or derives from a “common core,” only demonstrates the mystic’s inability to adequately articulate each experience phenomenologically. So for Katz, the mystic reduces his experience to fit a particular parameter which has already been designed by other mystics. Moreover, the mystic is relying on knowledge that is *a priori*; so in a sense, the mystical experience is already a perceived concept that stands as a paradigm for each mystic to provide explanations for phenomena that, for Katz, are different. Katz writes, “The significance of these considerations is that the forms of consciousness which the mystic brings to experience set structured and limiting parameters on what the experience will be, i.e. on what will be experienced, and rule out in advance what is ‘inexperienceable’ in the particular given, concrete, context.”10 Mystics, thus, rely on these mystical paradigms to
summarize each particular experience, so the mystic reduces his experience to fit these set parameters. Katz argues that mystical experience retains immense diversity contextually, methodologically, and epistemologically. Most of these differences can be traced to the diversity imbued in the mystic’s appropriate religious liturgy and doctrine.

Katz discerns, by means of religion and the diversity therein, that mystical experience should also mirror these differences. Hence, Katz poses these questions: what does a particular religion bring to a particular religious experience, as well as mystical experience; and how does a particular religion affect this experience? As for mystical experience, the reason why these experiences exude context and religious boundaries is because each mystical experience is perceived post-experientially instead of pre-experientially. In regards to this two-directional symmetry vis-à-vis mystics and their mystical experiences, in lieu of perceiving an experience and then letting this experience shape belief, the mystics are letting belief shape experience. Consequently, for Katz, there is an unneeded impetus placed on post-experiential explanations of mystical experience, rather than focusing intently on pre-experiential journeys for mystical experience. For if the focus is inherently pre-experiential, it will evoke diverse understandings of an experience. Consequently this diversity is innately ensconced within all mystical experience.

Katz expresses the pre-experiential diversity found within religions by comparing pre-experiential contexts found in Jewish and Buddhist mysticism. Katz explains that unlike Jewish mysticism and its dependence on monotheism and the mystical union with that one God, Buddhist mysticism is not necessarily seeking to encounter God. But
rather, Buddhist mysticism focuses on the ontological state of existence.\textsuperscript{14} For Buddhists, there is no divine will or loving God, so their mysticism is pending on ethics and causality. While Jews look to purify the soul in order to meet God, Buddhist mystics are seeking to annihilate suffering by enlightenment.\textsuperscript{15} Therefore the contextual goals found in these two diverse religious traditions are also different pre-experientially.

Katz also argues that pre-experiential diversity is evident methodologically by focusing on the relationships between the mystical master and apprentice. Within the master and pupil context, the master teaches specific goals to the pupils as well as the essential and explicit paths to reach these goals. Katz claims that the master does not teach the same way to reach the same goals to his students as other mystical traditions do. Katz uses the competitive nature manifested between different mystical traditions, as well as within the diverse schools, as the evidence for this polemic.\textsuperscript{16}

Katz argues that many schools of mysticism believe that mystical experience is either “all” or “nothing,”\textsuperscript{17} so these schools are in competition with each other and refute the other’s perception of mystical experience. Katz writes, “Decisive proof of this is found not only in a close examination of the respective ‘teachings’ of the various teachers but also in the polemical spirit manifest by many, if not most, mystical masters.”\textsuperscript{18} Since contextual understandings are different for Katz, e.g. monism in juxtaposition with monotheism, the appropriate teachers dispute the other’s teachings because their understandings of metaphysical concepts are obviously different. A Buddhist guru will teach something different than a Hindu guru, a Christian Saint will not teach the same thing as the Taoist master. Again Katz writes, “Shankara does not shrink from entering into heated polemics with his Buddhist opponents about the meaning of the ultimate
experiences, understood by him in a non-personal monistic way, or again with his more theistically-minded Hindu colleagues—and of saying that they are wrong.”  

So because the pre-experiential goals and contextual milieus are different, the methodologies too are also diverse.

Yet another methodological variation, for Katz, is again constituted in mystical experience by the indications of language.  Katz believes that even though some depictions of mystical experiences may be similar in description, in actuality, these descriptions are not similar and are ultimately describing different experiences.  

This argument is based again in pre-experiential contexts, for all mystical language is a specific vernacular for a specific context.  Katz alleges that since a Hindu mystic speaks of an Absolute and a Jewish mystic speaks of an Absolute that many scholars reduce these descriptions to say that both the Hindu and the Jew are speaking of the same Absolute.  But in fact, the Hindu speaks of an Impersonal Absolute Brahman, while the Jewish mystic speaks of an Absolute Being or God, yet both understand these entities differently and diversely from the other.

Katz continues to dispute the diversity of mystical language by analyzing certain terms described by mystics that many Universalists claim as being as “common core” mysticism.  Nonetheless, there is not positive proof that the language used can mean the same thing for each mystical tradition.  Furthermore, Katz uses the paradigm term that describes the sentiments of “nothingness,” which precludes this sense of spiritual death and rebirth.  

The term “nothing” or “nothingness” in a Hasidic-Kabbalistic context does not refer to “introvertive experience” of mystical union.  The Hebrew term, Ayin or nothingness, for Katz, means that, “As Ayin, ‘nothingness’, God, as the term is meant to
indicate, is still beyond any and all human understanding of experiences. As Ayin, God is still alone. No human experience ever achieves relation with this dimension of God’s nature.”23

In addition, the linguistic analysis of this term “nothingness” is also extended within Buddhism. The Buddhist term Mu, or nothingness and non-being, is not necessarily referring to God, as Katz explains, “But rather refers to the absolute ontological condition of emptiness or sunyata which transcends all being, all prediction, all substantiality.”24 Katz uses this term in comparison with the Christian mystic’s rebirth of the purified soul and the Sufi concept of the Arabic term fanā, which is literally the death of the temporal and corruptible self, and its replacement with a transcendent self that is able to taste the true reality of Allah unveiled. But for Katz, the understanding of the terms nothingness, emptiness, and self, because of the contextual diversity, must signify variances within each religious milieu. As a result, language creates variations in mystical experience, which must preclude any type of mystical assimilation.25

Finally Katz endeavors to prove that because each religious tradition is diverse, so is mystical epistemology. For if a particular religious context maintains a particular comprehension of theology, Christology, and even cosmology, how can there be a universal epistemology that somehow obtains perennial truth? Mystics expand on traditional doctrines to seek out poignant gradations of truth; truth that is more intense or explanatory than that of an ordinary believer. These intensifications of truth are found epistemologically by means of mystical experience.
Basically, there is no real way to determine epistemological knowledge received by mystics. So there are “no givens” in mystical experience.\textsuperscript{26} Katz extrapolates, “Indeed, talk of the ‘given’ seems to be a move made to short-circuit the very sort of epistemological inquiry here being engaged in, but such a move fails because there is no evidence that there is any ‘given’ which can be disclosed without the imposition of the mediating conditions of the knower.”\textsuperscript{27} Katz believes that all mystics are packaging their experiences to fit a priori definitions already pre-conceived in the mind just as previously argued. Katz expounds further, “All ‘givens’ are also the product of the processes of ‘choosing,’ ‘shaping,’ and ‘receiving.’ That is, the ‘given’ is appropriated through acts which shape it into forms which we can make intelligible to ourselves given our conceptual constitution, and which structure it in order to respond to the specific contextual needs and mechanisms of consciousness of the receiver.”\textsuperscript{28}

Katz argues that it is human nature for the mystic to reshape his experiences post-experientially and conform them to the parameters consistent with each prescribed tradition. By doing this, the mystic is legitimizing their experience as being consistent within the appropriate tradition. Ultimately, there are no unmediated mystical experiences. Katz concludes:

This much is certain: the mystical experience must be mediated by the kind of beings we are. And the kind of beings we are require that experience be not only instantaneous and discontinuous, but that it also involve memory, apprehension, expectation, language, accumulation of prior experience, concepts, and expectations, with each experience being built on the back of all these elements and being shaped anew by each fresh experience.\textsuperscript{29}
Therefore no mystic acts as a “tabula rasa” in which the Absolute instills something unmediated and not preconceived; the mystic seeks after something that is already preconceived and by doing so, no matter the phenomenological consciences, the mystic receives exactly what the mystic originally sought.

But really, for Katz, his argument is rather cyclical; pre-experiential contextualism is the reoccurring factor which nullifies universal mystical experience. Religion is thus essential, for it is the centrifugal aspect of his entire argument since religion provides the unique context in which diversity can be found. Otherwise, scholars like Staal, Huxley, and Stace only reduce the evidence and assemble it into a universal form or “common core” mysticism. Thus Katz not only disagrees with Huxley’s philosophia perennis, but also with Huxley’s diminishment of the religious tradition, in general, as a foundation for mystical experience.

In contrast, scholar Reza Shah-Kazemi vehemently disagrees with Katz’s polemic. Shah-Kazemi admits that religion is essential within mystical experience, like Katz, since religion provides the basic virtues within its doctrines, the most important being, faith, hope, and grace. However in contrast, Shah-Kazemi’s thesis speaks of one single, “transcendent essence of spiritual realization, whatever be the religious starting point.”³⁰ In other words, Shah-Kazemi imbues the concept that since there is one Absolute, anything within the transcendent realm of the Absolute must conform into the Absolute and His unity. Therefore, there is only one transcendent realization unified with the Absolute. Anything less than this may cause multiplicity, i.e. diversity.³¹
Shah-Kazemi claims that Katz himself is using the very reductionist methods he condemns. As Shah-Kazemi writes, “Mystics themselves claim to have attained a spiritual degree which transcends all context.”32 Thus, Katz himself is reducing his judgments into claiming that no matter the mystic or experience the mystic relates, because of the pre-experiential contexts, the mystic conforms the experience to fit the parameters defined by the appropriate religion or context; for Katz, mystical experience is essentially diverse since all religious milieus are also diverse and any unitary realization of transcendent mystical experience must in turn, be a reduction. However, by claiming this, Katz is also reducing a priori mystical experience by concluding that all mystical experience must be diverse. Shah-Kazemi disputes, “Now Katz, on the contrary, conceals his own a priori judgment behind the veil of academic objectivity.”33

The essential problem is that within mystical experience, one must take into account the Absolute. Katz, on the other hand, develops his argument strictly on the relative context of humanity in search for an immanent Absolute. Notwithstanding, the Absolute realizes Himself through the human individual, so “to limit the Absolute is to relativize it.”34 The Absolute must be taken into account, for mystics, such as Ibn ‘Arabī, believe that the ability for Self-Knowledge of the Absolute depends on humanity to manifest the divine image back to the Absolute, as in a mirror. This concept connects the human relativity to an immanent Absolute. Yet Katz disagrees with this connection, Katz holds human relativity distinct from the Absolute as well as transcendent realization, which is the goal of mystical experience.35 Katz, thus, rejects the idea of divine immanence as well as the liberation of human relativity as transcending all contextual factors.36 This rejection of “common core” mysticism, by Katz, is thus a priori.
The Pre-Experiential Virtues Found in Religious Contexts

On another note, like Katz, Shah-Kazemi bolsters the idea that religion is necessary for mystical experience. For without religious context, mystical experience is impossible and cannot exist. Religious context provides the essential pre-experiential doctrines and virtues that shape the ethical character of each mystic. These ethical characteristics, coupled with the pre-experiential modes of action, the “technologies” or “techniques,” induce an essential formula which enables mystical experience.

In particular, the ethical virtues of faith, hope, and grace are three qualities found in religious traditions that play an essential role within mystical experience. Both Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz similarly see these characteristics as a necessary quality found in true disciples as well as necessary in perceiving the Absolute and obtaining mystical experience. Shah-Kazemi also believes these qualities, especially in regards to faith, are of the utmost importance. Shah-Kazemi writes:

Faith in the [Absolute] is a prerequisite for the disciple: without faith, no further instruction is to be imparted; however inadequate be the initial conception of the [Absolute] in the first instance, the Absolute must at least be acknowledged and believed in, albeit as a mental construct prior to the rectification of this concept in the light of realized knowledge of the Self.

These three virtues are not only essential to acquire as a method to ameliorate the spirituality of the mystic, they also stand as a preparatory element that acts as a readying agent for the knowledge that will be obtained through mystical experience.
In regards to Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz, faith plays an essential role within both appropriate religious traditions, Islam and Christianity. The basic concept of faith is a belief in the Absolute, or in this context, God. This ideology can be a belief in something that is not seen, or necessarily known, such as a “blind faith.” In Islam, faith is more profound. In Arabic, *īmān* or faith signifies a type of divine knowledge that Muslims may obtain by practicing *Islam,* or submission to the doctrines prescribed within the religion. Thus, faith is manifested only after a believer has already secured a sense of the truth by orthopraxy. Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz both envisioned this type of faith as necessary for the believer to initiate mystical experience.

Suhrawardi envisions faith as a steadfast quality in which enables the mystic to persevere upon the path in sojourning for knowledge and truth. Suhrawardi writes, “The wayfarers who hammer upon the doors of the chambers of light—they who are sincere and patient—will be met by shining angels of God, who will give them the greetings of the heavenly kingdom and will purify them with water flowing from the spring of glory, for the Lord of Loftiness loves the purity of the traveler.”40 Suhrawardi believes that these wayfarers are those that fervently believe or have faith in God, and because of the wayfarers faith, they are full of insight and devotion in submitting to God.41

San Juan de la Cruz views the virtue of Faith as a garment to be worn in order to act as a protector against the temptations of the devil. San Juan de la Cruz writes, “The Faith is a garment of such surpassing whiteness as to dazzle the eyes of every understanding: for when the soul has put on faith it becomes invisible and inaccessible to the devil.”42 But not only is faith a protective device that ensures steadfast devotion to God, faith is a tool used to draw the mystic inward towards God in unity. Again San Juan
de la Cruz writes, “It is as if He said to the soul, If thou wilt be united and betrothed to Me, thou must draw near inwardly clad in faith.” Thus faith stands, for both Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz, as a beacon of proof, demonstrating to the Absolute the essential virtue of having a steadfast and convicted belief that God will justify their faith by means of Grace. This concept provides Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz with hope.

Hope is another essential virtue that Islam and Christianity offer within both religious traditions. Hope sustains faith, but expounds further as a segue between faith and grace. This virtue acts constantly to reinforce both belief and practice, as well as solidify the desire for further companionship with the Absolute. The mystic expounds on the virtue of hope by using it to evade desires of the flesh and focus on the immanent relationship an enhanced spirituality may evoke between humanity and the Absolute. Hope, therefore, begins to evolve into another virtue, the virtue of love or love for God.

Suhrawardi agrees that the virtue of hope is a connection point to the grace of God. Religion inspires believers with certain virtues that facilitate piety. Faith establishes belief, while hope expands belief into dependence and love for God. For Suhrawardi, he believes that hope will encourage further piety and permit the purification of the soul, which in turn, brings grace. However, this hope cultivates a deep desire and love for God.

San Juan de la Cruz unfolds the virtue of hope as a more intimate quality, yearning upwards to obtain the very union the soul desires. San Juan de la Cruz states, “The green vesture of hope—for the soul is then ever looking upwards unto God,
disregarding all else and delighting only in Him—is so pleasing to the Beloved that the soul obtains from Him all it hopes for.”⁴⁵ This means that hope intensifies faith in becoming more potent and in tune with the ultimate goal, or the grace of God. For San Juan de la Cruz, hope influences God to have pity and mercy for all that which desires God.⁴⁶ Furthermore, hope aides in withdrawing from the material world and helps focus the mind on God. San Juan de la Cruz writes of the link between faith and hope and how it creates a bridge to the grace of God:

Faith blinds the understanding, and empties it of all material intelligence, and thereby disposes it for union with the divine wisdom. Hope empties the memory and withdraws it from all created things which can possess it. Thus the memory is withdrawn from all things on which it might dwell in this life, and is fixed on what the soul hopes to posses. Hope is God alone, therefore, purely disposes the memory according to the measure of emptiness it has wrought for union with Him.⁴⁷

Grace, for both Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz, is God’s reaction to pious believers who have faith in Him and hope that He in turn will recognize their sentiment and devotion. Grace is a gift, but it is not freely given such as the Christian concept of antinomianism. In contrast, grace is only given after thorough devotion and purification of the soul. Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz both believe that mystical experience depends on the application of the guidelines established by religious traditions as well as the measure of one’s intentions and deeds.⁴⁸ Only after the soul experiences an education in moral behavior and true devotion will God acknowledge the faith and hope with the benevolent gift of grace.
Suhrwardi explicitly describes this process and promises that the ultimate source of grace is God. Suhrwardi, while speaking of the wayfarers, explains:

They expend their efforts in Thy gracious path. Grant them a mighty portion form Thyself, and give them from Thee a sovereignty confirmed and illumined. God has answered the angels’ prayers in behalf of those who work virtuous deeds, who are steadfast in worship, who associate nothing with Him, decreeing that when they reach the court of power, they will be cloaked in that in which the archangels are cloaked, the angels who stand beneath the stair of grandeur at the source of grace.49

Thus God always supports those who maintain His will through faith and hope. God, therefore, always provides grace to those who submit to His will and glorify Him. In turn, God offers recompense and immanence.

San Juan de la Cruz also maintains this concept, but grace is even more intricate and dependent upon God’s reciprocation. San Juan de la Cruz considers grace to manifest different levels of divine reciprocity. Initially, God benefits the believer who has steadfastly sought Him through faith and hope. This level of grace is given my means of goodwill and mercy. San Juan de la Cruz describes this type of grace as the betrothal to the Bridegroom. The ultimate level of grace is provided by means of marriage. This level of grace is a special communion that God only deems to those who have journeyed to the uppermost levels of devotion. San Juan de la Cruz writes, “There is a great difference between the fruition of God by grace only, and the fruition of Him in union; the former is one of mutual good will, the latter one of special communion.50

Hence, religion provides basic virtues necessary in establishing the very foundations required in mystical experience. Both Suhrwardi and San Juan de la Cruz
value these virtues for the connection they establish with God, as well as how these virtues educate the soul. Ultimately, these virtues are proficient in facilitating remembrance of God, which is essential in both Islam and Christianity. Yet these religious traditions not only provide the virtues necessary to evoke mystical experience, but also, religion teaches certain technologies that exercise the full capabilities of these virtues and establish a conduit for reciprocated communion with God.

The Pre-Experiential Technologies Found in Religious Contexts

Suhrawardi believes that religious orthodoxy assists believers in living in accordance to the commandments of God, which is of the utmost importance. However, there are certain pre-experiential technologies that may advance the cleansing process of the heart and demonstrate the true devotion of the believers. These technologies, or techniques, are commonly found within religious contexts as traditional practices or even liturgy, but the mystics also incorporate these technologies within their journey to the Absolute. By doing so, they add additional emphasis on these technologies and use them as a means for purification, which can be seen as the mystics attempt to construct conduits that facilitate mystical experience; i.e. the mystics are fabricating a homing beacon by using common religious technologies to attract the attention of the Absolute. Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz both consider the technologies of prayer, meditation or contemplation, and asceticism as being advantageous in preparing the heart and soul for God’s attentive answer.
In the traditional understanding of Islam, Muhammad negotiated with God a set number of prayers for believers to offer each day. Along with these prayers, the believers may also offer supplications to God on behalf of their daily physical and spiritual needs. Prayer, for Suhrawardi, is essential in every believer’s daily life. Prayer is a method in which God may be glorified. While in earnest prayer, any believer becomes closer to God and is sanctified within the believer’s heart. Accordingly, God will answer the prayers of the devoted, of those who earnestly seek him. Suhrawardi clarifies, “He will answer the prayers of all who are weighed down with gloom—of all who are pure yet seek to be darkened for the good pleasure of God—that he will aid the patient against the evil of the sons of devils.”

Furthermore, Suhrawardi also employs prayer as a means to ease the burden of the difficult path to God. In prayer, the believer is remembering God. This concept of dhikr may be a common practice in traditional Islam, however for Suhrawardi, by remembering God, the believer is advancing closer, and so God will recognize this advancement and ease the believer’s burdens. Because of this closeness, Suhrawardi believes prayer becomes an institutionalized method of relief.

The Gospel of John 15:7 states, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” San Juan de la Cruz instills the importance of prayer by referencing the preceding scripture. He explains, “The soul calls Him ‘my Beloved,’ the more to move Him to listen to its cry, for God, when loved, most readily listens to the prayers of him who loves him.” Thus God desires for the believer to pray and supplicate His assistance. Like Suhrawardi and the Muslim understanding of dhikr, for Christianity as well, God desires to be remembered and will offer recompense
for all those who remember Him. The act of prayer concentrates particular attention and devotion to God. San Juan de la Cruz views prayer as an escape, and condemns those who pray in vein. Moreover, prayer is a palpable and accessible technology in which evokes a special escape for the believer to seek God for devotion and strength, and then receive that which is desired.56

Meditation or contemplation is another pre-experiential religious tradition that mystics use as a technology to remember God and become closer to Him. Meditation consists of the constant focus on the divine, coupled with the pondering of all mysteries therein. For mystics, this focus intently determines an amount of devotion and commitment which renders progress along the path towards mystical experience. The Qur’an preaches in verse 55:29, that God is always at work.57 God, thus, is busy with many wonders that escape the capacity of the human faculty of reason. Suhrawardi envisions benefits in pondering these types of wonders, which truly devote remembrance to God. Suhrawardi advises, “There are indeed wonders that the minds of men cannot encompass so long as they remain dabbling in the darknesses. All such wonders as have been described are less subtle, less astonishing than other wonders there. That we know even this amount is one of the proofs showing that things yet more wonderful will be found there.”58 As a result, since humanity resides in darkness, mystics seek to be illuminated through meditation. Meditation inscribes such a degree of focus and devotion that wonders may be enlightened by means of knowledge by presence, which will be explained further in the next chapter.

San Juan de la Cruz also views meditation or contemplation as an essential technology for mystical experience. San Juan de la Cruz argues that within
contemplation, God is working within the soul. The mystic may receive confirmations of God’s presence by subtle feelings of peace and quiet delicacy. Additionally, this devotion for God purges the human facilities and incites the imagination.\textsuperscript{59} In other words, remembrance and devotion to God are the first steps towards mystical experience. Meditation helps create memories in the mind of the mystic, which in turn, builds a background for the mystics to contemplate or imagine God.\textsuperscript{60} Once a background is determined, the mystic may return to this background every time the mystic returns to meditation. For San Juan de la Cruz, meditation acts as a bridge to mystical experience.

The final technology that this chapter approaches is asceticism. These are not the only technologies that mystics use; however these technologies are commonly practiced, and play an essential role in the regards to mystical experience defined by Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz. Asceticism is a path designed to enable the mystic to focus on remembering to devote their life to God.

The idea of asceticism is to develop a dependence on spiritual conditions that sustain spirituality growth, rather than devoting avid concentration on the material conditions that accompany material growth. This ascetic path, thus, emphasizes virtues and technologies that are difficult to sustain by depriving the body of material needs. Therefore by sustaining this path, the mystic is grappling to purify and purge the mystic’s attachment to materialism. Asceticism is adhered to in both Islam and Christianity. In accordance, both Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz advocate the ascetic lifestyle, for it manifested the technological advantages needed for mystical experience with the purpose of upholding remembrance and devotion to God.
In Islam, this path is called Sufism. Suhrawardi believes:

With piety, asceticism, and meditation, the Sufi hopes to cleanse his heart and achieve an inner order. This in turn brings his soul to an inspired state of wisdom. Action is the cause and knowledge is the effect. Piety, asceticism, and perfect behavior are the means; knowledge is the result. This knowledge cannot be attained either by reflection or by reasoning. There cannot be a Sufism which depends upon knowledge without action. Neither does a life of piety and asceticism which does not attain wisdom become Sufism.61

The human being requires certain substances to sustain existence in the material world. Food, clothes, and shelter are some of these basic necessities the body requires for survival. However for Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz, the necessities of life need to be selected and limited in moderation. Pleasure is one of these necessities that need to be strictly moderated because pleasure destroys the perfection of the soul and creates a dependency on materialism instead of on God.62 By adopting the ascetic lifestyle, the mystic is able to turn the “soul away from distractions” and purify “it from hindrances in order to become perfected.”63 Suhrawardi exhorts, “Let him meditate for forty days, abstaining from meat, taking little food, concentrating upon contemplation of the light of God.”64

San Juan de la Cruz instructs the concept that wealth never provides ultimate satisfaction. For the wealthy continually search for material things that will satisfy them. However, San Juan de la Cruz teaches that satisfaction is only found in the heart detached from all material things and dependent in poverty of spirit.65 In addition to satisfaction only being found by means of materialistic detachment, San Juan de la Cruz encourages suffering, for suffering builds strength. Again San Juan de la Cruz maintains that in
suffering the soul is strengthened by practicing the technologies that help the mystic acquire virtue and purify their soul.\textsuperscript{66}

Since asceticism focuses intently upon the purging the soul of material attachments and is innately ensconced in remembrance and devotion to God, Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz affirm this technology as advantageous in enabling mystical experience. Therefore, mystics are using traditional religious technologies to relieve the purification process and focus on the fibers that connect human beings with God and ascertain a close relativity to Him. Finally as Suhrawardi describes:

He will be characterized by nearness to God most high, a spare diet and little sleep, supplication to God to ease the path for him, and a heart made refined by refined thoughts. He will ponder the clues to God’s holiness enshrined in beings. He will constantly recollect God’s glory; which leads to these matters. He will be sincere in turning toward the Light of Lights, which is the basis of this realm, making his soul sing with the remembrance of God, the Master of the Kingdom.\textsuperscript{67}

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the importance of a religious foundation within the mystical tradition. Not only is a religious foundation important, but it provides the pre-experiential virtues and technologies in which mystics use to evoke mystical experience. Katz believes that the diversity in pre-experiential religious contexts causes diversity within mystical traditions. However, as far as Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz convey, mystical traditions maintain a very similar origin, since the foundation for mystical experience is based on the pre-experiential virtues and technologies that these religious contexts provide. Moreover, mystics are practicing the basic orthodox traditions held by their appropriate religion, but are extending these traditions to truly devote themselves to the Absolute.
End Notes

10 Katz, 26.
11 Katz, 25.
12 Katz, 30.
13 Katz, 30.
14 Katz, 38.
15 Katz, 38.
16 Katz, 42–45.
17 Katz, 24.
18 Katz, 45.
19 Katz, 45.
20 Katz, 46.
21 Katz, 46.
22 Katz, 52–53.
23 Katz, 53.
24 Katz, 53.
25 Katz, 53.
26 Katz, 59.
27 Katz, 59.
28 Katz, 59.
29 Katz, 59.
31 Shah-Kazemi, xiv.
33 Shah-Kazemi, 231.
34 Shah-Kazemi, 231.
35 Shah-Kazemi, 231.
36 Shah-Kazemi, 234.
37 Shah-Kazemi, 248–249.
38 Shah-Kazemi, 249.
41 Suhrawardi, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, 156.
43 Saint John of the Cross, 141.
45 Saint John of the Cross, 142.
46 Saint John of the Cross, 142.
47 Saint John of the Cross, 144.
50 Saint John of the Cross, 461.
51 Suhrawardi, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, 156.
52 Suhrawardi, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, 158.
55 Saint John of the Cross, 177.
56 Saint John of the Cross, 23.
59 Saint John of the Cross, 34.
61 Suhrawardi, *The Shape of Light*, 16.
64 Suhrawardi, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, 162.
65 Saint John of the Cross, 178.
66 Saint John of the Cross, 119.
Chapter Two

Knowledge by Presence

Shihāb al-Dīn Abū al-Futūh Yahyā ibn Habash ibn Amirak al-Suhrawardi, born in 549 A.H./1154 C.E., has significantly influenced both philosophical and mystical studies in Islam. The life of Suhrawardi was quite enigmatic. He was a philosopher, trained in the Peripatetic style of diatribe, as well as mystic who paralleled the typical ascetic garb of the dervish.¹ Much of Suhrawardi’s history is unknown, for he wandered as an ascetic for around a decade, studying, developing his particular philosophy, and trying to gain patronage. Throughout this time, Suhrawardi grappled with defining actual epistemological proof by means of his highly esteemed studies in philosophy and religion. Suhrawardi ultimately classified all that he learned according to merit, and incorporated these different ideologies together by constructing his own philosophical system. Suhrawardi articulated his findings with a prolific corpus of both Peripatetic and Illuminationist treatises. In Suhrawardi’s most famous work, Hikmat al-Isrhaq or The Philosophy of Illumination, he demonstrates a new creative synthesis of a type of illuminative philosophy founded upon mystical experience and orthodox Islam.

Suhrawardi’s works challenged many ideologies present in contemporaneous Islam. Some of which disputed the prominence of Peripatetic philosophy circulating by
means of Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Ibn Rūshd (Averroes), while other ideas even challenged the dogma of orthodox Islam, namely the prophethood of Muhammad juxtaposed with the personal revelation of sages. The major concept which demonstrated this idea of personal revelation or intuitive philosophy, Suhrāwārdī associates with al-‘īlm al-laduni or knowledge by presence. However, because of these concepts and his charismatic and mystical approach to life, Suhrāwārdī attracted attention in Aleppo and gained a following that led to his utter demise. At this point in the twelfth century, during the zenith of medieval Islamic philosophy, Suhrāwārdī shaped an amalgamated cosmological and ontological paradigm that combined illumination philosophy with Sufism as an end epistemological path to absolute knowledge and truth. This chapter is designed to demonstrate the vast importance of Suhrāwārdī’s understanding of knowledge by presence as a transcendent state of mystical experience between human beings and the Absolute. This concept was extended from an amalgamation of Islamic orthodoxy and Islamic philosophy made by Muslim intellectuals of the medieval era, but Suhrāwārdī deviated from this tradition and created his own nuances, which combined elements of intuitive philosophy and Sufism to create a new illumination philosophy that demonstrated a path to gnosis (‘ilm)² by means of mystical experience.
The Medieval Philosophical Milieu in Islam

In the first few centuries of the Common Era, which was dominated by the imperial Roman Empire, many Greek and Roman philosophical traditions, to the like of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno, disseminated throughout the empire as an inspiration for ethics, physics and other sciences, and metaphysics. With the burgeoning of these philosophical studies like Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism, many philosophical schools spread throughout the Roman world to bolster the interest. One of the most prominent students of Ammonius Saccas’ Platonic school in Alexandria was Plotinus, who greatly influenced Islamic philosophy.

As the philosophical schools grew, so did the influence of Christianity on the central authority of the Roman hierarchy. The Christian leadership, led by Emperor Justinian I, hindered all non-Christian religious groups, including all philosophical schools. After Justinian banned public teaching by philosophers in 529, many of the philosophical schools died out or were banished to other regions like Anatolia, Syria, and Persia. As a result, the philosophical traditions that had cultivated the classical world for so long were beginning to dissipate like an evanescent vapor. Fortunately, a huge portion of these works, which included philosophy, medicine, and the physics and other sciences, survived by the efforts of the Greek translation movement during the ‘Abbāsid caliphate.

During the middle of the eight century, Islamic culture was on the rise with the foundation of the ‘Abbāsid caliphate. Around this same time, a systematic movement began to assimilate and translate Greek scientific and philosophical learning to magnify
the intellectual prominence of the Islamic world.⁶ These works were translated from
Greek and Syriac into Arabic, which would preserve these traditions and their history
until they were later translated into Latin. One of the most prolific champions for this
Greek translation movement was al-Kindī.

Al-Kindī adamantly supported the Greek translation movement, and even though
he did not specifically make the translations, his work influenced the reception of these
texts within the Islamic world.⁷ Al-Kindī and his circle of followers, thus, gravitated
towards the philosophical traditions. Not only did al-Kindī assist in preserving these
philosophies, he mastered the Greek philosophical tradition to engender his own unique
philosophy that manifested as a hybrid representation of Greek philosophy mixed with
Islamic doctrine.⁸ Al-Kindī, therefore, introduced an Islamic philosophical tradition that
would be appreciated by many Muslim, Christian, and Jewish intellectuals within the
Islamic world.

Much is not known about Suhrawardi’s early life; however scholars like John
Walbridge and Hossein Ziai have argued that Suhrawardi grew up within this Islamic
philosophical tradition. Suhrawardi received an extensive education. He first studied
religion and philosophy in Marāgha under Majd al-Dīn al-Jīlī. Then Suhrawardi traveled
to Isfahan or Mārdīn to study under Fakhr al-Dīn al-Mārdīnī. Later he studied logic with
Zahīr al-Fārisī.⁹ As a student of logic, Suhrawardi was very familiar with both the
Aristotelian and Avicennan forms of the Peripatetic arguments, their methodology, as
well as their dependency on the demonstration of the human senses. Yet after his formal
training, Suhrawardi wandered for almost a decade as an attempt to determine his
particular philosophy.
Because of the ambiguous record of time spent in sojourn, many scholars have disputed the different influences, which assisted in developing Suhrawardi’s appropriate philosophical system. Henry Corbin is one of these scholars who have proposed a polemic for Suhrawardian influence. Corbin argues that Suhrawardi designed his philosophy after the ancient Persians. For Corbin, Suhrawardi is taking elements of ancient Persian and Zoroastrian thought, especially in regards to his theosophy of light and darkness, and mixing them with different Platonic ideas. Corbin argues that this is self-evident and based on Zoroastrian concepts of light and darkness and angelology. For example, Suhrawardi organized a cosmological hierarchy of emanating light, which derives from the Light of Lights and shines all the way down to human beings. Zoroaster also developed a similar approach to cosmology, which he describes as an emanation that starts with the Endless light and then travels to the sun, the moon, the stars, to fire on earth, and finally, to the human being. Yet in Zoroastrian cosmology, there is an Endless Light as well as an Endless Darkness. This concept is somewhat different from Suhrawardi’s, since by having both an Endless Light and an Endless Darkness proposes a sense of dualism. Notwithstanding, Suhrawardi writes that darkness is not an entity unto itself, but rather, darkness is only lacking light.

In contrast to Corbin’s hypothesis, John Walbridge believes that Suhrawardi favored, instead, the works of Plato and al-Ghazālī over Zoroaster. Walbridge argues that Corbin relies too heavily on the symbolic gestures that may be similar between Suhrawardi and Zoroaster. Corbin romanticizes this alleged tie between the two ideologies, which ultimately, he believes Suhrawardi championed as an attempt for an Islamic return to true enlightenment of the ancient Persians. Walbridge, even though he
demonstrates a vast respect for Corbin and admits that Suhrawardi was influenced slightly by Persian thought, refutes Corbin’s hypothesis by explaining Suhrawardi’s Peripatetic texts. The clearest explanations of Suhrawardi’s key philosophical positions come within this argument against the Peripatetics called the *sophismata*. In due course, Walbridge considers, “Suhrawardi’s interest in ancient Iran was derivative and the same nature as the exoticism of such philosophers as Porphyry and Iamblichus. For Suhrawardi the central point of the philosophical tradition was Plato, not Zoroaster.”

Walbridge argues that the philosophical system constructed by Suhrawardi was grounded heavily in Greek Philosophy. In actuality, it is somewhat difficult to attain explicit evidence, which provides ample proof that Suhrawardi used Greek philosophy as a resource for his own philosophical system. For it is rare for Suhrawardi to cite his sources. Another difficulty arises when analyzing whether Suhrawardi was able to acquire Greek sources. His predecessor Avicenna definitely was able to obtain an immense amount of Greek philosophical resources in the library of Bukhara, while Averroes maintained a similar advantage in Cordova. However, it is unknown if the same resources were available to Suhrawardi in Iran, Anatolia, and Syria.

Suhrawardi definitely had the Islamic versions of the Peripatetics while studying as a youth; though, Suhrawardi seemed to rely more on the Platonic philosophical system instead. By looking at concepts maintained within Suhrawardi’s metaphysics of light, it is easy to see the parallels with Platonism. Suhrawardi demonstrates elements of Platonism within his philosophical structure, so it is probable the Suhrawardi had fragments of the Greek works. Walbridge believes Suhrawardi used all the Platonic works and renditions available to him to reinvent his version, which, in a sense, played
homage to Plato. For example, Suhrawardi used Plato’s doctrine of Universal Forms, which compares to Suhrawardi’s archetypes. Walbridge writes, “Suhrawardi was quite capable of understanding the philosophical implications of various Greek systems from the fragmentary information available to him.” Suhrwardi, therefore, believed himself to be the next link in the chain of Platonic transmission. This link traced, “From the Academy of Plato’s old age through the Pythagoreanizing Neoplatonists like Iamblichus and Proclus into the Islamic world and that has its defenders still.”

Suhrwardi was one of the intellectuals that reinvented or reintroduced this system to the Islamic world. The Platonic system fits perfectly with Suhrwardi’s understanding of philosophy and mysticism, for it coincides together. Walbridge articulates this point:

It is no accident that these philosophers should all be interested in both Pythagoras and Plato, that they considered mysticism central to philosophical inquiry, and that they were interested in the views of ‘oriental’ sages. These are positions that grow naturally from their common underlying commitments. The Greek texts, relatively well understood, thus clarify the nature and logic of Suhrwardi’s position.

Moreover, one of the most important factors, which explains Suhrwardi’s appreciation for Greek Philosophy, was that it fit perfectly with another one of his major influences, Sufism. For with the incorporation of both Greek philosophy and Islamic mysticism, for Suhrwardi, these systems engendered mystical experience and absolute truth.
Dialectic Reasoning or Intuitive Philosophy

A significant influence on Suhrawardi was al-Ghazālī. Abū Hāmid Muhammad Ibn Muhammad al-Tūsī al-Ghazālī was possibly the most influential intellectual of medieval Islam. Al-Ghazālī is a prominent figure in law, philosophy, theology, and Sufism. Al-Ghazālī received his education at a young age. He succeeded in being “trained as an Islamic Lawyer (faqīh) and theologian (mutakallim) and became a noted Islamic mystic (sūfī).”25 It is no wonder Suhrawardi saw al-Ghazālī as such a prominent and influential figure.

Again, Walbridge views al-Ghazālī as the predecessor to Suhrawardi.26 Walbridge argues that Suhrawardi took the work of al-Ghazālī and applied philosophical principles more rigorously. Both al-Ghazālī and Suhrawardi displayed a similar cosmology of light, believed that the means to true ‘ilm was epistemologically through mystical experience, and challenged the contemporaneous Peripatetic philosophies.27 The similarities are so exteriorly prominent, it is difficult to not see the comparisons.

Many Muslim philosophers and theologians have looked at the light verse in the Qur’an and developed various exegetical understandings. The Qur’an 24:35 reads:

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is a niche wherein is a lamp—the lamp is in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star—lit from a blessed olive tree, neither eastern nor western, whose oil almost lights up, though fire should not touch it. Light upon light. Allah guides to His Light whomever He wishes. Allah draws parables for mankind, and Allah has knowledge of all things.28
Al-Ghazālī and Suhrawardi also demonstrated an exegetical understanding of this verse. Al-Ghazālī developed a metaphorical cosmology of light that coincided with the light verse in the Qur’an. Ghazālī believed that there are gradations of light descending from the Real Light or God to the elect of the elect, the elect, and the common people. Yet these gradations of light are sheer metaphors without reality. Only God is the Real and True Light—He alone, by himself.

Suhrawardi also developed an extensive cosmology of lights. Nonetheless for Suhrawardi, the gradations of light that descended from the Real Light, or what Suhrawardi refers to as the Light of Lights, were actual physical emanations of light manifested ontologically within the reality of human existence. Thus light was not metaphorically positioned to describe an unveiling of knowledge to those who seek out truth. But rather, divine light emanates from the Light of Lights and human beings maintained different levels of brightness according to their human rank or their level of enlightenment. In other words, all things are gradations of actual light. Thus, the Light of Lights is constantly emanating and receiving light in a cosmological fashion.

Both al-Ghazālī and Suhrawardi also perceived ‘ilm as deriving from mystical experience. Thus for both intellectuals, absolute truth was in fact veiled from human perception, albeit human beings were able to transcend this barrier through mystical experience. Al-Ghazālī studied intensely in philosophy and theology to determine which tradition would unveil absolute truth, but found that these disciplines only added confusion. Yet these disciplines claimed the ability to attain the truth, so he realized it was still possible through some means. He realized this after suffering a nervous breakdown due to doubt. For al-Ghazālī, absolute truth could only be found through the Sufī
path to mystical experience. As demonstrated in the preceding chapter, Sufism extends orthodox Islam by emphasizing devotion to God through means of intense attachment to orthodox virtues that sustain moral purity, as well as the orthodox technologies that enable communication. Sufism uses these concepts, and by incorporating excessive devotion to God, to enable mystical experience which they believe provides them with tastes (dhāwq) of truth until the absolute truth of God’s Light is unveiled (kāshf). Thus al-Ghazālī abandoned his academic chair and career in Baghdad to pursue the Sufi path.

Suhrāwārī also holds the Sufi path and mysticism as valuable in reaching ‘ilm. This path enables a seer to overcome the veil which convolutes true perception. Suhrāwārī quotes the Qur’an 34:3 in saying, “The faithless say, ‘The Hour will not overtake us.’ Say. ‘Yes indeed, by my Lord, it will surely come to you.’—The Knower of the Unseen, not [even] an atom’s weight escapes Him in the heavens or in the earth, nor [is there] anything smaller than that nor bigger, but it is in a manifest Book.”

Suhrāwārī believes that nothing is veiled to God, and in turn, if one follows the Sufi path proficiently, nothing will be veiled to humankind. For clear vision is not based on the “imprinting of an image or on the emission of something,” clear vision is when there is no veil between the seer and the object of vision. Ultimately, al-Ghazālī and Suhrāwārī grounded true ‘ilm epistemologically in mystical experience. Walbridge concurs, “Ghazālī began with a light from heaven, unexpectedly illuminating his soul and driving away doubt. Suhrāwārī started with an examination of the Self, generalizing from the phenomenon of vision and sensation in general to a theory of knowledge by presence that encompassed mystical experience and brought it within the scope of reason.” Hence, al-Ghazālī and Suhrāwārī valued mystical experience over the
analytical dialectic theory of rational demonstration by means of perception of the senses used by Peripatetics; so both intellectuals found themselves skeptical to the epistemological approach through means of reason.

With the Greek translation movement, Islamic philosophers like al-Kindī began to cultivate philosophical systems that combined elements of Aristotelian philosophy with Neoplatonics. One of the most prominent intellectuals to follow in the traditions established by al-Kindī was Avicenna. Avicenna was not only influential in the Islamic world, both his philosophical treatises and medical texts were also extremely instrumental in Europe. Avicenna propagated the discipline of dialectic theory; so as a reaction to Avicenna’s epistemological methods, both al-Ghazālī and Suhrawardi disputed the concept of reason as an epistemological tool in perceiving the absolute truth.40

Michael Marmura writes, “Avicenna’s Metaphysics is an endorsement of basic Aristotelian concepts—an endorsement, however, that includes refinements and expansions leading to formulations as in the discussion of universals, that are distinctly Avicennan.”41 The basic building blocks of this system are a combination of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic ideologies, yet Avicenna expands these concepts and develops a unique philosophical system that incorporates Islamic theology as well.42 However, Avicenna’s developments in philosophical understanding caused major dissonance with al-Ghazālī and Suhrawardi.

Al-Ghazālī believed that Avicennan philosophy had ventured away from true principles of Islam, thus making certain concepts, which were derived by dialectic reasoning, heretical. In response, Al-Ghazālī issued a diatribe that refuted twenty
objectionable doctrines, seventeen being heretical and three being anti-Islamic; these three were the beliefs in the eternality of the world, lack of a physical resurrection, and God’s lack of knowledge over the particulars. Suhrawardi also wrote a similar treatise that also refuted Peripatetic philosophy in the first part of his *Philosophy of Illumination*.

Like al-Ghazālī’s *Tahāfut al-falāsifa (The Incoherence of the Philosophers)*, Suhrawardi critiques the philosophers in the first part of *The Philosophy of Illumination*, called the *sophismata*. Since Suhrawardi was formally trained in Peripatetic philosophy, he not only grasped the philosophical concepts intellectually, he also accepted certain aspects of the Peripatetic dialectic reasoning as essential in relating his appropriate philosophy. Also like al-Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt al-anwār (The Niche of Lights)*, which posed certain solutions to their common set of problems, Suhrawardi designed his second section of *The Philosophy of Illumination* that introduces similar answers to the same problems. The common solution was that the epistemological means to absolute truth was through mystical experience without dissipating traditional Islamic orthodoxy.

Suhrawardi designed *The Philosophy of Illumination* for both students of intuitive philosophy (mystical) and discursive philosophy (dialectic reasoning). Yet as Suhrawardi writes, “There is nothing in it for the discursive philosopher not given to, and not in search of, intuitive philosophy.” Thus, this work was designed to change the opinions of discursive philosophers similar to Suhrawardi’s own experience. Suhrawardi claimed that Aristotle visited him in a dream to inform him of the veracity of Platonic philosophy and knowledge by presence as a mystical experience in lieu of the Peripatetics. This experience convinced Suhrawardi of the reality of Platonic Forms as well as the epistemological merit of intuitive philosophy.
Dialectic reasoning attempts to construct syllogisms based on axiomatic, known truths comprehended through the demonstration of the senses. Suhrawardi writes, “In true sciences, only demonstration is used. Demonstration is a syllogism composed of premises known with certainty. The premises that we know with certainty may be ‘primary,’ meaning those to which assent is given merely by conceiving their terms and whose truth no one can deny after their terms have been understood.”48 These premises can be known through outer or inner senses. But the outer senses only comprehend sensory data, while the inner senses are able to attain and comprehend “intuitive premises.”49 Consequently Suhrawardi believed that the unknown was only determined by means of knowledge by presence, in lieu of the Peripatetic concept, which reasons that the unknown can be determined by the known.50 Knowledge by presence, therefore, is needed because reason does not obtain all knowledge or absolute truth. Suhrawardi concludes, “It is clear that it is impossible for a human being to construct an essential definition in the way the Peripatetics require—a difficulty which even their master [Aristotle] admits.”51 Suhrawardi appreciated the Peripatetic form of reason used to articulate syllogism, but ultimately, the knowledge and absolute truth was only obtained through knowledge by presence.

Suhrawardi apparently disputed Peripatetic concepts, especially in regards to God’s knowledge of the particulars. Knowledge by presence reconciled this disparity. As Avicenna argues, God’s knowledge is of a universal nature. Notwithstanding the Qur’anic verse 50:16 states, “Certainly We have created man and We know to what his soul tempts him, and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein.”52 Suhrawardi argues that God knows each particular of His creation, and provides all humanity with the ability
to receive knowledge. In this area he writes, “In every seeking soul there is a portion, be it small or great, of the light of God. Everyone who strives has intuition, be it perfect or imperfect. Knowledge did not end with one people, so that the doors of heaven are shut behind them and the rest of the world is denied the possibility of obtaining more.” For God, the giver of knowledge is not stingy of the unseen.

Furthermore, Suhrawardi believed dialectic reasoning to be insufficient for intuitive philosophy. Even though this type of reasoning had merit as far as articulating particular intuitions, epistemologically, dialectic reasoning could never merit as the end of knowledge, and God provided absolute truth and knowledge to all of those who ventured in search of it. Knowledge by presence was the ultimate epistemological method to perceive the Absolute.

**Knowledge by Presence**

Suhrawardi explains that knowledge by presence is the transcendental stage in which all humanity has the ability to attain absolute truth, but only after human beings have ascended past the veiled barriers of temporal existence. Knowledge by presence as a mystical experience clarifies the ability humanity possesses to receive personal intuition from a divine source. Suhrawardi believed this experience to be of vital importance as a traditional Muslim and intuitive philosopher.
Suhrawardi constructed an extensive cosmology of light that coincided with his understanding of knowledge by presence, which stood as the zenith of his intuitive structure. Hossein Ziai argues:

The Philosophy of Illumination begins with an attack on the Peripatetic notion of definition, which Suhrawardi modifies and expands into a more comprehensive theory of knowledge that emphasizes self-knowledge and self-consciousness as the grounds of all knowledge. This view of knowledge then serves as the foundation for a cosmology in which real essences of the true being of things is set forth in a continuous sequence of self-conscious and self-subsistent entities within a continuum, depicted as ‘lights,’ which together constitute the whole cosmos.  

Suhrawardi believed that everything was a gradation of light or lack thereof. Suhrawardi’s cosmology, thus, depicted an extensive chain of radiating light that emanated through the cosmos. The principle source within this chain was the Light of Lights, or God.

Since the Light of Lights is the source of everything that exists within Suhrawardi’s cosmological order, the Light of Lights is self-emanating by means of Its self-consciousness; because of the contemplation and self-awareness, the Light of Lights being the most self-conscious being in the universe, Its radiating light or “abstract lights” emanates to “obtain”⁵⁶ al-nūr al-aqrab or the Closest Light.⁵⁷ When the Closest Light realizes Its self-awareness and contemplates the Light of Lights, light is both reflected back to the Light of Lights and extended in the creation of the next proximate light. The higher light always maintains control over the lower lights. Hence, the Light of Lights maintains control over all things and radiates light because of what It is ontologically, the
necessary existent. As Ziai explains, “Thus, that the Light of Lights exists becomes a first axiom from which the whole of reality may be deduced.”

This cosmological scheme of light continues to descend to the lower lights. A higher light is more intense and perfect than its successor, so the Light of Lights is the most perfect and intense light. Finally, the closest and most significant light vis-à-vis the sub-lunar realm of existence is al-nūr al-mudabbir or the Managing Light. The Managing Light is the most instrumental light in regards to knowledge by presence, since this light is the link between cosmic and human. Ziai compares this light to the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit, or the link between God and Humanity. For Suhrawardi the Managing Light is a soul that is connected to both human and celestial bodies, thus there is a particular Managing Light for every human being on this planet. The concept of the Managing Lights is very similar to Plato’s Universal Forms, and is designed to describe the essential representation of a specific archetype for every particular human being. Consequently, because of the Managing Lights, the Light of Lights is able to govern immanently with an intimate knowledge of the particulars; and because of the Managing lights, human beings are able to discover absolute ‘ilm by means of knowledge by presence. This connection to the Light of Lights was fundamental for Suhrawardi. Suhrawardi states, “The Light of Lights is the ruling Agent despite all intermediaries, the Cause of their activity, the Origin of every emanation, the absolute Creator, with or without intermediary.”

Suhrawardi also connected his cosmological order to his theory of knowledge by presence, which is based on self-consciousness and vision. As previously explained, light emanates through the cosmos by means of self-consciousness and vision. Each
sphere of light is either obtained or created once the previous light gains self-awareness and vision of its predecessor. This concept is similar to the human being’s ability to receive intuition, since knowledge by presence requires the human being to realize self-consciousness and gain vision of each representative archetype. In other words, the human being needed to become self-aware by training the soul to perceive its archetype and purify it sufficiently to manifest its perfect essence to establish a union.

Yet, this “union” was unique to the Peripatetic understanding of mystical unity. The Peripatetics believed mystical union to be a connection with the Active Intellect that at some point had previously been disconnected. So in other words, the Peripatetics attempted to re-find that unity with the active intellect. However Suhrawardi understood this concept differently. Suhrawardi preached that union or a connection with this concept of the Active Intellect was not dependent on re-finding a connection, but the connection was re-established by means of self-realization. Once the self was realized, the vision of the appropriate archetype was perceived.64

Suhrawardi maintained that the path to self-realization was by means of purification of the temporal or material self, or what he calls the “fortress.” The path, as previously established in chapter one, was that of the Sufi. As a Sufi, followers are able to focus their devotion towards God by concentrating on their nearness to Him in exchange for human commodities. Suhrawardi sustained this Sufi path, since it required human beings to turn towards the Light of Lights and forget their fortresses.65 In theory, the human fortress is not in a purified state. In traditional Islam, the Arabic term fitrāh describes the primordial created state of the human being in covenant with God, the Creator. Each human being is created in the fitrāh, which prescribes humanity with a
perfect submissive nature and remembrance of God. The human being is given a commanding light, or their human rational soul, to assist them with remembrance of God. The commanding lights are attached to the celestial barriers. Yet because of the darkness or lack of light in the world, the fitrāḥ is forgotten and the commanding light is clouded. Suhrawardi explains, “If the human fortress is corrupted and the commanding light is clouded by the darknesses, not knowing what is beyond it, it is drawn by its desire to the lowest of the low.” Thus each human being is responsible for clarifying its commanding light and purging the corrupted fortress, in order to perceive knowledge of the beyond and maintain joy.

Suhrawardi believed that all dark substances truly desired light. In order to shed dark substances from all that is light, human beings are required to enter in a state of death, which purges the human fortress of darkness. In Arabic, this concept is referred to as fanā or extinction. Sufism enables this extinction of the materially dependent self by taking orthodox virtues and technologies and using them to surpass the regular devotion to God and creating an utter dependence on Him. This utter dependence assists with the extinction or death of the material fortress, so a purified soul can be reborn into the fitrāḥ with sheer remembrance of God and a connection to the dominating lights. Suhrawardi explains this extinction:

The mightiest state is the state of death, by which the managing light sheds the darknesses. If it has no remnant of attachment to the body, it will emerge into the world of light and be attached to the dominating lights. There will it behold all the veils of light as though transparent in relation to the glory of the eternal, the all-encompassing Light: the Light of Lights. It will become, as it were, placed within the all-encompassing light. This station is mighty indeed.
The Sufi path of fanā and its rediscovery of the fitrāh reestablishes the proper human state ready for the mystical experience by means of knowledge by presence. Again Suhrawardi counsels, “If distractions of man’s external senses are reduced, he will be freed from the distraction of imagination and will become cognizant of hidden matters and thereby see veridical dreams.” A significant point in Suhrawardi’s philosophy was the human being’s ability to perfect oneself in order to be ready for knowledge by presence. This point resided innately within the unity of the human being and the human being’s individual archetype, for this unity enabled pure vision.

Suhrawardi preserved the ideology that vision defines the phenomena when subjects are able to see objects. Since the reality of the Light of Lights must exist and all things are gradations of light emanating from the Light of Lights, the lowest emanation must possess the ability to see all of the higher light. This is the return of light that reflects back towards the Light of Lights that is prevalent in Suhrawardi’s cosmological scheme as an action within the emanation process. This cosmological scheme designated a longitudinal chain of lights that starts with the Light of Lights and descends unto the Managing Light. Upon reaching the Managing Light, the scheme shifted into horizontal, latitudinal levels of numerous lights. Since the Managing Light controls all inferior lights, these lights exist as original forms or archetypes of the copied and lower commanding lights that reside as the human rational soul within each human existent. These commanding lights, thus, are permanently attached to the archetypes, but veiled, i.e. each individual human rational soul is connected to its original and perfected archetype. Suhrawardi argues that human beings are only veiled from their archetypes because of the perfection of the archetype’s light and the deficiency of light within
human beings. Therefore these archetypes are not hidden, but just veiled. Nonetheless by rediscovering the *fitrāh*, human beings are rediscovering their archetypes.\(^\text{72}\)

The essential principle in knowledge by presence for Suhrawardi was for the human being to attain perfection, or rather, to emulate the same brightness as the human being’s archetype. Ziai again writes, “Knowledge is obtained when the identity preserving relational correspondence, that is to say, “sameness,” relates the subject and the object, or any type of knower to its known.”\(^\text{73}\) Once the human being is able to attain perfection by means of self-consciousness, the copied entity is able to reunite with its particular archetype and reflect light. When this unity occurs, the human being as manifested light is able to envision the ascension of the higher lights which lead to the Light of Lights. As a result, absolute truth or ‘ilm is seen and God’s knowledge of the particulars is witnessed. True vision, thus, is nothing more than an illuminated object opposite a sound eye.\(^\text{74}\) This state of vision is the nearest location to God a human being can ascertain. Suhrawardi proclaims, “The nearer the illuminated object or light, the more easily it is beheld, so long as it remains a light or illuminated.”\(^\text{75}\)

**Prophet or Sage**

With the development of Suhrawardi’s philosophy on knowledge by presence, Suhrawardi proclaimed his convictions to the intellectual and political elite of Aleppo to gain patronage. This concept of intuitive philosophy, however, proved to be the cause of his imprisonment and death. Suhrawardi held intuitive philosophy as an equivalent to prophetic revelation, so traditional jurists such as the *Jahbal* brothers, tenured *faqīhs* in
the Nūrīya Madrasa, deemed Suhrwārdi to be a heretic. The problem with this view, as far as Suhrwārdi’s adjudicators were concerned, was that Suhrwārdi associated knowledge by presence with revelation, and the sage with the prophet.

Suhrwārdi believed that prophets were the leaders of humanity. Prophets were assigned to help human beings remember their fitrāh and provide them with the correct virtues and technologies to assist with inducing fanā. Suhrwārdi explains, “God has covenanted with every generation that they might answer the one who calls to them and flee the lies that the parties have invented against God ere the veil of the time of Resurrection weighs heavy upon them.” Human beings benefit with an involuntary desire to know the higher lights, thus prophets are instruments of God that hearken to this involuntary yearning. God provides prophets with revelations and messages to support and instruct human beings on how to fill this yearning emptiness within their souls. These revelations are given freely to the prophets; i.e. the prophets perceive their archetypes naturally without conditions.

Nonetheless, Suhrwārdi constituted intuitive philosophy as an equivalent to revelation. For both the sage, or intuitive philosopher, and the prophet gained knowledge by connecting with their appropriate archetype. Even though this connection was provided freely to prophets, sages who were able to reach this level of luminosity maintained the same level of ‘ilm. Suhrwārdi divided the sages by the merit of their intuitive methods. As previously demonstrated, sages that followed the Peripatetics, the dialectic philosophers who depended on demonstration of the sense, were only able to attain the lowest levels of absolute truth and knowledge. Sages that maintained a foundation in only intuitive philosophy, namely Sufism, were able to perceive absolute
truth and knowledge, but were unable to adequately rationalize their mystical experience. Suhrawardi labeled the sages who maintained a solid foundation in both the Peripatetic tradition as well as the intuitive tradition as the highest level of sages. Coincidentally, Suhrawardi harnessed a mastery of both disciplines.

In summary, Suhrawardi considered intuitive philosophy as a prominent means to "ilm or absolute knowledge and truth. Suhrawardi believed that God always answered prayers, even if the object was sought by a sage instead of a prophet. This caused major problems with the orthodox clergy in Aleppo. Even though he found patronage with the prince, his father Saladin eventually ordered his execution in 1191. The historical sources are not explicitly clear whether Suhrawardi was executed because he truly envisioned himself as a prophet, or if his prosecutors merely misunderstood his illuminative philosophy. However Suhrawardi’s legacy remained with the institution of the Illuminationist School. Scholars like Shams al-Dīn Shahrazūri were able to uphold Suhrawardi’s philosophical tradition.

In the end, Suhrawardi instituted an intuitive philosophical system that maintained elements of Platonic philosophy and Sufism. The focal point of his cosmological order of lights was illuminated by means of mystical experience which he called knowledge by presence. Knowledge by presence described the transcendent connection between human beings and the Absolute by means of self-consciousness and vision. Accordingly illumination philosophy deviated from the normalcy maintained within the medieval Islamic philosophical tradition proliferated by philosophers such as al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and Averroes, who combined Neoplatonic and Peripatetic traditions. Suhrawardi elaborated on the understanding of al-Ghazālī, for Suhrawardi also claimed that Sufism
was imperative in order to purify the soul to enable the perception of the archetypes.

Even though Suhrawardi viewed the Peripatetic traditions as a valuable means to articulate mystical experience, ultimately the only epistemological means to derive absolute truth and knowledge was by the means of knowledge by presence.
End Notes

2 *Ilm* describes the Arabic term for knowledge. For Suhrawardi, this knowledge was absolute, or even, absolute truth of God (Absolute Reality, Light of Lights), brought forth by one’s own individual archetype (*al-*ilm al-Laduni or knowledge by presence), which contained an emanation of divine, immaterial light from the Light of Lights.
4 Cristina D’Ancona, 10.
5 Cristina D’Ancona, 17–18.
6 Cristina D’Ancona, 21.
8 Adamson, 33.
9 This information is taken from the Translator’s introduction in Suhrawardi, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, xv.
12 *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, 45.
32 Suhrawardi, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, 82–89.
36 *The Qur’an* verse 34:3, 598.
38 Suhrawardi, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, 104.
Al-Ghazālī also opposed Kalam theology for this same reason, their dependency on dialectic theory.


42 Avicenna, xxii.

43 Al-Ghazālī, Incoherence of the Philosophers, trans. by Michael Marmura, (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), xix–xxi. This is also compared with Walbridge, The Wisdom of the Mystic East, 55. Al-Ghazālī also criticized the philosophy of al-Fārābī.

44 Walbridge, The Wisdom of the Mystic East, 56.

45 Walbridge, The Wisdom of the Mystic East, 56.

46 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 4.

47 Walbridge, The Leaven of the Ancients, 16.


49 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 27.

50 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 10.

51 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 11.

52 The Qur’an verse 50:16, 733.

53 The Qur’an verses 81:22–24, 838.


55 Hossein Ziai, “Suhrawardi,” 38. Ziai explains that the First Light is obtained (yuhsal) rather than created.

56 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 114. This is also supported by Hossein Ziai, “Suhrawardi,” 36.

57 Hossein Ziai, “Suhrawardi,” 37. This can also be called the First Light.

58 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 114.


60 Hossein Ziai, “Suhrawardi,” 38.

61 Hossein Ziai, “Suhrawardi,” 35.


63 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 114.

64 Hossein Ziai, “Suhrawardi,” 34.

65 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 161.

66 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 151.

67 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 142.

68 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 141

69 For Suhrawardi the dominating lights were the immaterial lights that have not direct relation to material beings and are neither souls controlling bodies or spheres nor archetypes of species; found in Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 197.

70 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 150.

71 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 151.

72 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 113.

73 Hossein Ziai, “Suhrawardi,” 36.

74 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 96

75 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 96.

76 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, xvi. This periscope is cited in the Translators’ Introduction.


81 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 153.

82 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 158.

83 Averroes maintained the most authentic rendition of the Aristotelian philosophical system.
Chapter Three

Unio Mystica

It has been difficult, within monotheistic religions, to elucidate theology in determining the true nature of God as being either transcendent or immanent, which has defined the subtle relations between Him and humankind as either universal or particular. These differentiating relationships constituted how humankind worships and remembers God in regards to traditional worship, liturgical practices, and communication with the divine. Throughout history, humankind has labored assiduously to comprehend the nature of God along with the relevance of Jesus Christ maintained within soteriology. Humankind, thus, grappled with how the human species may know the true nature of God epistemologically. Theologians, philosophers, and mystics uniquely understood these principles and ascertained fissures of perennial or eternal truth through their own particular ideologies. One mystic and priest in particular, San Juan de la Cruz, believed that humankind was destined to communicate with God immanently and personally, for it was God's plan to magnify human existence ontologically. Yet, San Juan de la Cruz manifested these mystical ideologies in sixteenth century C.E. Spain, where tradition had already been solidified within the Roman Catholic Church and where reform was taking place to counter any infiltrations of the Reformation. Still, San Juan de la Cruz accepted the Roman Catholic traditions and liturgical practices as certain precepts in the worship
of Jesus Christ, yet he also believed God desired more in remembering His most holy Son. Therefore, for San Juan de la Cruz, remembering God surpassed traditional worship and liturgical practices universally accepted by the Roman Catholic Church; remembrance was an actual commitment, connection, and desire for mutual love with God similar to how he describes in his poem, *Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ*, as a bride desires the bridegroom. Thus through his poetic voice and paradigm, San Juan de la Cruz articulated the will of God as being a desire for *unio mystica* or mystical union with the souls of His creation in order to espouse knowledge, truth, and most importantly, His love for humanity, which in turn, would perfect the human soul. Ruth Gordon writes, “Mysticism is the immediate feeling of the unity of the self with God,” or mysticism is the art of unification with God that takes place after the training of the soul, purification of the soul, and installment of a new abstract soul ready to merge with the divine.¹ The union, or *unio mystica*, begins with the attainments of gradual tastes or realizations, which in turn, lead to a complete escape from the reality of the world and unification with the Divine Reality.

The ideas or mystical practices adopted by San Juan de la Cruz, to a point, threatened Catholicism in Spain. The Reformation had significantly damaged the prominence of the Roman Catholic Church in Western Europe, so in response, the Church opposed any type of religious schisms that detracted from traditional Catholic practice and liturgy. Nonetheless the Reformation left sixteenth century Spain untouched, yet the caution, coupled with the paranoia of the remnant Spanish Inquisition, induced a precarious milieu for any type of religious practice that may eventually threaten Catholicism. Fr. Marcelo Del Niño Jesus, Provincial of the Discalced
Carmelites, writes that mysticism relies on the fringes of true principles and that one should not venture into studying mysticism unless they know of the dangers and maintain a foot securely within the truth. Yet despite the dangers, mysticism offered San Juan de la Cruz a sense of escape or comfort. Mysticism was not unique with San Juan de la Cruz and became a significant consternation in the Spanish milieu, since mysticism seemed to be manifesting an esoteric religious ethos sponsored by an extraordinary group of literary giants such as Teresa of Ávila, Ignatius of Loyola, and Maria of Agreda who all disseminated their writings in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These mystical literary giants desired an immanent connection and personal relationship with the divine; furthermore, mysticism, which focuses more on the internal purification and perfection of the soul rather than the external, was practiced for a number of years throughout many different religions and shared a common mystical core, *unio mystica*. Even though San Juan de la Cruz was influenced by the mysticism of these other religions, which will be explained later, he transcribed the process through his writings, so that others would be able to understand and experience the internal connection with God. Thus for San Juan de la Cruz, belief in God, as well as the purpose of humankind’s ontological existence, reached beyond the traditional ideals and liturgy of the time. It surpassed the theological doctrines of Augustine, and Aquinas, because it depended independently on the cultivation of a personal relationship of love with Jesus Christ. *Unio mystica*, thus, enabled the reception of knowledge, truth, and the experience of love and intercourse to perfect the soul, obtain the potential beauty of the divine image, and transcend the barriers of humanity.
The Life of San Juan de la Cruz and His Turn to a Life of Solitude and Mysticism

The early life of San Juan de la Cruz manifested the harsh realities of temporal existence which he later used as a source for his escape into God’s love. Juan de Yepes y Alvazez was born into extreme poverty in Fontiveros, Spain, in the year 1542. Juan’s father, Gonzalo de Yepes, died a few months after his birth, leaving Juan’s mother Catalina Alvarez with three children and insufficient funds. Catalina attempted to work to support her three children, though she was unable to provide means for their shelter and sustenance. With no support from her family or the family of Gonzolo, Catalina sent Juan to the orphanage, Colegio de la Doctrina, where Juan was educated and nourished.\(^6\)

Juan felt the abysmal plummeting of his spiritual and physical self from the calamitous hardships that he faced and the lack of love directed toward him.\(^7\) Consequently, Juan sought for something or someone who may incorporate love within his life and who offered an escape from the harsh realities found in terrestrial circumstances.

Juan later joined the Jesuit Colegio in Medina where he studied the humanities including the classics of Virgil, Horace, Cicero, Seneca, Caesar, Ovid, Suetonius, and Pliny. Juan also studied the classical languages of Latin and Greek, along with religion and Catholic theology.\(^8\) After Juan joined the Carmelite order of Medina at the habit of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, he demonstrated such merit as an academic and theologian that he was sent, as a representative of the Carmelite order, to the University of Salamanca where he studied theology from 1564 to 1567.\(^9\) In the University of Salamanca, Juan learned the classical philosophies and theologies of Aristotle, Plato,
Aquinas, and Augustine that greatly affected his own understanding of ontology and epistemology. Coupled with his journey to find love, his studies at the University of Salamanca influenced his decision to become a priest in 1567. After Juan was ordained a priest, he immediately desired to live a life of solitude, alone with Christ and joined Teresa de Ávila’s commitment to reform and construct a new foundation of a priory based on that primitive lifestyle.

Yet in complete irony, since San Juan de la Cruz chose a life of solitude and joined Teresa de Ávila’s reform movement, his Carmelite brothers captured him and held him prisoner in an extremely small cell, without windows and which was used as a lavatory, for nine months. The imprisonment of San Juan de la Cruz demonstrated the reaction of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, for this motif cautioned discalced priests and admonished them to maintain traditional practice within their worship. Juan was admonished to forsake the reforming cause of Teresa de Ávila and return to Medina del Campo. However San Juan de la Cruz maintained his commitment to the austere ascetic lifestyle which bolstered his desire for the interior life of solitude, alone with Christ. Accordingly, Juan returned to prison, and suffered extreme hardships, such as exile, abuse, and torture at the hands of his Carmelite brothers. Due to the intense sufferings and hardships while in prison at Toledo, the emptiness returned, but emerged as a catalyst for one of Juan’s most famous poems, the *Spiritual Canticle*, in which he speaks about the search, discovery, and union of the bride and Bridegroom or loved and Beloved. This experience revealed the commitment of San Juan de la Cruz as well as his willingness to embrace asceticism and hardships to perfect his soul and ascertain sentiments of love from God.
San Juan de la Cruz and the Influences for His Beliefs in Unio Mystica

Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, San Juan de la Cruz did not necessarily create mysticism or even this particular appearance of mysticism. So who truly influenced San Juan de la Cruz to seek this alternative esoteric route or claimed that there existed a specific path that actually could beget means of determining truth and understanding the potential of humankind and his union with God?

San Juan de la Cruz received a diverse education in both the secular and religious studies. In regards to his secular or classical studies, which were in the works of Aristotle and Plato, there is a clear chain that links the concepts of these particular philosophers with San Juan de la Cruz’s intellectual methodology. In ancient thought, the distinction between religion and philosophy was not truly apparent, for within the classical motif of metaphysics the idea of religion and philosophy was amalgamated into one doctrine of salvation. This concern for soteriology marked a great awareness within the writings of Plato. Eugene A. Maio argues, “There is a far-reaching agreement between Plato and the Mystery religions. For both of them salvation means the deliverance of the soul from the prison of the body and the senses, and its restoration to its original heavenly home.” While salvation came by purifications and ritual observances in the esoteric religions, for Plato, salvation came by means of philosophy; but within philosophy, purification and conversion is also a requirement for true salvation.
Plotinus extended the teachings of Plato and ensconced Plato’s teachings within the mystic tradition of Neo-Platonism. As Maio argues, Neoplatonism incorporates Plato’s teachings that the greatest good is the greatest likeness to God, but emphasizes the mystical approach to God and His transcendence. Plotinus sought *unio mystica* with the One or God, since it completed the potential of a human being, in such that the unification directly resulted in the utmost joy or permanent pleasure within the human being’s very existence. As Plotinus writes, “If mere Being is insufficient, if happiness demands the fullness of life, and exists, therefore, where nothing is lacking of all that belongs to the idea of life, then happiness can exist only in a being that lives fully.” Hence, it is possible to draw the link that San Juan de la Cruz used a Neoplatonic motif within his poems as he describes the required ascent, purification of the soul, the journey through the perils of night, and finally, the spiritual marriage which is inherently involved within *unio mystica* and that insures feelings of love, joy, and the fulfillment of existence.

Another possible influence on San Juan de la Cruz may have been Islamic mysticism or Sufism. One scholar in particular, Miguel Asin Palacios, in his book *Saint John of the Cross and Islam*, argues that Islamic mysticism or Sufism is a direct influence for San Juan de la Cruz. This argument is in fact extremely plausible, due to the prominence of Islam in Spain and Islam’s influence on San Juan. Spain has greatly benefited from a myriad of monotheistic religions that flourished within its history. Islam ruled an immense portion of Southern Spain from the eighth century to the fifteenth. Thus Islam significantly influenced Spain’s religious ethos, as well as its sciences. Yet even after the Muslims were gradually pushed out of Spain by the end of the *Reconquista* of 1492, the cultural and religious influences still remained among the populace.
In further detail, after the Muslims entered into the Iberian Peninsula in the eighth century and named the peninsula Al-Andalus or Andalusia, a relationship of toleration interchanged vis-á-vis the monotheistic faiths. *La Convivencia* or coexistence, described by historians, cultivated a mutual sharing of much cultural significance including intellectualism, philosophy, and mysticism. Yet *La Convivencia* was not necessarily a proto-modern concept of absolute equality. In contrast, there were significant problems between the three monotheistic religions, as well as with the Pagans. Some of these problems included military raids and pillaging for resources and booty. Nonetheless, mysticism emerged decisively during medieval times and especially proliferated in Al-Andalus were *la Convivencia* bolstered these ideas among Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

Specifically, the rhythm or process of *unio mystica* was a specific vernacular that could be found in both Christian and Islamic mysticism during that similar time and place in which both the Carmelite and Shadhilite schools developed. As a result, San Juan de la Cruz used a similar vernacular of terminology, metaphors, as well as the renunciation of everything that was not inherently God, which was a specific teaching of Ibn Abbad of Ronda. Ibn ‘Arabi exhibited similar beliefs as a Sufi mystic, where all humanity was a friend of the Real, and if the friends followed the true path to transcendence, they could reach a similar type of transcendent proximity and be one with the locus of the Real as if He was looking directly at His reflection in a mirror. Finally due to San Juan de la Cruz’s poverty as a child, he was raised in many Islamic neighborhoods in Fontiveros, Arevalo, and Medina del Campo; so as a child, he could have been greatly influenced by Muslim spirituality and even Sufism.
Apart from his secular studies, San Juan de la Cruz also studied the Christian religion and theology. Within Christianity, there is a response to the presence of God being hidden or veiled that engenders the ideal for the perfection of the soul. This perfection is also inherent in mysticism, so it is very conclusive to see that a mystical path to the perfection of the soul may be incorporated within any human being’s desire, as a Christian, to unveil the presence of God. Many Christian theologians flirted with the ideas of mysticism and *unio mystica*. San Juan de la Cruz, in his studies at the University of Salamanca, absorbed many mystical theologies and illuminist methods of prayer, such as Dionysius the Areopagite and Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*. Notwithstanding, San Juan de la Cruz also saw inspiration for his poetic voice in the Bible with the Song of Songs and the treatise of Saint Gregory on this same particular text.

Another Christian influence of San Juan de la Cruz was the charismatic Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard was one of the first medieval theologians to write about *unio mystica*. In his *De Diligendo Deo*, Bernard eloquently expresses that *unio mystica* is based on love and that man may unite with God if he is able to reciprocate this love. However, this *unio mystica* described by Bernard of Clairvaux is not necessarily an ontological union of essences, but rather a prepared or operational union of the willing and loving, or *unitas spiritus*. Bernard’s idea originated with the Pauline doctrine in 1 Corinthians 6:17, “But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.” From this perspective, union is identified with the Holy Spirit, rather than an actual union of two bodies being as one flesh. But for Bernard, this unification of the spirit was only theoretical.
Finally, the scholar Helmut Hatzfield argues that San Juan de la Cruz was ultimately influenced by a combination of Oriental Christianity and Neoplatonism. Furthermore, for Hatzfield, the origins of mysticism, as practiced in medieval Spain, originated directly from these two sources. Hatfield explained that the reason similar strands of mysticism can be found in different parts of the world, articulated by different religions, yet intermingling a similar jargon and understanding, such as Ibn ‘Arabi and Meister Eckhart, was due to these traditions having the same origin. This origin of mysticism, created by Oriental Christians and Neoplatonist merging their thoughts together to either assimilate or reach a common understanding, marked the “ground zero” of unio mystica.

Albeit, no matter what the distinct sources may have been or where these distinct sources may have come from, San Juan de la Cruz incorporated a myriad of different influences to develop an efficient style of prose that mirrored his specific spiritual practices. San Juan de la Cruz vehemently believed that these practices were the will of God and anyone who followed the path he laid forth in his poems would have the opportunity to experience that same love and joy gained through unio mystica.

The problem for San Juan de la Cruz derived not only from his practice of mysticism, for mysticism was not necessarily condemned by the inquisition as long as mystics could prove arbitrarily, with a slim possibility of success, their knowledge was of God; but the problem also derived from becoming marginalized from traditional doctrine and liturgical practices. For San Juan de la Cruz, many of the doctrines and theologies of the great Christian theologians were not adequate in explicating the sentiments he lacked in Christ. San Juan de la Cruz studied the writings of theologians, such as Augustine and
Aquinas, but had a different understanding of how Augustine explained temporal and eternal knowledge, as well as how Aquinas articulated the process in obtaining truth. For San Juan de la Cruz, true remembrance and worship of God needed to exceed the exoteric traditions and doctrines. True worship, thus, depended instinctively on the esoteric nature of the purification and perfection of the soul, as well as the erotic love espoused in the connection of the bride and Bridegroom in *unio mystica*. In this connection of *unio mystica*, San Juan de la Cruz accomplished his utmost potential in transcendence by fulfilling his very nature; thus all humanity, from this interior path, may understand true forms of knowledge, ascertain truth from a pure source, and be loved. For this, according to San Juan de la Cruz, is the will and plan of God.

**Saint Augustine of Hippo and His Argument for Temporal and Eternal Knowledge**

Saint Augustine of Hippo was an extremely authoritative figure in early Christianity as well as an author of a prolific corpus of theological writings. Augustine wrote to bolster the position of Christians in relation to other dominating religious traditions including Neoplatonism, Stoicism, and Pagan worship. Due to his success and prolific influence, Augustine was viewed as the great champion of Christianity. Still, for Augustine, his knowledge came directly from his understandings of the various Christian texts, including the Synoptic and Gnostic gospels. Augustine believed that the Synoptic gospels, or universally accepted scriptural texts, offered a sense of illumination and
revelation, but this was exclusively discovered by hermeneutical research or exegesis and
not from knowledge revealed directly from *unio mystica.*

It is clear, though, that Augustine was well aware of both Platonism and
Neoplatonism, since he deeply respected this type of philosophical endeavor. Augustine explained that Plato was close in obtaining true Christian knowledge, but his
source for knowledge was the problem. For the knowledge obtained in Neoplatonism,
which of course derived from Plato through Plotinus as previously mentioned, was based
in an interior or esoteric process of purification of the soul and *unio mystica* rather than
being essentially based in the scriptures, thus that knowledge could not be the fullness of
God’s revealed truth. In contrast, the understandings of Christianity, as Augustine
believed, was also present in ancient times. The ancients, therefore, already knew of this
true religion and the doctrines ensconced within Christianity. Augustine writes, “That
which today is called the Christian religion existed among the ancients and has never
ceased to exist from the origin of the human race until the time when Christ himself came
and men began to call ‘Christian’ the true religion which already existed beforehand.”

Augustine believed that knowledge was either temporal or eternal. The temporal
knowledge was an exterior or exoteric knowledge ascertained by the principle testaments
of the scriptures and creation. The scriptures, being mainly the Septuagint, Synoptic
Gospels, the Gospel of John, and the Epistles of Paul, along with creation, mutually
illuminated the knowledge of the Word or *λόγος.* Thus in Christianity, these two
testaments both confirm and guide the believer to gain a clear perception of the truth
concerning the invisible God, as well as confirming each other. For both the scriptures
and creation prove the existence of God and the veracity of the other. Also, the scriptures
and creation create a corporeal expression of the Word, which then reflects His nature as well as the image of the Father to humankind. Accordingly, humankind is afforded the ability to perceive creation by three principle means: faith, miracles, and providence.\textsuperscript{36}

With faith and by perceiving scripture and creation, humankind gains the ability to comprehend the temporal knowledge of truth. Faith enables the ability to comprehend the various symbols, allegories, and sacraments that maintain the Incarnation of the Word of God, and thus become more lucid, visible, and infallible.\textsuperscript{37} Also through faith, humankind perceives the fullness of the creation and is able to clearly see the remnants of the hand of God.

Miracles are another form of temporal knowledge described by Augustine in being a principle for humankind which provokes wonder and inspiration. Miracles are not above creation, but conform to the very propensities that enable human weakness. In viewing creation, things that are successively miraculous seem to evade marvel. Nonetheless, when miracles are thrust into the “unusual changeableness,” within the human milieu, they are deemed as miracles. Therefore miracles demand the attention of humanity, so that human beings will seek to understand the very meaning of each marvel.\textsuperscript{38}

The final form of temporal knowledge, according to Augustine, is providence. Within providence, Augustine wrote that there are two types, natural and voluntary providence. Natural providences are those surreptitious acts constituted by God that are continuous and out of the grasp of human bustling. These forms are the natural miracles that humankind may take for granted like the cosmos, growing, ageing, or even death, so
they may or may not be directly noticed. Voluntary providence results from the active participation from humankind or angels to ameliorate one’s physical, intellectual, or even spiritual standing. It is the physical action or work in order to reap certain benefits or to perceive knowledge that cannot be seen naturally. 39 These forms of temporal knowledge are the direct result of the fall of Adam. Augustine writes that because of the fall of Adam, the connection with God has been severed. 40 Thus, the direct communication or this so-called connection with God is no longer internal, but an external phenomenon that reveals itself temporarily until it becomes eternal through the atonement of the Word.

Eternal knowledge builds directly on faith which ultimately transforms temporal knowledge into eternal knowledge. Through faith in Christ, humankind may overcome the remnant effects of “Original Sin.” This means, because it is inevitable for humankind to die physically and spiritually, by having faith in the Word, Jesus Christ, who leads the faithful to truth, they can overcome this physical and spiritual death, and their temporal knowledge may become an eternal knowledge. Or rather, their temporal being becomes an eternal being. This is how Augustine saw the role of the Word as well as the meaning of the scripture in the Gospel of John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” 41

Conversely, San Juan de la Cruz adamantly disagreed with Augustine’s perception of knowledge as well as his definition of this scripture in John. Due to the immanent nature of God, San Juan de la Cruz believed that humankind was still able to receive knowledge from a direct divine presence. San Juan de la Cruz explains in his commentaries on the Spiritual Canticle, that because God is the creator of all things on earth, He left tokens of Himself in all created things. 42 As he writes, “God created all
things with great ease and rapidity, and left in them some tokens of Himself, not only by creating them out of nothing, but also by endowing them with innumerable graces and qualities, making them beautiful in admirable order and unceasing mutual dependence. 

Thus, God made humankind beautiful and united Himself to the very essence and nature of all existence, so a connection with the Word can be made through *unio mystica* and knowledge and truth can be given to humankind interiorly. In this sense, humankind is an elevated being or one who inherits a transcendent quality. Juan believed that there was still a connection with God because of the fact that He left His own essence within creation. Therefore, humankind still deserved divine knowledge even with the transgression of Adam, since God still desired for a connection, and since it was His will and His plan. San Juan de la Cruz argues:

> The Bridegroom at once denies the request and hinders the flight saying: ‘Return, my dove!’ For the communications I make to thee now are not those of the state of glory wherein thou desirest to be; but return to me, for I am He whom thou, wounded with love, art seeking, and I, too, as the heart, wounded with thy love, begin to show Myself to thee on the heights of contemplation, and am refreshed and delighted by the love which thy contemplation involves.

San Juan de la Cruz considered Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, as well as He being the path to the Father. This, of course, meant that through a connection with Christ, knowledge and truth could be glimpsed, received, and known. This is the reason why San Juan de la Cruz believed that belief went beyond the boundaries of traditional spiritual practices. For this wisdom could only be received by means of internal, mystical practices in which the soul truly used the Word as a marriage of purpose and of knowledge. This is the illumination that Juan refers to in his commentaries as the “supernatural light of the soul, without which it abides in darkness.” Thus the Beloved
reveals Himself in glimpses until the marriage, between the loved and the Beloved, completes its unified intercourse and receives, “interiorly from the Beloved such communications and knowledge of God as to compel it to cry out.”

Furthermore, San Juan de la Cruz mentioned that the connection between God and humankind was not dead nor has personal revelation or inspiration ceased. In this vein, he writes:

This divine whisper which enters in by the ear of the soul is not only substantial knowledge, but a manifestation also of the truths of the divinity, and a revelation of the secret mysteries thereof. For in general, in the Holy Scriptures, every communication of God said to enter in by the ear is a manifestation of pure truths to the understanding, or a revelation of the secrets of God. These are revelations or purely spiritual visions, and are communicated directly to the soul without intervention of the senses, and thus, what God communicates through the spiritual ear is most profound and most certain.

The knowledge received from this connection, as San Juan de la Cruz clarifies, is of the utmost delight to the human soul, and in actuality, is the highest delight or elation a soul can experience in life. For knowledge is given as a whisper, which penetrates the ears and is “stripped of all accidents and images,” this nullifies any natural efforts within the communication. For that reason, San Juan de la Cruz writes in his commentaries on his poem, The Living Flame of Love, that the way to knowledge is opened to humankind because God desires to provide humankind his secret knowledge, for if it is not given, it is not known. In the end, God desires to be known by His creation.
Saint Thomas Aquinas was an extremely influential figure in medieval Christian theology. San Juan de la Cruz, as previously mentioned, studied Aquinas at the University of Salamanca, and was thus familiar with Aquinas’ thoughts on natural theology. Aquinas deeply studied the peripatetic works of Aristotle, as well as the Muslim philosophers Avicenna and Averroes who accentuated the Aristotelian idea of deducing truth by means of the senses and then articulating the findings by rational rhetoric.\textsuperscript{54} The essential process in determining truth was by using the senses to perceive examples of demonstration within nature. Then one constructed syllogisms built on the structured demonstrations and pervaded findings through rhetorical or dialectic means. This was the Aristotelian, rational way and process of seeing and determining truth in nature.\textsuperscript{55}

Aquinas propagated this idea within his Christian Theology, but he incorporated the connection of the human soul with the divine, which was inherently a Neoplatonic doctrine.\textsuperscript{56} This amalgamation of the Peripatetic and Neoplatonic style was very similar to Avicenna, but Aquinas also added Christian elements within his natural theology. Therefore Aquinas coupled natural theology and the human connection as a distant paradigm between humankind and God. From this perspective humankind maintained the ability to pray to God, but was also entitled to use their rational mind to perceive God. Revelation, thus, had significantly diminished, but humankind could still perceive truth through their intellectual or rational faculties; so more specifically, revelation, for Aquinas, was more theoretical than actually possible.\textsuperscript{57}
San Juan de la Cruz agreed with Aquinas’ idea of the soul as not being two separate beings but rather just one. However for San Juan de la Cruz, realization of our senses and experiences are revealed within the imaginative faculty of the soul instead of the intellectual or rational faculty. Also, the process in preparation to receive truth was an arduous and ascetic journey of interior dependency. This process ameliorated the progression of the soul by first blinding the senses and the ability to understand, as well as then purified and detached itself as if the soul was dying. Ultimately, the new version of the soul would be perfected internally and purged in order to receive truth or illumination. San Juan de la Cruz writes, “For one single affection remaining in the soul, or any matter to which the mind clings wither habitually or actually, is sufficient to prevent all perception and all communication of the tender and interior sweetness of the spirit of love, which contains within itself all sweetness supremely.”

For San Juan de la Cruz, this journey resounded from strict discipline and specific concentration on the exact process or path for truth, using specific technologies or methods to enhance the progress. The first step in mystical exploration resulted from the discovery and exertion of an absolute background, which was an original image connected to creation or God. The background was a specific religious image, selected by a mystic, which he focused on during contemplation that induced a heightened sense of divine perception. It could have been the concept of the creation process or the atonement of Jesus Christ. For San Juan de la Cruz, his background was the concept of the Trinity. After constructing this background, it acted as a beacon that attracted God. The next step was thus to retrain the will to remember, recognize, and recreate the Trinitarian experience. Thus with the background determined, San Juan de la Cruz
concentrated on his background to strengthen his will through the technologies of meditation, reading, praying, sensing, and feeling. Specifically, meditating on this background brought this image of the Trinity, or the bridge, into remembrance. By remembering, San Juan de la Cruz converted the memories into images. The process of imagining the Trinity and the life of Christ helped the spiritual body approach dismemberment, which led to an ultimate change in being.64

As the spiritual senses became more in tune during the dismemberment of the terrestrial senses, the technologies used to reach this point became a habit, thus, accelerating the process of spiritual purging. However, as the surge up the path suddenly became arduous and desensitized, San Juan de la Cruz experienced an utter collapse in his determination and understanding. Thus he decided to rely on faith in this utmost dark hour, which aided him to purge his old soul into death and have his new soul reborn as light illuminates darkness. This rebirth of the soul emerged into perfection and stood ready for union.65 The union between San Juan de la Cruz and God was the unification of both wills, a mutual relationship of love, which led to knowledge and truth. Thus, Juan viewed this path or process as the ultimate and most efficient means of cultivating a personal relationship with an immanent God and, in understanding God’s plan for humankind, to reach his ultimate true potential or transcendence within unio mystica. For the soul requires union over separation.66 In his poems, San Juan de la Cruz expresses this path and articulates these specific technologies, which later helped his students create these valuable images for themselves.

San Juan de la Cruz conveyed a significant importance in unio mystica not only as a means to receive knowledge and perceive truth, or even in fulfilling the utmost
potential nature of humankind, but also, *unio mystica* was the desire of two wills to cultivate a personal relationship or intercourse of love between humankind and Christ to perfect the human soul. San Juan de la Cruz was significantly inspired by the relationship between the bride and the Bridegroom or the lover and Beloved in the *Song of Songs* of Solomon in the Vulgate Bible.

The relationship involved in *unio mystica*, actually related to a literal spiritual marriage between the essences of the human soul with the Divine Christ. Juan describes this marriage erotically in his *Spiritual Canticle*, “The bride has entered the pleasant and desirable garden and there reposes to her heart’s content; her neck reclining on the sweet arms of the Beloved.”67 This line articulates the mutual desire for the joy obtained within this state of spiritual marriage. This union requires the complete transformation into the Beloved, as San Juan de la Cruz states in his commentaries, “whereby they surrender each to the other the entire possession of themselves in the perfect union of love, wherein the soul becomes divine, and, by participation, God, so far as it is possible in life.”68 This union is the highest state possible in life, and as earthly marriage is a union of two in the flesh, as Juan writes, in a “spiritual marriage between God and the soul there [are] two natures in one spirit” and in their erotic love they become one as the sun itself absorbs all other light in its own.69

This transformation of the human soul is the direct reason why God desires *unio mystica*. San Juan de la Cruz explains that because the soul magnifies the Trinity, God, in turn, perfects the human soul. San Juan de la Cruz writes, “Extolling those three grand gifts and graces which They perfect within it, in that They have changed death into life, transforming it in Themselves.”70 Thus God desires this union out of passionate,
enduring love for His creation and since the human soul testifies of God. Yet God does not need this union, but he fervently wants it. Or in other words, *unio mystica* is the direct will and plan that God has incorporated to enable humankind to reach his ultimate potential, which is perfection and transcendence. God wants humankind to seek him, for as Juan writes, the Bridegroom beckons the bride to “return” to Him, and find what she is so vehemently seeking. *Unio mystica* is authored directly by God and it is His will to perfect the transformation of the soul which God has given freely to humanity, thus, with this perfect marriage, both the will of God and the soul are completely satisfied.71 San Juan de la Cruz argues:

> God is the Author of this union, and of the purity and perfection requisite for it; and as the transformation of the soul in Himself makes it His, He emptied it of all that is alien to Himself. Thus it comes to pass that, not in will only, but in act as well, the whole soul is entirely given to God without any reserve whatever, as God has given Himself freely unto it. The will of God and of the soul are both satisfied, each given up to the other, in mutual delight, so that neither fails the other in the faith and constancy of the betrothal.72

Due to the experiences of San Juan de la Cruz, he believed that in order to truly worship and remember God, humankind needed to advance beyond the traditional doctrines articulated by such Christian theologians as Augustine and Aquinas. For these doctrines only grasped a small aspect of a larger truth, that God desired humankind to engage in *unio mystica*. Within this spiritual marriage, not only was the soul purged, renewed, and perfected, but divine secrets were also disseminated within this mystical path to obtain truth. Furthermore, *unio mystica* remained a relationship that engendered from both the will of the soul as well as the will of God, to form a union, transform the soul, and redeem the ultimate ecstasy in life. This gift of grace was directly given to the
soul out of unconditional love. Since San Juan de la Cruz ascertained this knowledge from his unifying experiences with God, he transcribed the process and technologies in his poems and prose to enable any of his followers to reach this ultimate goal and obtain the same knowledge, truth, and love from God. For this was God’s plan and will, for humankind to cultivate personal relationships with Him and experience unio mystica.
End Notes

2 Fr. Marcelo Del Niño Jesús, *El Tomismo De San Juan De La Cruz*, (Burgos: Tipografia De El Monte Carmelo, 1930), 11.
7 Antonio T. De Nicolas, *St. John of the Cross (San Juan De La Cruz), Alchemist of the Soul: His Life, His Poetry (Bilingual), His Prose*, (Boston: Weiser Books, 1996), 20.
10 Brenan, 7.
11 Brenan, 9.
27 Brenan, 8.
33 Augustine, *City of God*, 255–256.
36 Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 114–117.
37 Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 120.
38 Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 125.
39 Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 129.
The perfections of the Beloved are by it communicated to the soul lovingly and sweetly, and through it the whisper of knowledge to the understanding. It is called whisper, because, as the whisper of the most subtle and delicate knowledge enters with marvelous sweetness and delight into the inmost substances of the soul, which is the highest of all delights.

The Reason is that substantial knowledge is now communicated intelligibly and stripped of all accidents and images, to the understanding, which philosophers call passive or passable, because inactive without any natural efforts of its own during the communication. This is the highest delight of the soul, because it is in the understanding, which is the seat of fruition, as theologians teach, and fruition is the vision of God.

Saint John of the Cross, 407.


Altmann, 3.


Saint John of the Cross, 87.


Saint John of the Cross, 295.
Chapter Four

Post-Experiential Comparisons in Mystical Experience

The aim of this work is to demonstrate the similarities in mystical experience described by Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz. While chapter one examines the pre-experiential foundations in mystical experience, chapters two and three are designed to construct a paralleled analysis of the reality of mystical experience as it is based on transcendent realization. This final chapter attempts to compare certain aspects of mystical experience from a post-experiential perspective that both Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz deem as essential in enabling mystical experience.

As chapter one describes, Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz believed that it was important to have a foundation in a religious tradition to imbue particular virtues and technologies within a mystic’s system of devotion and remembrance to God. Yet these mystics also describe the importance in the process of venturing beyond traditional practices to reach a true focus and commitment in the process of purifying the material self of the contaminants that dissuade mystical experience. Some of the concepts described in this chapter have been mentioned previously within this work; however they are reintroduced in this chapter with greater description because of their essential nature. Nevertheless, even though there are vast similarities within the mystical experiences of
Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz, there are also post-experiential discrepancies that imbue a contrasting view in the actual mystical connection. Ultimately this contrast in the understanding of mystical connection also affects how Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz disseminate their message as well as the complexities that their followers must accomplish to attain the Absolute Reality of mystical experience.

**From the Exoteric to the Esoteric**

Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz viewed religious orthodoxy as an essential principle in mystical experience. The essential virtues and technologies found in religious traditions were used by Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz to assist in readying the soul for purification as well as the remembrance of God. Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz, however, both demonstrated within their post-experiential mystical writings that true mystical experience required practitioners to venture beyond the religious traditions, from the exoteric to the esoteric. Within the esoteric traditions the mystics attempted to demonstrate an extra effort to display absolute devotion to God.

For Suhrawardi this extra effort refers to the Islamic concept of *ihsān*. *Ihsān* is defined as doing that which is beautiful, or the extra effort in doing everything beautifully. Thus the concept describes the attempt to do everything beautiful, since God sees everything. Joseph Lumbard writes, “*Ihsān* is an Arabic word which comes from the root *hasana*, meaning to be beautiful, good, fine, or lovely… *ihsān* thus means making beautiful or good, or doing what is beautiful or good.”¹ Lumbard describes what he
considers the *ihsānī* intellectual tradition as starting in the times of the Prophet Muhammad as a specific teaching in how to approach a true life of submission to God. The most famous reference to this *ihsānī* intellectual tradition Lumbard depicts as coming from the *hadīth* of Gabriel. The *hadīth* states, “He said: ‘Then tell me about *ihsān.*’ He said: ‘It is to worship Allah as though you are seeing Him, and while you see Him, not yet truly He sees you.’”

This tradition, thus, originated with the Prophet Muhammad and was then incorporated into Islamic mysticism. Lumbard writes, “The central manifestation of the practice of *ihsān* took form in what is traditionally known as Sufism (Islamic mysticism), where the emphasis is on making one’s heart and soul beautiful so that beauty will arise naturally from within.”

So not only did mystics desire in following orthodox religious practice, they expanded their devotion beyond tradition to incorporate the ultimate effort of *ihsān* to beautify their heart and soul.

Suhrawardi highly supported the *ihsānī* intellectual tradition since it seeks the Ultimate Reality of the Absolute, as well as the attachment and return to their origin, God. Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes, “*Ihsān*, which is both ‘virtue’ and ‘beauty,’ is associated with the spiritual path that leads to the sanctity and is considered practically a definition of Sufism.”

Nasr believes the *ihsānī* intellectual tradition is an inner path that renders an esoteric journey to truth and knowledge, while transcending *Sharī‘ite* differences. For this reason, Suhrawardi considers *ihsān* as the definitive method in inducing mystical experience. Suhrawardi advises his followers “to turn with all your being to God our Lord,” for God sees all human actions and remembers to reward each human being according to their commitment to Him.

This tradition of beauty, therefore, is dependent on doing everything as beautifully as humanly possible to lead the mystic to
perfection and purification of the soul and heart in order to facilitate mystical experience. This path of *ihsān* composes a mystic’s soul to be rendered as balanced and centered in perfect order. The beautification and order of the soul is the highest goal of the *ihsānī* intellectual system, and thus, stands as a path which enables the perfection of the soul as well as mystical experience.

San Juan de la Cruz also believed that it was necessary to venture beyond traditional religious belief and practice. Doing that which was beautiful, however, for San Juan de la Cruz, was described as exerting love for God. San Juan de la Cruz writes, “I have said that God is pleased only with love.” San Juan de la Cruz supposed the relationship of the mystic vis-à-vis God was defined by means of love. This concept of love was defined as a spiritual marriage between the mystic or bride, and God the bridegroom. Just as love, theoretically, is cultivated within a physical marriage between two human beings, San Juan de la Cruz followed this principle paradigm with his relationship with God.

Accordingly as a bride, San Juan de la Cruz demonstrated an utter devotion to the bridegroom. Love was an essential foundation in this devotion to God, but also, love was a process that could increase by practicing extra acts of love. These extra acts of love were found in the mystical path, where acts of devotion and remembrance remained as parts of the spiritual marriage. Prayer, fasting, meditation, and asceticism were all methods which evoked devotion and loyalty to the bridegroom, and cultivated love within this spiritual marriage. San Juan de la Cruz explains:
All its actions are love, all its energies and strength are occupied in love. It gives up all it has, like the wise merchant, for this treasure of love which it finds hidden in God, and which is so precious in His sight, and the Beloved cares for nothing else but love; the soul, therefore, anxious to please Him perfectly, occupies itself wholly in pure love for God, not only because love does so occupy it, but also because the love wherein it is united, influences it towards love of God in and through all things.  

Like the concept of *ihsān*, love was defined as projecting all energies and strengths into the mystic’s love for God. Love was, thus, dedicating everything to God, even if it meant sacrificing material comforts or wealth. San Juan de la Cruz attempted to please his bridegroom by emphasizing nothing else but his love for God. This in turn resulted in reciprocation of love from God, as in a marriage. 

San Juan de la Cruz believed God desired to be loved by the mystic. Since God does not necessarily desire anything else from human beings, the one thing He does desire, is the growth of the human soul.  

God desires for the human soul to become equal in a manner to His. This enables mystical experience or union. In this sense, God receives love first, and then gives love back to the mystic by means of union. San Juan de la Cruz not only believed love to be a special virtue which connects the mystic to God, love was also the ultimate process in which perfects the human soul.  

San Juan de la Cruz writes, “The more a soul loves, the more perfect it is in its love.” Accordingly, love stood as a path to the perfection of the soul, as well as mystical experience. 

Hence, the concepts of *ihsān* for Suhravardi and love for San Juan de la Cruz were post-experiential developments that demonstrated the importance of going beyond
the traditional practices of religion and establishing a path to the perfection of the soul. These paths of beauty and love were actions that exposed the true devotion of the mystic and helped strip the materialistic elements of the soul that bound it from an unveiling of absolute truth. In addition, beauty and love extended the mystic’s conscious self in fulfilling every possible avenue to God; so all thoughts, actions, and intensions were devoted only to the epistemological journey to divine truth. This way of life replaced a regular temporal existence based on subsistence of earthly survival of the exoteric religious practitioner. Since existence depended on the unveiling of this truth, the mystic avoided the propensities of material wealth and subsistence, to follow the esoteric journey to mystical experience.

The Decomposition of the Material Self

The path of *ihsān* and love concentrated the mystic’s devotion on God alone. Yet this path also benefited the mystic’s ability to perfect the soul and purify the material self of temporal attachments. For both Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz believed that mystical experience depended on the decomposition of the material self and its replacement with a perfected image of the spiritual self. This concept, as previously stated in the previous chapters, resulted from early philosophies of the Greco-Roman world. The most influential philosopher in regards to Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz was the Platonic philosophy renovated by Plotinus.
Plotinus truly articulated the process of the soul’s descent into the temporal sub-lunar realm. Plotinus believed the pre-physical existence to be a station of self-fulfillment where the soul enjoyed unity with the One. However upon the descent of the soul into temporal existence and the connection to a physical body, what was once a unitary existence was now an existence of many. The soul, now, only experienced an interconnected relationship of give and take, as well as cause and effect with the One. Yet this temporal existence also instilled certain deformities within the nature of the soul. Plotinus explains, “And so we might expect: commerce with the body is repudiated for two only reasons, as hindering the Soul’s intellective act and as filling it with pleasure, desire, pain.” The descent of the soul and attachment to a physical body resulted with the soul’s dependence on physical fulfillment or satisfaction instead of spiritual dependence on the One. Consequently even though the soul maintained a connection to the One, the soul had forgotten this connection as well as its divine origins. This, for Plotinus, was the essential problem of the soul.

Plotinus maintained, though, that human beings were able to return to the One by attachment and detachment. Plotinus advised of the process the Soul entered upon when attaching to the One and detaching from the material self. Plotinus writes, “In Sum, we must withdraw from all the external, pointed wholly inwards; no leaning to the outer; the total of things ignored, first in their relation to us and later in the very idea; the self put out of mind in the contemplations of the Supreme.” Peter Hines argues that there are three levels of detachment in Plotinus’ mystical philosophy. In the first level of detachment, the mystic turned away from thoughts or memories and sense perceptions of the material world. The mystic then needed to attach to the spiritual realm, or the realm...
of forms. In the second level of detachment, the mystic needed to turn away from the 
spiritual realm. For even though the multiplicity of the material world has diminished in 
the spiritual world, it was ultimately not a unification with the One. There are spiritual 
senses in this realm that needed to be ignored or detached from, similar to the material 
world. The final level of detachment consisted of ignoring all things to truly focus 
entirely on the One. This type of contemplation was the utmost devotion to the One, 
since there was no separation between the “contemplator and the contemplated.”19 
Plotinus’ process of detachment aided the soul to contemplate and attach to the One by 
means of the decomposition of the material self. Decomposition of the material self was 
delightful for the soul and absolutely necessary to establish a connection for mystical 
experience. This decomposition facilitated the purification and perfection of the soul.

Plotinus taught that the One is always present when the mystic purifies the soul. 
The separation from the material self and the purification is a simultaneous process. 
Hines writes, “The soul’s separation and purification happen simultaneously, just as the 
removal of a dark cover from a light and the consequent illumination are inextricably 
linked.”20 Plotinus focused intently on the how to reach the One rather than anything 
material, so he devised that purification of the soul would assist in remembering the 
human origin and focusing on the Source of this origin. Plotinus explicates:
The purification of the Soul is simply to allow it to be alone; it is pure when it keeps no company; when it looks to nothing without itself; when it entertains no alien thoughts—be the mode or origin of such notions or affections what they may, a subject on which we have already touched—when it no longer sees in the world of image, much less elaborates images into veritable affections. Is it not a true purification to turn away towards the exact contrary of earthly things?21

Plotinus exemplified this process of the decomposition of the material self within his philosophy and significantly influenced Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz therein.

This concept of the decomposition of the material self was developed post-experientially within Suhrawardi’s mystical approach. Suhrawardi extended the Islamic concept of the Arabic term fanā as a methodological comparison to the insight of Plotinus. Fanā, thus, describes the process of the decomposition of the material self by means of perfection or purification. The direct translation of fanā refers to a total annihilation of the material self or the ego. Toshihiko Izutsu defines fanā as, “Fanā as a human experience is the total annihilation of his own ego and consequently of all things that have been related to the ego in the capacity of its objects of cognition and volition.”22 Fanā signifies the annihilation or death of the material self (temporal ego) and the replacement of this void with the rebirth of a more spiritual self that has been transformed and transcended into a more perfected form.

In Islam, fanā is an unconditional, ontological state of being. The process of decomposition or annihilation is a continuous process that substantiates the human return to God. This decomposition, for Suhrawardi, was an axiomatic process of all material bodies. Suhrawardi writes, “Your body is in continuous decomposition. If this
continuous birth and death did not occur in your body, and your cells multiplied, your form would have been the size of a giant.”23 For your material self, “It changes, it is decomposing, [and] it is dying.”24 Suhrawardi manifested the belief that while the material self was in constant decomposition, the incorporeal essence was an indivisible constant ontological thing, eternal and incorporeal.25 For this reason, Suhrawardi exhorted mystics to annihilate the incorporeal essence’s dependency on the material self to find the true design of human creation; a design that was utterly dependent on God and His connection to human kind.26 The true design of the human creation, in Arabic, is referred to as the fitrāh.

The fitrāh was the primordial state of existence, in which human kind was ontologically perfect and the self-consciousness of the reality of existence was intact.27 Human kind, therefore, remembered God and was constantly cognizant of His immanence. The problem of the fitrāh originated with the nature of the human being. It is a natural propensity for human beings to forget their origin and perfect nature. In support, the essential nature of fanā was to annihilate the material self in order to remember the fitrāh. Forgetfulness acts as a veil, which clouds the reality of human epistemology. Suhrawardi believes, “As long as the soul is preoccupied with the flesh, neither will it suffer from villainies nor will it be pleased with virtues because it is in a state of heavy drunkenness with the intoxicant of nature. It has lost itself with the violence of his drunkenness.”28 But Suhrawardi relinquished the affects of the veil by perfecting the soul to taste the true reality of existence.

Within the process of the decomposition of the material self, as parts of the material self become annihilated, the soul begins to be able “taste” the true reality of self-
awareness. In Arabic, the linguistic terminology for taste is *dhawq*. As the mystic embarks on the path of the *ihsānī* intellectual tradition, the mystic experiences *tastes* that reaffirm the path and assist with the perception of the self and of God. The tastes entice the soul to seek further progress on the path to annihilate the material self. As true self-awareness is perceived in tastes, these gradations of truth eventually lead to a complete “unveiling” of all barriers that preclude the realization of the soul. The unveiling, or *kashf*, describes the mystical experience that instills the full comprehension of self-awareness as well as the reality of the human existence vis-à-vis God. Nonetheless, the unveiling depends entirely on the decomposition of the material self, and the perfection and purification of the soul. Shayk al-Halveti writes, “With these spiritual efforts, man can be elevated to the level of annihilation, leaving the material tastes of the world, the flesh, and worldly knowledge, cutting all relationship with the exterior. That is when the soul becomes a mirror upon which Allah’s light reflects, and the soul sees the image of light.” Therefore, it is essential in mystical experience, for the mystic to annihilate the material self in order to replace it with a perfected and purified image that manifests the true reality of existence, which is close to God.

San Juan de la Cruz also extensively believed in the decomposition of the material self to enable mystical experience with the divine. This concept was so important to San Juan de la Cruz, he constructed an entire poem called, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, to describe this process of material death and spiritual rebirth. San Juan de la Cruz understood mystical experience with an expression similar to Plotinus. As a consequence, San Juan de la Cruz comprehended the actual dark night of the soul to be the path toward mystical experience or union with God. The dark night represented the
process in which the soul attempts to decompose its attachment to the material self while it ventures for the light of dawn. In this process there was a sense of suffering during the dark night, but the suffering imbued strength and perfection. The dark night, however, enlightens the mind of its prototype image and brings forth the perfect liberty of the spirit.

San Juan de la Cruz writes in the first stanza, “In a dark night, with anxious love inflamed, O, happy lot! Forth unobserved I went, my house being now at rest.” In the exegesis of the first stanza, San Juan de la Cruz begins the process of annihilation with the entrance into the dark night. In this dark night, the soul experiences real mortification as it longs for the sweet and delicious love of God. The actual process requires strict meditation and concentration on the spiritual path, which San Juan de la Cruz refers to as “purgative contemplation.” Even though this process is rigorously difficult, the soul finds particular aspects of the experience as joyful, since there is content in just being on the path to God. This path assists the soul, after having passed through the night, to arrive in a state of union with God after the soul has reached a state of perfection. The nature of the dark night is to reflect the dark shadows of imperfections that restrict the soul of self-awareness. The night is darkness—it is contemplation—it describes the two divisions of purgation necessary for mystical experience, the purification of the sensual and the spiritual. The first stanza represents the purgation of the sensual self, while the second stanza represents the purgation of the spiritual self. As San Juan de la Cruz writes, “Thus the first night, or sensual purgation, wherein the soul is purified or detached, will be of the senses, subjecting them to the spirit. The other is that night or spiritual purgation wherein the soul is purified and detached in the spirit, and which
subdues and disposes it for union with God in love.”40 The dark night, accordingly, explains the path of the purification of the soul. Like Plotinus and Suhrawardi, there are gradations of reality revealed within the dark night that helps the soul progress and ascend to the ultimate goal of mystical experience.

San Juan de la Cruz accredited the “anxious love inflamed,” as previously discussed, to be the extra devotion to God, which sustains the journey and provides motivation to persevere. While on the path and because of the nature of devotion, the love inflamed grows similar to the concept of fire. The more the fire is feed, the larger the fire grows. The soul remains anxious during the purification process, waiting for the time when the soul may unite with God.41 The love for God acts as a physician that heals the suffering of the soul and the imperfections therein, which results from the purification of the material self.42

San Juan de la Cruz stipulates a great paradox within his poems, for as the soul progresses it transitions from suffering to joy—and then back from joy to suffering again as it passes through each gradation. San Juan de la Cruz explains, “This night and purgation of the appetite is full of happiness to the soul, involving grand benefits, though, as I have said, it seems to it as if all were lost.”43 San Juan de la Cruz describes this process when he writes, “O, happy lot!”44 Once the soul purifies a sensual attachment to the material world it rejoices, but the soul returns to suffering as it journeys to shed the other attachments. San Juan de la Cruz again writes, “Forth unobserved I went.”45 This phrase illustrates, once again, the labored and lonely path of sensual purgation. Every step of the path, the mystic feels the drastic imperfections and weaknesses that veil the perception of the reality of existence. But as the mystic becomes more self-aware, the
soul abandons these imperfections for its love of God. At the end of the night of darkness when the soul’s sensual attachments have been mortified, the soul finds a sense of joy and peace. San Juan de la Cruz concludes the first stanza in saying, “My house being now at rest.”46 Thus, for San Juan de la Cruz, God took notice of his devotion and provided His grace to assist the sensual purgation. These are the first “tastes” of true reality of self-awareness as well as the true reality of God.

The second stanza describes the spiritual purgation of the second night. San Juan de la Cruz conceives that the spiritual purgation is similar to the sensual purgation, as far as annihilating the soul of imperfections. San Juan de la Cruz articulates, “In darkness and in safety, by the secret ladder, disguised, O, happy lot! In darkness and concealment, my house being now at rest.”47 In the spiritual purgation, however, the path is much more difficult, since the mystic now is more experienced. The love and contemplation necessary for spiritual purgation is far more intense than that of the sensual purgation. Notwithstanding, the joy experienced upon the shedding certain spiritual attachments is also more immense.48 At this level, communication with God is very intense and spiritual as it readies for divine union.49 This is also the reason why in the dark night, now, there is a sense of safety. San Juan de la Cruz clarifies:

The reason of this safety has been clearly shown: for usually the soul never errs, except under the influence of its desires, or tastes, or reflections, or understanding, or affections, wherein it generally is overabundant, or defective, changeable, or inconsistent; hence the inclination to that which is not becoming. It is therefore clear that the soul is secure against being led astray by them, when all these operations and movements have ceased. Because then the soul is delivered, not only from itself, but also from its other enemies—the world and the devil—who, when the affections and operations of the soul have ceased, cannot assault it by any other way or by any other means.50
The soul is safe because God is now bringing it into Him in union. Hence, the finality of the spiritual purgation is coming to an end.

For San Juan de la Cruz, the phrase “By the secret ladder disguised,” describes the ultimate nature of the purgation process. The “secret” exemplifies the esoteric path the mystic takes in order to ascend up the “ladder” to mystical experience. The “ladder” demonstrates the path the soul takes to purify itself of the material self. The term “disguised” describes the soul’s ability to hide itself in another form—a form that is different from its prototype.51 Again like Plotinus and Suhrawardi, San Juan de la Cruz affirmed a similar concept in regards to the soul’s attempt to become more self-aware; i.e. to realize its original form connected and in view of the reality of existence. The dark night of the soul, thus, demonstrated the mystical practice in purifying the material impurities attached to the soul that hindered self-awareness as well as absolute truth.

By purging these impurities, San Juan de la Cruz confirmed the path to reencounter the prototype image of each human being. This understanding is directly influenced by the Pentateuch. Genesis 1:27 discusses the creation of humankind in the image of God.52 God created humankind in His image, and by doing so, San Juan de la Cruz believed that this image still resided within all human beings. However, because of the material attachments, human beings forget this concept and their connection to the God becomes diluted. Hence, the dark night of the soul expresses this concept of decomposition of the material self, in which strips the soul of material dependence in order to manifest only the purified form of the soul’s divine image.53 Once the purified
image is exposed, the pure connection with God is unveiled and mystical union is reestablished.

As demonstrated in this section, the decomposition of the material self in order to find a primordial form of existence was the most essential process in the path to mystical experience. Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz both incorporated these concepts within their post-experiential elaborations of the mystical journey. They realized that even through traditional religious devotion their souls would never be able to revert to its primordial form; hence, they decided it was necessary to journey into the esoteric and venture beyond traditional practices in order to reestablish the true nature of the human being and the reality of the ontological human existence.

A Comparison of Mystical Experience—the Connection with the Absolute

After the decomposition of the material self, the next natural step of self-awareness was the connection to the Absolute. Chapter two and three attempt to demonstrate the vast similarities between Suhrawardi’s and San Juan de la Cruz’s post-experiential renditions of mystical union with the divine. Both mystics viewed mystical experience as the source for knowledge and love. Notwithstanding Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz disputed the nature of mystical union as a pleasurable or erotic locution, in addition to the actual locus of the union.
Once the material self has been purged, the infinite illuminations of the Light of Lights will shine upon the soul. The realization of the Light of Lights endowed the soul with the experience of infinite pleasure.\textsuperscript{54} Suhrawardi’s cosmology of emanating lights facilitates an infinite chain of lights that shines upon the soul and “upon others from it.”\textsuperscript{55} Yet Suhrawardi considered this pleasure to ascend beyond description as well as human comprehension. Suhrawardi discerned that the pleasures established in mystical experience were an intellectual enticement, rather than bodily unity. Sexual intercourse, according to Suhrawardi, was compared to the aspects of material existence that cast shadows over the soul. Sexual intercourse is only a fraction of true pleasure that mystics experience in union. However, physical pleasures excite the faculties of love and dominance, “so that the male desires to dominate the female.”\textsuperscript{56} Suhrawardi writes, “A love mixed with dominance occurs in the male and a love mixed with abasement occurs in the female in the proportion of cause and effect.”\textsuperscript{57} When united the veil of barriers is lifted.

This human interconnection was just a glimpse of the sheer pleasure of spiritual unity found in mystical experience, but even so, this unity was not a metaphorical comparison for Suhrawardi. Unlike the unity prescribed by material union, the incorporeal lights never unite to become one single thing. Suhrawardi explains, “Only in bodies is there connection and mixture. The incorporeals do not cease to be, for they are distinguished intelligibly through their cognizance of themselves, through their cognizance of their lights and the illuminations of their lights, and through a particularity based on their control of the fortresses.”\textsuperscript{58} Thus, this union is more like an image as a locus in a mirror, analogous to one another. Mystical experience, hence, is not a
metaphorical erotic locution, but rather, mystical experience is becoming perfect and analogues to the Light of Lights. This transcendence ascribes ecstasy, yet the ecstasy is a result of knowledge and self-awareness found in the purification and perfection process.\textsuperscript{59}

As discussed in chapter two, mystical experience portrayed a transcendent recognition of the soul’s archetype. Suhrawardi understood the phenomenological experience not necessarily as a unitized phenomenon, but as a transcendent fulfillment of the soul’s potential; i.e. the soul is transcending to the level of the Light of Lights by acknowledging the self in addition to God’s \textit{tawhīd}. The closer the soul’s proximity to the Light of Lights, the more intense the level of luminosity.\textsuperscript{60} Consequently, Suhrawardi understood mystical experience as a “subject” and “object” relationship, so truth and knowledge depended on vision of the subject and the luminosity of the object.\textsuperscript{61} Transcendence of the soul was based on proximity to God, but the soul purified and perfected itself to resemble a mirror that reflects or returns light back to the Light of Light instead of its unification with God.

In juxtaposition, San Juan de la Cruz postulated mystical experience as a unification of the soul with Jesus Christ. The purification of the soul still sought to find the prototype of its divine image, yet for San Juan de la Cruz, self-awareness empowered the mediation of Jesus Christ for mystical union. San Juan de la Cruz affirmed mystical experience as a union of love with God.\textsuperscript{62} Moreover, this union of love was described as a marriage between the bride and bridegroom. The joy of this marriage also ascribed a sublime sense of pleasure and eroticism.
San Juan de la Cruz asserted that the pleasure of mystical union inspired the soul to experience sublime pleasure. This pleasure was distinct from the material sense, since it was more intense and satisfying. San Juan de la Cruz described this ecstasy to reach beyond what language can describe. The relationship between the soul and God was absolutely dependent upon the other as a merger of two wills and two desires. San Juan de la Cruz characterized this merger as a parallel with sexual intercourse. Antonio T. de Nicolás explicates:

And the manifestation of success is the experienced union of two wills, after the death of the individual will of the mystic has survived its own dark burial. The mystics express this union in verses and prose concerned with love: the union of love, of two lovers, a sexual language which expresses the reality of two wills uniting, which expresses a reality that only the mystic experiences: that God is no longer only a transcendent being but lives in the human flesh. He becomes flesh, the immanent God in the flesh, in the dust, in the earth out of which he built himself a wife.

In contrast to Suhrawardi’s view of sexual relations being a material repetition of a higher pleasure and ecstasy, San Juan de la Cruz believed that in mystical union, grace subjected Jesus Christ to return to the metaphorical flesh and enter into a metaphorical union of the flesh. San Juan de la Cruz describes this unity in his prose:
O, guiding night; O, night more lovely than the dawn; O, night that hast united the love with His beloved, and changed her into her love. On my flowery bosom, Kept whole for Him alone, there He reposed and slept; and I cherished Him, and the waving of the cedars fanned Him. As His hair floated in the breeze that from the turret blew, He struck me on the neck with His gentle hand, and all sensation left me. I continued in oblivion lost, my head was resting on my love; lost to all things and myself, and, amid the lilies forgotten, threw all my cares away.66

Furthermore, mystical union manifested a unique relationship that affirmed truth concerning the reality of existence, but this mystical experience was also dependent on the will of God. The experience, thus, resulted from mediation rather than solely within self-awareness.

Another discrepancy between Suhrawardi’s and San Juan de la Cruz’s post-experiential renditions of mystical experience resonated from the actual transcendent experience; i.e. Suhrawardi received a luminous vision of the Light of Lights by means of the soul’s purification and self-awareness. San Juan de la Cruz’s mystical experience depended, first, on the purification of the soul and discovery of the reality of self-awareness; but most importantly, mystical experience was a condition brought forth by the merger of two wills. The two wills being the will of the mystic and the will of Jesus Christ. For San Juan de la Cruz, Jesus Christ desired this unity with the mystic by means of desire and of love. Therefore, Jesus Christ represents a mediating figure that assists the mystic in transcendence. In light of this concept, perhaps the emphasis on Jesus Christ is
a result of the contextual impetus resounding from the contemporaneous influence of Christianity.

Clearly, Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz manifested some nuances within their understandings of mystical experience. Since Suhrawardi placed so much emphasis on the self-awareness of the mystic, his renditions required his followers to embark on a difficult path towards the reality of mystical experience. Illuminationist philosophy was a difficult process where the followers needed to master the Peripatetic traditions as well as the Platonic and Sufi traditions. Yet even so, the followers of Suhrawardi also needed to maintain a distinct worthiness. Therefore, it was a difficult process.67

San Juan de la Cruz saw the process to mystical experience as a much simpler process. He transcribed his poems as a methodological tool to endow his followers with words and lyrics that would evoke contemplation and the creation of memories in which enable a bridge to mystical experience. For San Juan de la Cruz, anyone was able to follow the path since Christ desired this union and mediated the process.68 Yet despite these post-experiential nuances, Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz emphasized a universal mystical experience, for the transcendent phenomenon depended on a similar process. In other words, both mystics believed that a similar path would lead them to a close proximity of the Absolute. From this closeness, Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz experienced the same transcendent reality that instilled divine knowledge and love.
Conclusion

This thesis compares the mystical experiences of Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz as an extension of the traditional devotion to God. Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz believed that both knowledge and love was established in the path to mystical experience. While religion is seen as a necessary foundation that imbues both particular pre-experiential virtues and technologies that establish the methodological conduit for the purification of the soul, the personal journey of the mystic ventures beyond tradition to focus on intense devotion of ritual mysticism. For Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz ritual mystical practice enabled the decomposition of the material self by means of purification and perfection. Once this material self was stripped from the mystic, the true ontological human form would be present to perceive the epistemological truth of the absolute reality of existence. Yet even though this process seems similar in the writings of both Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz, ultimately, these mystics viewed the final unveiled concept of mystical union with subtle discrepancies. Nevertheless, Suhrawardi and San Juan de la Cruz maintained a universal post-experiential rendition of mystical experience as a transcendent realm of absolute understanding and discernment. This transcendence was phenomenologically based on the soul’s proximity to the Absolute.
End Notes

4 Lumbard, “Decline of Knowledge,” 42. Lumbard writes, “Like the philosophy of Plotinus, Meister Eckhart or Shankaracharya, the iḥsānī intellectual tradition comprises a science of Ultimate Reality in which metaphysics, cosmology, epistemology, psychology, and ethics are elaborated in terms of the attachment of all things to their one true origin which is also their ultimate end.”
6 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, The Heart of Islam, 63.
7 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 162.
9 Suhrawardi, The Shape of Light, 21. This thought is found in the interpreter’s introduction as well.
11 Saint John of the Cross, 332–333.
12 Saint John of the Cross, 332.
13 Saint John of the Cross, 333.
14 Saint John of the Cross, 332.
15 Saint John of the Cross, 332.
19 Brian Hines, Return to the One, 234. The entire paragraph is Hines’ explanation of the attachment and detachment of the soul according to Plotinus.
20 Hines, Return to the One, 252.
23 Suhrawardi, The Shape of Light, 52.
24 Suhrawardi, The Shape of Light, 52.
25 Suhrawardi, The Shape of Light, 52.
26 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 144. Suhrawardi refers to the decomposition of the material self as the annihilation of the human fortress.
28 Suhrawardi, The Shape of Light, 90.
29 Suhrawardi, The Shape of Light, 91.
30 Suhrawardi, The Shape of Light, 91.
31 Suhrawardi, The Shape of Light, 35. This text is part of the interpreter’s introduction on Suhrawardi. This can also be compared with many pericopes in Suhrawardi’s The Philosophy of Illumination, 110 & 163.
33 Eugene Maio, The Imagery of Eros, 172.
34 Saint John of the Cross, 119.
35 Saint John of the Cross, 86.
36 Saint John of the Cross, 4.
37 Saint John of the Cross, 4.
38 Saint John of the Cross, 5.
39 Saint John of the Cross, 27.
40 Saint John of the Cross, 27.
41 Saint John of the Cross, 41.
42 Saint John of the Cross, 41.
43 Saint John of the Cross, 43.
44 Saint John of the Cross, 42.
45 Saint John of the Cross, 42.
46 Saint John of the Cross, 55.
47 Saint John of the Cross, 113.
48 Saint John of the Cross, 59.
49 Saint John of the Cross, 61.
50 Saint John of the Cross, 115.
51 Saint John of the Cross, 122–139.
54 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 147.
55 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 147.
56 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 147.
57 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 147
58 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 147
61 Hossein Ziai, “Suhrawardi,” 27.
62 Saint John of the Cross, 3.
63 Saint John of the Cross, 151.
64 Saint John of the Cross, St. John of the Cross (San Juan de la Cruz): Alchemist of the Soul, trans. by Antonio t. de Nicolás, (Boston: Weiser Books, 1989), 139.
65 Saint John of the Cross, Alchemist of the Soul, 39. This citation is found in the translator’s commentary.
66 Saint John of the Cross, 2.
67 Suhrawardi, The Philosophy of Illumination, 162.