

“MYSTICISM, LOVE AND POETRY”

A Comparative study of Amir Khusrau and Jacopone da Todi

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I am the only enemy that stands between me and salvation.

Jacopone da Todi

Poetry became my plague.

*Too bad Khusrau never observed silence,
never quit talking.*

Amir Khusrau

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INTRODUCTION

Amir Khusrau and Jacopone da Todi lived in the same century but in very distant places. The former in the splendour of Delhi, the capital of the Delhi Sultanate, the latter in a small town of central Italy, under the sovereignty of the Catholic Church. However, both were men of mystical orientations whose work gave birth to an everlasting genre of sacred music: *qawwali* for Khusrau and *Stabat Mater* for Jacopone. Not only are both these musical genres still played and sung today using the two poets' original verses but, over the ensuing seven centuries, have also managed to maintain their prestige and popularity. They have been since, and are to this day, interpreted and performed by the biggest names in the musical world. Moreover, Khusrau and Jacopone are key figure in the process of the vernacular development, to the point of being considered the father of Hindustani and Italian respectively. And finally, both of them are strongly connected with two of the greater figures of the history of mysticism. Amir Khusrau was disciple and friend of Nizamuddin Aulya, the famous Chishti saint, while Jacopone da Todi was a fervent follower of San Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of Italy and most beloved and popular mystic in Christian religious history.

Inspired by the common legacy, I intend to explore the works and lives of these two writers, to confront their mystical visions and languages, to analyse the cultural and historical premises to their poetical production, and to look at the social impact of their popularity. Therefore, my study will not compare their poetries from a lyrical point of view, nevertheless for their literary values. Rather, I will focus on them as historical expressions of their age, as mystical responses to the spiritual tension of the thirteenth century which crossed borders and faiths, and as important means of communication moving along the medieval social structure both horizontally and vertically. Many are the

differences between these two authors. Amir Khusrau was a court poet, well esteemed and acclaimed by the Indian-Muslim aristocracy of the Sultanate, as well as loved by the folks; Jacopone da Todi was a later convert, who roamed barefoot through the forests of central Italy for ten years, then took part in the upsurge against Pope Bonifacio VIII, fought in arms within the stronghold of Palestrina under siege, was finally defeated and imprisoned for seven years, and died three years later while living a monastic life. Moreover Khusrau was an encyclopaedic author, who dispensed an immense production of works of different genres, while Jacopone wrote 99 poems in all, whose attribution is partially controversial – curiously enough just as it is that of some of Khusrau's works, such as *Khaliq Bari*. And last but not least, the two mystics were celebrating God with different names. Therefore, a superimposition of the two figures would show a very imprecise and not responding drowning.

Still, they hold some undeniable correspondences which become, in my opinion, even more interesting in the light of their differences. Of course, the question of influence and derivation will be discussed. It is a broad issue that involves art, culture and religion of both faiths, which share prophets and sacred texts, as well as centuries of interweaved history. It is also a delicate issue, since it risks to menace religious identities. Historiography so far has been generally divided between scholars – mostly of western origins – who tend to prove different levels of Christian or other faiths influence on Islam; and those – mostly of Muslim origins – who defend the autonomy and integrity of Islam from external influences. To partially soften the hurdle I suggest a third approach, which it does not pretend to be general, nor to give answer to the entire question of the origin of Islam, as a cultural, religious and political system *per se*. Rather, I argue it can be applied to mysticism, seen as a universal pattern of relation between the natural and the supernatural, sharing not only with Christianity and Islam, but also with other spiritual systems, a form of continuity. In particular, I focus on the figure of the saint,

which proves to hold – no matter how far does the institutional assimilation reach, and notwithstanding the many theological differences that persist – specific and common features. Thus, I follow this tread of continuity from the shamanism of traditional cultures to the saints of Middle Ages, to suggest the possibility of a common path in spite of distances in geography and faith, the possibility of a supreme language that unites universal lovers in the same theosophical and enlightened vision.

Rich and varied is the historiography on mysticism, but it mainly remains divided by faith. For instance, we have exhaustive and accurate studies on Sufism, as well as on Christian mystics and orders, but rarely the two fields cross each other. And this happens between other religions as well. One exception is the brilliant essay of Toshihiko Izutsu “Sufism and Taoism: a comparative study of key philosophical concepts”, which shows how two metaphysical and mystical thought-systems, although historically unrelated, can share features and patterns proving fruitful for transhistorical dialogue. But otherwise, too often the historiography on mysticism – both of Islamic and Christian origins – remains confined in its own “courtyard”, engulfed with the preoccupation of defending the originality and authenticity of the mystic matter it deals with, more or less consciously in fear of contamination. The “otherness” of different faiths' mysticism is somehow given for granted, and persistently not looked upon.

The present dissertation is a modest contribution to fill this gap, in the conviction that such a comparison will be useful not only for a better understanding of the singular faiths, but also for the assumption of spirituality in a broader sense, that is the universal need to accommodate and ritualize the material and the transcendent, to recognize the visible and the invisible reality as inseparable parts of the same unit. To quote Henry Corbin, “the totality of our being does not end in what we call 'persona', but includes also another person, a transcendent counterpart which remain invisible to us, and that Ibn

'Arabi calls 'our eternal individuality' and 'our divine name'".¹

The work is divided in three chapters, beside an introduction and conclusion. The First Chapter, entitled "Poetry, Mysticism and Sainthood", is divided into five sections. In the first section, (*Poetry and Communication*), I outline a brief history of poetry, starting from the question: "What is poetry?". Since the most archaic traces of civilizations of the planet are known to have been – first oral and later in written form – produced in verses, poetry appears to be the oldest media of our world. Although spoken and written in a large variety of ways, the poetic language still holds some very specific and unique features. It is connected with the symbolic world, with the archetypes, with the ambivalence. It has to do with revelation, with eternity, with truth. It skims the supernatural, it gets dangerously close to madness, to illness, to death itself. It speaks of silence, and silence of the speech. It produces vibrations, rhythm, and music. It is definitely housed by mystery. But, at the same time, poetry is also an historical process since, without preservation, it ceases to exist.

Of the many genres of poetry, in the second section (*Poetry and Mysticism*), I focus my attention on mystic poetry, to find out that the language of poetry and the language of mysticism quite often collimate. First of all because they both deals with emotions; moreover, they share many common steps along their paths. The poet and the mystic wonder in similar, desolated lands. The more the quality of poetry is high, the more its language, being or not religious, becomes sacred. To a certain level, the encounter between poetry and mysticism seems inevitable.

The third and fourth sections, viz. *Poetry and Islam in the Thirteenth Century* – *Poetry and Christianity in the Thirteenth Century*, are dedicated respectively to the Islamic and Christian contexts in which mystical poetry developed. Here the attention will be focused mainly on the period that witnessed the life and works of Khusrau and

1 H. Corbin, *L'immaginazione creatrice (The creative Imagination)*, Laterza, Bari, 2005, p. 152.

Jacopone. Interestingly enough, both Christian and Islamic theologies share a critical judgement on poetry, accused to be a dangerous path leading towards sin and heresy. For similar reasons, although based on different theological motivations, orthodoxy of the two faiths side against poets and their mischievous production with a persistence deserving attention. What seems mostly disturbing about poetic verses is the magic they are believed to evoke, and the intrinsic ambivalence of their language, which remains open to more than one interpretation. But, as a matter of fact, all the efforts to repress the poetic inspiration are bound to fail, to the extent that poetry would become the privileged language of both Islamic and Christian mysticism. Although such a union will develop along the centuries with different degrees of intensity, the thirteenth century attains the apex of an unrivalled spiritual phenomenon crossing over geographical and religious border, bringing mystical poetry of both faiths to the highest level ever reached. And it is precisely to this exceptional historical and spiritual time that the two poets of the present dissertation belong.

The fifth section is dedicated to the question of “sainthood”(*Saints, Shaykhs and Sainthood*). Once again, although the theological approach of the two faiths towards saints is very different – so much so that one religion canonizes them and the other does not – still many are the shared and common features. To begin with the etymology, most of the qualities, attitudes, and characteristic related to holy beings are recurrent in both religions. The meaning of “adhere”, for example, is implicit in the Latin, Greek and Arabic definition; the importance of the community and of popular devotion to establish and attest saintliness, is another common trait; union with the divine, supernatural powers, ecstasy, clairvoyance, healing, humbleness, moral virtues and saintly life, are indispensable qualities required in both cases. Differences also subsist, a part from the theological aspects, such as the relation between master and disciples, for example, or the question of identity as a shared communion between different orders other than the

religious one.

However, if we enlarge the glance to the pre-Christian Era to include the traditional cultures, we again come upon very similar patterns. Indeed, the figure of the shaman, for example, not only is very close to the Christian and Islamic saints, but also suggests new and interesting analogies: the motif of the ascension, reached through the ecstatic flight, the link with the souls of the dead, the role of music, the syndrome of vocation, just to name a few. What emerges is an element of continuity connecting holy beings of different times and cultures. Thus, the saint seems to be not only a historical figure, but also seems to belong to an universal symbolic system, made of rituals and ceremonies which are, at the same time, part of the historical present of the living saint, and part of the eternal arrangement of human needs and desires. In other words, the saint belongs to religions as well as to sacrality in the broadest and universal sense of the term.

The second chapter is entitled “The Historical Background” and is divided into four sections. The first section (*Medieval Italy: Socio-Economic Setting*) brings out the salient socio-economic features that favoured the emergence of heretical movements and the institution of mendicant orders in thirteenth century Italy. The unprecedented increase in population, the revival of trade and the consequent urbanization contributed to a unique socio-cultural transformation that generated desire for wealth on the one hand, and craving for spiritual life on the other. The Medieval Church ignored the new problems and needs of the evolving society and concentrated on its political and institutional matters. The vacuum this created was occupied by the numerous heretical movements that mushroomed from town to town. Many of them were persecuted, other absorbed by the Church and channelled into the mendicant orders. Among them, the Franciscan Friars were the most successful to pursue the ideal of poverty and brotherhood, and to elevate them to a worldwide renowned pattern.

The second section (*Jacopone da Todi*) reconstructs the Italian political scene

during the time of Jacopone da Todi. Fractured between the autonomous *communes* of the north, the state of the Church in the centre and the Sacred Roman Empire in the south, the Italian peninsula witnessed a very fragile equilibrium, reliant on mutable and short-lived alliances, which concerned all the agents of the political board of Europe. Jacopone was not only a lucid and attentive observer of his time, but became personally involved in the fierce fight of the Roman aristocracy against the Pope. His figure is emblematic of the controversial relationship between the centre of Catholic power and its peripheries, as well as the spiritual development that will concern Christianity for the following centuries.

The third section (*Medieval India: Socio-Economic Setting*) focuses on the emergence of new urban centres in northern India as a consequence of the changed condition in the Muslim world and the socio-economic transformations in India following the Turkish invasion. The section deals briefly with the multi-faced and intricate cultural setting of the urban society of Delhi during the thirteenth century, a cosmopolitan vibrant metropolis, full of challenges as well as opportunities. Particular attention is given to the role of saints and to the importance of *khanqahs* (hospices) within the urban society of the time.

The fourth section (*Amir Khusrau*) follows the life and works of the author, whose grandfather belonged to the flood of migrants who, from Afghanistan, had settled in India to escape the Mongol expansion. Through his personal story, the section considers and analyses the political setting of the Sultanate, and the intricate web of power of the court that Khusrau attended for many years and where his works were commissioned and evaluated. Attention is also given to Khusrau's relation with his spiritual master, Nizamuddin Auliya, who was the inspirer of many of his most successful lyrics.

The third chapter, entitled “Lyrical Features: Differences and Analogies” is divided in four sections. The first section (*The works*) analyses the artistic production of both the

authors. Wide is the distance between their works of art in matter of number and subject. Amir Khusrau was a very prolific author, a sort of “encyclopedic writer”. His artistic production seems boundless, he is accredited with ninety-nine works, many of which, however, have been lost. He wrote both in prose and poetry, and covered almost all kind of literary genres: historical chronicles, epics, elegies, rewrites of famous masterpieces, lyrics, riddles and songs. Attribution of his works is controversial, especially on the wide amount of his *ghazal*, which are believed to be several thousands. Today, so many attributions exist to his name that the musicologist use the term “Khusravi style” to describe compositions that may have been influenced by Amir Khusrau or whose core can be traced to him.

Although Jacopone was not a prolific writer at all, he shares a similar destiny. The number of his poems does not exceed the hundred, however attribution of many of them is still discussed and controversial. In particular, his absolute masterpiece, the *Stabat Mater* (*The Mother was*), an unparalleled and unique success in the history of religious music, set to notes and performed by the biggest name of Western classical music for seven hundred years with no interruption, is suspected to be spurious. Still, the name of Jacopone has been so tightly linked to the *Stabat Mater*, so intensely connected to it during processions, liturgies, concerts, functions, rituals and performances, that has become property of the collective culture as well, against any evidence.

The second section (*The Style*) analyses the lyrics under the style prospective. Although their styles are as different as their geographical length, the two poets share some interesting features. Both of them, in fact, seem easy to fall into conventional and ideological traps, making some of their verses dull and boring. However, their lyrical limits coexist with sudden and striking pages of sublime heights, proving without doubt their undisputed genius.

The third section (*The Language*) focuses on their contribution to the development

of vernacular. The reasons why vernacular languages started to develop almost simultaneously in different parts of the world as distant as Italy and Northern India, have not received the attention of historians yet. However, in both cases the two poets hold a key-role in the process, so much so that their names are linked to the birth of Hindavi in India and of “*volgare italiano*” in Italy. Although moved by different motivations, they obtained parallel results in their respective cultures.

The fourth section (*The Music*) looks at the role of sacred music both in Christianity and Islam as important medium of communication between the hierarchies and the peripheries. While for the Islamic culture the concept of music itself dangerously run on the blade of sin, creating a never ending debate on the legitimacy of *sama* (the mystical musical session of the Sufis), Christianity has allowed sounds and chanting from the very beginning as part of the liturgy, but limiting the production of music only to religious finalization for many centuries. However things changed around the twelfth-thirteenth centuries with the advent of the *laud*, a form of chanted prayer used by groups of laities in private assemblies or during processions that, with the contribution of Franciscan preaching, became the form *par excellence* of religious poetry. While Amir Khusrau's most popular compositions are his ghazals for *sama* reunions, Jacopone is the master of Italian *lauds*.

The fourth chapter (“Poems to Poems: the Metaphysic of Love”) brings the verses to a final confrontation. However, since the lyrics of both authors are deeply influenced by their spiritual masters, a first section (*The spiritual masters*) is dedicated to the theosophical message of the two saints. Interestingly, San Francis of Assisi and Shaikh Nizamuddin share an impressive spiritual resemblance, in terms of life-style, principle and prestige.

The second and last section (*Poems to poems*) follows the mystical path of the two authors through their verses respectively. Renouncing worldliness, annihilation, madness,

separation and finally, dying for Love, are the common stages of their journey. Jacopone da Todi and Amir Khusrau share not only an almost identical route, but also very similar images, and sometime very close expressions, to describe their spiritual experience. Although they never met, and most probably they never heard of each other, they sound like old friends talking about a way they have walked together.

Finally, the conclusion will attempt to answer to the following questions: how is it possible that, given the many peculiarities and distances of these two authors, their spiritual message still remains close if not identical? Is there an inspiring source that moves beyond history, geography and faiths? Can we hypothesise a common origin of inspiration? Do similar ideas emerge in two different places independently of each other? A coincidence of inner experiences that moved them both on the same path of love? And if is this the case, how will we name it?

Chapter 1

POETRY, MYSTICISM AND SAINTHOOD

Amir Khusrau and Jacopone lived in the fourteenth century in two different parts of the world. They resorted to the literary device of poetry to express their spontaneous outflow of ecstatic emotions and mystical experiences. Both Amir Khusrau, working within the imperial establishment of the Delhi Sultanate and a close witness of its socio-economic and cultural changes, and Jacopone, living as an anti-establishment mystical saint against the context of reviving trading activities and urban life, combined in their writings elements of poetry, mysticism and sainthood in a surprisingly unique way. Besides being mystics and saints, both were poets par excellence and used poetic languages to convey the mystical experiences of their spiritual journey. This chapter outlines the multiple ways by which poetry, as a mode of communication, was generally perceived at different times of history, and analyses its role in the belief systems and within the celebrative practices of Islam and Christianity, in the thirteenth century in particular. It also examines the way how saints and sheikhs resorted to poetry as a communicative vehicle to express their feelings of being touched by the supra-mundane, and to show the intensity of their separateness from the mundane.

a) *Poetry and Communication.*

As far as the historical knowledge can reach, poetry appears to be the oldest media of our world. The most archaic traces of civilisations of the planet are known to have been – first orally and later in the written form – produced in verses. Vedas, Gilgamesh,

Odyssey, just to name a few, are illustrious testimonies of the use of poetic communication in ancient times. Not only that, but they also stand for the very roots of the cultural systems they respectively belong to. Poetic medium has been used to convey emotional experiences of extraordinary intensity and of fundamental value, so much so that, in the historical process of our world, we are tempted to connect poetry with an idea of Beginning. As the nobel laureate Gerhard Hauptmann wrote, almost one century ago: “Poetry evokes out of words the resonance of the primordial word”.²

But what is poetry? Of course it is simply not a composition in verses or rhymes, since there are many of such which are not poetical at all, as well as we can have pages of prose that are highly poetic. Then, what does make the difference between a carol and a poem? This difference is called art.

Heidegger claims that trying to define art will take us in a circle that violates any logic. To describe the features of an art work, in fact, is a hard job, “since the art work is something else over and above the *thingly* element. This something else in the work constitutes its artistic nature. The work is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than the mere thing itself is”.³ So, the work of art is a *thing*, but a *thing* to which something else adheres, in which something other is brought together. In Greek language, to bring together is *symbollo*, from which the word *symbol* derives. In ancient Greece, a ring was broken into two parts, and each of them was the “symbol” to be kept by two different subjects in order to testify the link that brought them together.

Thus, we could say that the work of art is a symbol. But who are the two subjects united in the case of art? Heidegger indicates them as *earth* and *world*, meaning the outwardness and the essence of things, and he calls this encounter *truth*. It would be naïve to mistake this truth for true, just as we distinguish true gold from fake one. Rather, every truth silently nourishes its contrary, as any certitude hides a doubt, a lie, a fright.

2 C.G.Jung, *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 9.

3 M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper & Row Publisher, 1971, p. 19.

No matter how far is shot, the arrow can never pierce the sky of ambivalence, it just draws an hyperbole between the opponents, placing truth in the arch of this swing, eternally in the balance. The result of this fluctuation is the strive of poetry. This is how Heidegger describes it:

The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there.[...] The opposition of world and earth is a striving. But we would surely all too easily falsify its nature if we were to confound striving with discord and dispute, and thus see it only as disorder and destruction. In essential striving, rather, the opponents raise each other into the self-assertion of their natures. Self-assertion of nature, however, is never a rigid insistence upon some contingent state, but surrender to the concealed originality of the source of one's own being. In the struggle, each opponent carries the other beyond itself.⁴

A conflict that frequently resounds in many poems, as in the following Baudelaire's verses: "Oh Beauty, are you coming down from the deep sky, or emerging from the abyss?"⁵ However, such a dilemma is not a rift out of which the opponents break apart; rather it shows the intimacy shared by the two agents, their deep belonging to each other. The poet stands on the edge of this border, like a tightrope walker on the horizon, suspended on void, armed with oscillating words. He or she dares the acrobatic of such a challenging position with the levity of a child and the hazard of a somnambulist, and so doing becomes the joining bridge of the two inconceivable extremities. This waddle pace brings the opposites into merging, without losing their identities and yet without sacrificing their opposition. Art is generated by the truth of this encounter.

The Greek word for truth is *aletheia*, that means not concealed, revealed. An idea

4 *Ibid*, p. 49.

5 E. Zolla , *Archetipi*, Marsilio Editore, Venezia, 1988, p. 131.

of reality that implies the existence of something hidden, something of which we are not aware of. Not only because there is much that human beings cannot master, and whatever they master remains inexorably inexact and insecure. Rather, because “yet – beyond what is, not away from it but before it, there is still something else that happens. In the midst of beings as a whole an open space occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting. [...] The lighting centre itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know”.⁶ With other words, Goethe said that the symbolic language of poetry it is not a vague shadow of the symbolized thing, rather “a vivid and instantaneous revelation of the inscrutable reality”, where the idea of the thing remains “awfully and endlessly active”, yet “unapproachable to its image”.⁷

Poetry cannot rime with geometry. Ambivalence is art's supreme rule. Sylvia Plath, in *Death and Company*, explain that she “deals with the double and schizophrenic nature of death, the marble coldness of the Blake's funeral mask, merging with the gruesome softness of worms, of water and of the other elements of catabolisation. I imagine these two aspects as two men, two partners who come to visit me”.⁸ The challenge is to rise above such an ambivalence, reaching a pre-spatial and pre-temporal place, somewhere close to Eternity. As Shelley wrote: “The poet is engaged with the Eternal, the Infinite, the One”.⁹ In those areas where collective poetry is still practiced, as for example in some popular feasts of the island of Sardinia (Italy), these features show their evidence. Poetry competitions are a public challenge to everybody's talent. The first poet improvises some verses on one theme, while the contender responds chanting on the opposite subject. Water against earth, winter against summer, night against day. The winner will be the one who performs a rhyme that does not allow any reply, imposing silence, solving the enigma, crossing the opposite.

6 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 53.

7 Zolla, *Archetipi*, p. 129.

8 *Ibid*, p. 137.

9 *Ibid*, p. 126.

Thus, we could say that, from a logical point of view, art seems to be an impossible task, unhinging the non-contradiction rules with its own existence. Still, from time immemorial not only it speaks to us, but also passes on to us the sublime enchantment of Beauty.

From a psychological angle, Jung says more or less the same thing: "...a work of art is not a human being, but is something supra-personal. [...]Indeed, the special significance of a true work of art resides in the fact that it has escaped from the limitations of the personal and has soared beyond the personal concerns of its creator".¹⁰

Jung describes the poet as overwhelmed by a flood of thoughts and images that forces itself on the author's pen, out of his or her will, "as though he were – a second person; or as though a person other than himself had fallen within the magic circle of an alien will".¹¹ Of all the poets of the world, past and present, none better than Fernando Pessoa could confirm such a statement. Not only because he signed his overflowing poetic production with 24 different heteronimos, three of which became the outstanding representatives of the poetical avant-garde of twentieth century Portugal: "I multiplied myself to feel myself,/To feel myself I had to feel everything,/I overflowed, I did nothing but spill out/I undressed, I yielded,/And in each corner of my soul there's an altar to a different god".¹² But also because he incarnates the dilemma of the artist possessed by his/her art: "An ancient terror, unburied/in my chest, gets down as from a throne/over me without forgiveness,/ makes myself its servant with no gesture nor insult".¹³

The poet might be aware of this process or not, Jung insists, but that does not change the features of the process itself. "[...]he might fancy [that] he is swimming, but in reality an unseen current sweeps him along".¹⁴ Baudelaire wrote about the *air bête*, the

10 Jung, *The Spirit in Man*, p. 4.

11 *Ibid*, p. 5.

12 F. Pessoa, *Una sola moltitudine (A Unique Multitude)* ed. by A. Tabucchi, Adelphi, 1979, Vol. 1 p. 87.

13 *Ibid*, Vol. 2, p. 275.

14 Jung, *The Spirit in Man*, p. 6.

idiot look of the poet, who mutates into vegetal or mineral forms, during his/her process of identification, without realizing what's going on.

Many are the cases of “poets who think they know what they are saying but actually say more than they are aware of”.¹⁵ Indeed, the biographies of many great artists clearly shows that the creative urge is often so imperious that it battens on their humanity and yokes everything to the service of the work, even at the cost of health and ordinary human happiness. “Oh poem, don't come over me, you are like a heavy mountain/squelching me like a gnat”, was writing Alda Merini from the seclusion of the mental hospital. The unborn work in the psyche of the artist is, according to Jung, “a force of nature” that achieves its end either quite regardless of the personal fate of the man (or the woman) who is its vehicle. “The creative urge lives and grows in him like a tree in the earth from which it draws its nourishment”.¹⁶ The result is “something supra-personal that transcends our understanding to the same degree that the author's consciousness was in abeyance during the process of creation”.¹⁷

For Jung the work of art has its source not in the *personal* unconscious of the author, but in a sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are the common heritage of mankind. It is what he calls the *collective unconscious*.

“The primordial image, or archetype, is a figure, be it a daemon, a human being, or a process, that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed. Essentially, therefore, it is a mythological figure.”¹⁸ A century before, Schlegel had had the same intuition, when he wrote that there is not poetry without mythology.

The impact with a mythological figure, is the “something else that happens” not away, “but before what is” of Heidegger. The encounter with the archetype is always a

15 *Ibid*, p. 6.

16 *Ibid*, p. 7.

17 *Ibid*

18 *Ibid*, p. 9.

stunning experience for the individual, who loses his/her personal features to become, at once, race: “the voice of all mankind resounds”¹⁹ in the author. According to Zolla, “the poet perceives the archetypes flowing from point zero, from proverbial silence.”²⁰

But it is a silence that resounds. For the vedic philosophy what distinguishes poetry from words is called *dhvani*, meaning the resounding evoked by poetry. There are 5355 different ways of poetic resounding counted in the Veda. *Dhvani* is not simply the emotion accompanying the poetic words, but what makes them vivid and revealing. It is what gives the taste, the juice (*rasa*) of reality. So poetry is the resounding of language communicating the flavours of reality. The background of such a resounding is, according to the Veda, a “*jubilant quiet*”²¹, once again: an ambivalence is chosen to define poetry.

The vibration of silence takes a rhythm. Just as the heart does, poetry speaks with a rhythm, and flows as blood running down our veins. The poetic communication works on several levels simultaneously, so much so that its complexity is dazing and disorienting the reader, leading him/her to a infantile stupor, which is precisely the attitude apt to receive the poetic message. To explain a poem on a rational level is, most of the time, to disintegrate it, to waste its deeper splendour. Rather, the readers should let themselves sink into the enchantment evoked by the verses without questioning why or where are they bound. Poetry cannot be understood, rather experienced. And when that happens, it leaves the readers speechless. As the nobel laureate Archibald MacLeish wrote in *Ars Poetica* in 1926, “A poem should not mean/But be”.

Art could not exist without mystery. No one would have ever started to carve a log to engrave a Totem, or to blow into a reed to obtain a sound, if he or she had not felt inside the dismay in front of the unutterable. A colour is much better to express the crushing heaviness of a doubt, as well as a note better shows the need of love rather than

19 *Ibid.*

20 Zolla, *Archetipi*, p. 119.

21 *Ibid*, p. 123.

the measurement of its extent. Crumbled by daily routine, shattered by logic, choke by fears, Splendour can show itself only as fiction, vision, allegorical representation. Yet, although unexplainable, that fiction seems to be more true than life itself. “The poet is a pretender./He pretends so completely/That he ends up pretending that it's pain/the pain he truly feels”.²²

But art, Heidegger concludes, is also never carried out in the direction of an indeterminate void. Rather, the truth of art, in the form of work that from times to times it takes, it is thrown toward the coming preservers, that is, toward an historical group of human beings. Indeed, without preservation, art does not exist, it simply dissolves itself into its own creation and, like a falling star, it disappears. Therefore, “art is historical, and historical it is the creative preserving of truth in the work”.²³ Only the interaction with the historical process enables art to remain and to obtain significance. Again, the destiny of art is played on two opposite levels – the world and the earth, in perpetual flight, yet in eternal need from each other. Art is historical in the essential sense that it is grounded on history. “The origin of the work of art – that is, the origin of both the creators and the preservers, which is to say of a people's historical existence, is art. This is because art is by nature an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical”.²⁴

b) *Poetry and Mysticism*

Due to the demand of the present research, among the many existing poetic genres, I will focus on mystical and religious poetry. “A long tradition puts the poetic experience close

22 Pessoa, *Una sola moltitudine*, Vol. 2, p. 177.

23 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 77.

24 *Ibid*, p. 78.

to the experience of the sacred, or even to the mystic ecstasy of a jointing encounter between the poet and the world”.²⁵ Indeed, poetry and mysticism are both dealing with emotion. But what is emotion? In the last thirty years many different theories have appeared on the subject, merging into the so called realm of “history of emotions”. Mainly historians are divided between those who claim the universality of emotions, and those who believe that emotions are the result of social, cultural and historical settings. Finally, some scholars suggest a middle ground between relativism and universalism, which recognizes the importance of culture and society on the shaping of emotion, but also identify an universal emotional core cutting across influences.²⁶ Recent theological investigations “prospected a cross-cultural vocabulary of emotions”, fitting to express the “intimate relation between language and feeling in the Christian experience”.²⁷ Clearly, all the languages of transcendent, no matter how different from each others, lean to use a similar grammar and vocabulary, and to produce “a sacred rhetoric”. But in the case of poetry, the correspondence is not only semiotical, but also ontological. Many, in fact, are the common steps of both the paths: “Experience of the void, death of the ego, explosion of the heart”.²⁸ Absence of language, silence, sufferance for the unutterable, are all motifs of both poetry and mysticism. The mystical experience stretches forward the intimate union with the Divine, called by John of the Cross “the transforming union”. It is an event that can be searched only in the most absolute solitude. This solitude is so radical that not only it separates the soul from any contingencies, but it also rips it away from the self. In this sense, the mystic subject is a very alienated being, perpetually elsewhere, lost in his/her mystical obsession...The place of the union is a place absolutely deserted...“It is a solitude of the spirit, an alienation of the soul, that despises everything to be entirely

25 P. Plouvier, *Poesia e mistica (Poetry and Mysticism)*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Citta' del Vaticano, 2002, p. 9.

26 J. Corrigan editor, *Religion and Emotion. Approaches and Interpretations*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

27 *Ibid*, p. 16

28 Plouvier, *Poesia e mistica*, p. 11.

one with God”.²⁹ But also poetry, as we have seen, can be produced only in solitude. The poet and the mystic wonder in similar isolations. Both of them are moved by insatiable thirst. We could say that the language of poetry becomes by itself prophetic, being or not religious. “The poetic metaphor is understood only when it ends to be an image and become ascesis”.³⁰ To speak about the ineffable union, mystic poetry turns to “*via negationis*”(path of negation), either through negative metaphors or explicit negations. “This mystic 'nihl' is the rhetoric expression of a unknowable fullness”.³¹ Negation, paradox, oxymoron are the semiotic of mystical poetry. The liminal images are recurrent too. Johan of the Cross wrote: “it would be foolish to believe that the language of love of the mystical intelligence could be somehow well explained with words”.³² The vicinity of the Beloved can be better perceived through poetical language, as perhaps a metaphor can better carry the substance of an emotion than its mere description. Mystical poetry brings the aroma of the invisible presence. This is why sainthood has been called “*la scienza soporosa*” (savoury science): because it deals with the taste of God. The emotion of this encounter is what Rudolf Otto calls *mysterium tremendum* (tremendous mystery). “The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrilling vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its *profane*, non religious mood of everyday experience...It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering...It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of – whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *Mystery* inexpressible and remains

29 B. Sese, *Poetica dell'esperienza mistica secondo Giovanni della Corce: l'unione trasformante (Poetry of the mystic experience of John of the Cross: the Transforming Union)* in Plouvier, *Poesia e mistica*, p. 47.

30 B. Torreilles, *Il cammino ha un senso, ma non un significato (The Path has a sense, not a meaning)*, in Plouvier, *Poesia e mistica*, p.170.

31 J.P. Joussua, *Forme di linguaggio mistico nella poesia, (Mystic Language in Poetry)* in Plouvier, *Poesia e mistica*, p. 22.

32 Sese, *Poetica dell'esperienza mistica*, p.40.

above all creature”.³³ This mysterious human experience is the subject of mystical poetry, and it should not be confused with religions *per se*, as complex cultural, social, philosophical, political and historical systems. The poetical language, as we have seen, takes birth from the archetypes, from the primordial roots of humanity, and therefore places itself somewhere *before* culture and history, as any other form of art does. Otherwise, we would not have been able to emotionally enjoy some verses of Saffo, for example, or of the Bhagavad-Gita, even thousands years after they had been written. In the work of art, both historical influences and archetype coexist. But what makes it artistic, are not its historical constructs, but its emotional contents. Poetry is different from culture to culture, though the essence of poetry is universal, in the way the roles of mother vary from culture to culture, but the essence of motherhood is universal.

Poetry is the prophetic language *par excellence*, and thus the natural voice of mysticism. In “Tears and Saints”, E.M. Cioran wonders: “How come that saints write so well? Is it only because they are inspired? As a matter of fact, as soon as they describe God, they have a style. For them it is easy to write, their ears strain to God's whispers. Their works are of super-natural simplicity; however, since they do not talk about the world, we do not call them writers...”³⁴

Coming to the Indian tradition, the legacy between mysticism and poetry dates back to the most ancient masterpieces of Sanskrit devotional epic, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, ascribed to oral transmission of uncertain dating. Since then, the union of lyric and transcendent has never failed to manifest itself, giving birth to an extraordinary abundance of mystic poetry, surpassing in number and popularity any other poetic genre in the country. The appeal was so powerful that, in course of time, some profane works were rewritten and translated into mystical language. This is the case, for example, of *Tuti Nama (The tales of the parrot)*, the Persian version of a very popular collection of

33 Corrigan, *Religion and Emotion*, p. 9.

34 E.M. Cioran., *Lacrime a santi*, Adelphi, Milano, 1990, p. 28.

stories of the Indian oral tradition, known under the title of *Sukasaptati*. Here, seventy stories on love and social subjects, were transformed by Ziauddin Nakshabi (d. 1350), a sufi poet of Badaun, into a mystic allegory rich in esoteric messages. Another case is that of *Chandayan*, the legend of *Lorik* and *Chanda*, belonging to the tradition of the *abhiras* or *ahirs* tribe. The Persian version of the legend was written by a poet, Daud, in 1379, during the reign of Sultan Firuz Shah. Daud's *Chandayan* falls within an old and popular Indian genre of oral narrative, called *katha*, that was performed by a class of wandering musicians. *Chandayan* itself was meant for musical performance, as it is clearly mentioned by its author, and we know that the work enjoyed immense popularity at the time. We are told that, just as the best *kathas* were suppose to do, “it created tumult in the hearts of the listener”³⁵. We also know from Badauni's chronicles that parts of the poem used to be read from the pulpit in the mosque, “and the people used to be strangely influenced by hearing them”³⁶. During the Middle Ages, not only Muslim mystic poetry gained extraordinary fortune, but poetry was also the language adopted by the *bhakti* (devotion) movement, whose production constitutes the most important and significant development of medieval Indian poetry. And it is just the case to mention that many of the most renowned names of Indian poetry were also monotheists of strongly devotional orientation, such as Kabir, Nanak and Ravidas.

Shaikh Nizamuddin, the most reputed Muslim saint of medieval India (of whom we will speak later), explained the powerful legacy of mysticism and poetry as follow: “The same thought expressed in prose, when cast into verse causes still greater delight. [...] For those who tread this Path desiring the Divine, the taste evoked through *sama* [listening to devotional song] resemble a fire set ablaze. Or else, how could one ever

35 Madhu Trivedi, “Images of Women from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century: a Study of Sufi Premakhyans” in “*Rethinking the Millenium. Perspectives on Indian History from the Eighth to the Eighteenth Century*”, ed. Rajat Datta, Aakar Books, New Delhi, 2008, p. 199.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 201.

experience the joy of eternity”³⁷

c) *Poetry and Islam in the Thirteenth Century*

The relationship between Islam and poetry is complex. In the Quran, poets do not find themselves in a favourable position. Sura 26 (v. 224-27) contains a sharp and peremptory judgement on them, “who wander distracted in every valley and say what they do not do”. The criticism was probably directed against the pre-Islamic tribal poets, soothsayers, balladeers and minstrels who roamed the streets and *valley* of Arabia, contending the audience to the Prophet's predication. The distance from such a mob is clearly taken in Sura 69 (v. 41-42), stating that the Quran is “the word of a noble Messenger, and not the word of a poet, little to believe, nor the word of a soothsayer, little to remember”. To leave out any doubts, Allah himself says about the Prophet: “We did not give Him knowledge of poetry, nor is it befitting for him.” (Sura 36, v. 69). Although the following verses of Sura 26 clarify that the criticism excludes “those [poets] who believe and do righteous deeds and remember Allah often and defend [the Muslims] after they were wronged”, the Quranic verdict has inspired much criticism of poetry among orthodox Muslims, supported by a number of traditions (*hadith*) which define poetry as “the spit” of Satan, or warn the believers against it: “Verily it would be better for a man to have his belly filled with pus until it destroy him, than to fill himself with poetry”.³⁸ To aggravate the position of poetry is the news, also of traditional source, according to which, triumphantly entering Mecca in 630, Prophet Muhammed put to death, among others, some poets guilty of having dedicated to him their insolent verses.³⁹

37 Lawrence B., *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad, (Morals for the Heart)*, Paulist Press, New York, 1992, p. 154.

38 A. Schimmel, *As Through a Veil. Mystical Poetry in Islam*, Oneworld Publications, Oxford 1982, p. 11.

39 C. Saccone, “Poesia e testo sacro nella tradizione poetica persiana” (“Poetry and Sacred Text in Persian Poetic Tradition”) in *Poetica medievale tra Oriente e Occidente, (Medieval Poetry between West and East)*, ed. Bagni P. and Pistoso M., Carocci Editore, Roma 2003, p. 259.

As on many other matters, the Tradition is contradictory on the subject, providing also several favourable statements, or at least not in opposition, to the poetic activity, such as the one in which the Prophet declares that “there is wisdom in poetry”. It is also said that “He appreciated and recruited some poets with the task to defend and to praise Islam with their verses”.⁴⁰ Finally, the linguistic unsurpassability of the Quran, poetry *par excellence*, is in ontological contradiction with its verdict against poets.

However, for the orthodoxy, poetry remained a dangerous activity, rightly deserving suspicion, and poets and prophets viewed as antagonist categories. The line dividing poetry and heresy was perceived as very thin, as well as any poetic composition was seen as a presumptuous attempt to emulate the unparalleled divine word of the Quran and, therefore, was considered a sin.

To further complicate the matter came the musical element that, since the pre-Islamic tradition, which used to accompany poetic compositions. The subject is dealt with by al-Ghazali (1058-1111) in his treatise *Kitab adab al-sama wa'l-wajd* (Book on Music and Ecstasy). In recognition of its rhythmic aspects and phonic values poetry is perceived as a variety of music, even without the employment of musical instruments. An “*incantatory power*”, a sort of magic (*sahr*), is attributed to musical poetry. Interestingly, the term used by al-Ghazali for music is *sama*, actually meaning “*listening*”, or “*audition*”, a term which is applied as well to the recitation of the Quran. Due to its rhythmic and rhymed form, the Quran has always been chanted by professional singers, following complex rules of not easy learning. Since the very beginning these singers were surrounded by raptured listeners, who often were moved to tears and overwhelmed by the emotions of such an experience. Now, the magic of poetry found itself in dangerous competition with the *sama* of the Quran, especially when many Sufi confraternities acquired the habit of performing *sama* as a collective ritual of prayers and devotion. Despite all these hurdles,

40 *Ibid*, p. 260. See also Schimmel, *Through a veil*, p.14.

from the ninth century on, Arabic and Persian poetry abundantly flourished, being decidedly linked to Islamic mysticism, that is Sufism, so much so that it was impossible to divorce one from the other. Poetry became the language of Sufism, and the Sufi metaphysic of love became the subject of poetry. While Sufism was developing into a social movement between the ninth and early tenth century, mystic poetry absorbed into itself many of the preceding poetic genres and rhetoric, such as classical Arabic *qasida* as well as love-and-wine poems of pre-Islamic culture, and made them instruments of its own esoteric language. The tension between the words of revelation and the words of poetry became even more strident, gaining to poetry a bad name. Nevertheless, the opposition of the orthodoxy was not able to dam the poetic flow, and love, music, wine and apostasy became “the real manifesto of Persian poetry, a poetic program to which thousands of poets, more or less famous, of Persian, Turkish, Indian, Central-Asiatic and Balkan origins, will adhere”.⁴¹

At the base of the Sufi metaphysic of love is a personal relation between God and the individual, aiming at the complete fusion of human and Divine will. “The Law of Islam has in view the posthumous salvation of the individual, with all that this implies in the way of the beatific vision of the Divinity in Paradise; while Sufism has in view the love and knowledge of the Divinity here and now, implying a liberation or salvation that is effective immediately, in this very life...”.⁴² At the same time, Sufi mysticism recognizes the difference between *zahir* (appearance, manifestation, esoteric truth) and *batin* (latent, hidden, esoteric truth) as a fundamental key for the hermeneutics of reality.

Under this perspective the same poetic verse can give way to more than one interpretation, apparently in contradiction with each other, and in perpetual ambivalence. One single reading of the symbolic word, will never be sufficient to explain its moral. On the contrary, the message stratifies itself on different levels, sometimes even opposite, but

41 Saccone, *Poetica medievale tra Oriente e Occidente*, p. 265.

42 V. Danner, introduction to Ibn 'Ata Allah, *The Book of Wisdom*, Paulist Press, New York, 1978, p. 11.

still both valid. This alternation, often mistaken for ambiguity, in reality comes from the conception of the Divine as “*coincidentia oppositorum*”, where the world, being nothing else than the shadow of God, cannot be other than ambivalent as well. Such an ambivalence, far from being a theoretical axiom, or neither a dialectic process based on logical considerations, represents the conscious and voluntary submission towards an Omnipotence that does not concede simplifications. The Creativity of the Creator does not admit limits, and it cannot be expressed other than through a plurality of valences. Ambivalence, therefore, is divine freedom accomplishing itself. Not for caprice, but for an ontological inevitability that the believer can only slightly imagine. God cannot remain other than free and incomprehensible.

Moreover, the uses of cryptic verses and enigmatic words was enforced by “the necessity of holding one's mystical thoughts and experiences in a time when the government became increasingly suspicious of the activities of the Sufis”,⁴³ forcing him or her to attain a highly complicated web of words which could be disentangled only by the initiated.

By the twelfth century the rhetoric of bad name will be completely assimilated and overturned by Persian mystic poetry into the sacred language of the heart, into the mystery of the unspeakable Truth. The recurring themes of these poetic theophanies are resounding from close to far the Islamic countries: the absoluteness of devotion, the unity and oneness of God (*tauhid*), the sufferance of separation from the Beloved (*firaq*), the intoxication and ecstasy inspired by the taste of the Friend, the longing for death considered as marriage to the Divine, the annihilation and death caused by the intensity of love, the immanence of God, and even the idolatry of devotion which cross all the barriers of religion, culminating in the identification with the Supreme. The statements “I am the Truth” and “I am God” of the first sufi martyr Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922), caused

43 Schimmel, *Through a veil*, p. 22.

his execution in 922.⁴⁴

However, despite differences in style and ability, the real and undisputed protagonist of Persian mystic poetry remains, out of doubt, Love. Inner principle of the Divine Essence, Love is the first and ultimate word of Sufism, the only indispensable, and the sole including in itself all the other constructs: “Love is what has no end/It has had neither a beginning, nor has it an end”.⁴⁵ Love is, like God, an endless ocean.

Between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Islamic world witnessed an unrivalled spiritual activity, which some scholars put in relation to the political and social destruction caused by Genghis Khan and his successors from 1220 onward.⁴⁶ It is the century when the greatest master of theosophical Sufism Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240) appeared on the scene, whose contribution was destined to influence the Muslim thought for ever. It is also the century of the apex of Persian mystical poetry, reached by Jalauddin Rumi (1207-1273), beside the burst and spreading of Sufi orders all over the Muslim countries.

Known as *ash-shaikh al-akbar (magister magnus)*, Ibn al-'Arabi became the spiritual staple of the Sufis, and the overwhelming influence of his theosophical system – generally called *wahdat al-wujud*, “Unity of Being” - marked an everlasting sign on Persian poetry. With him “Islamic mysticism comes close to the mysticism of infinity [...] for his goal is to lift the veils of ignorance which hide the basic identity of man and the Divine”.⁴⁷ His “prophetic psychology”⁴⁸ as it was defined by Henry Corbin, takes place in the inner time and space of the soul, whose sense organ is the “creative imagination”, capable of transforming sensible data into symbols, exterior events into symbolic messages. Ibn al-'Arabi's vision of reality is forged on *batin* (innate) as necessary counterbalance of *zahir* (visible), which together form an indissoluble entity

44 Mansur al-Hallaj (Baghdad, 858-922), mystic martyr of Islam.

45 Farid al-Din Attar, “Diwan”, in Schimmel, *As Through a veil*, p. 66.

46 Schimmel, *As Through a veil* Op. Cit., p. 35

47 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

48 H. Corbin, *L'immaginazione creatrice*, p. 72.

and assert the basic postulate of Islamic *ta'wil* (esoteric hermeneutics). Imagination, perceiving the correspondence between the hidden and the manifest, transforms things into symbols; in other words, it creates, it makes things exist on another level of being. Ibn 'Arabi also opens wide the door to tolerance towards other faiths, not so much as an ideological principle, or neither as a religious obligation, rather as the logical consequence of the Divine immanence: the mystic can recognize God under every semblances. The individual and God are united by a reciprocal passion, a shared enjoyment that is the mystic union: the possibility of God depends on how the human makes himself/herself capable of God self.

Ibn al-'Arabi's theosophy deeply impressed believers and Sufis of every corner of the Muslim world and of course found a ideal expression into their poetic production. As we mentioned before, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had a tremendous concentration of genius and talented artists. Being impossible here to give an exhaustive account, I just name some of the most well-known: Umar Khayyam (d. 1122), Sana'i of Ghazna (d. 1131), Nizami of Ganja (d. 1203), Ibn al-Farid (1181-1235), Farid al-Din Attar (1145-1221), Musliuddin Sa'di (d. 1292), Ibn Ata 'Allah (d. 1309), followed by the great Hafiz at the beginning of the fourteenth century.(1325-1389); and of course, among them, the master of all, Jalauddin Rumi (1207-1273). Amir Khusrau (1253-1325) belonged to this tradition.

All these poets nimbly move within the Love-cosmos of mysticism, pouring inside the river of poetry the genius and talent of their brilliant personalities. They share themes and devices, *topos* and allegories, metaphors and images which typify Persian poetry as a whole. We could say that it is the same message repeated over and over again, with thousands of manifold nuances, like different instruments playing in the same orchestra. If the background melody is Love, each component follows its own sheet music, and performs its personal interpretation. Recurrent motifs are employed with

endless creativity: ocean and waves, moth and candle, wine and tavern, fire and flame, parrot and nightingale, rose and cypress, desert and garden, dust and stone, and so on. Oxymora and paradoxes well serve to describe the ambivalence of the universe, as well the *via negationis* is applied to the One who is beyond how and why. Profane love, often embodied in the *shahid* (a handsome boy), contributes to the ambiguity between the human and the superhuman levels, in perpetual swinging. The cruelty of the Lover, the pain as greatest happiness, the joyfully acceptance of blame and defiance, the impossibility of describing the magnitude of God, and the sin of divulging the secret, all are inter waded in *a coloured brocade*, to use the beautiful image given by Annemarie Schimmel: “a very finely garden carpet whose pictures, flowers, and arabesques should be seen against a larger background: each of them is meaningful, and yet the whole of its beauty is more than the sum of its parts”.⁴⁹

To conclude, we can say that Persian mystic poetry, placing itself at the dateless proximity of God's feet, establishes a space of spiritual freedom crossing beyond the boundaries of orthodoxy. However, it would be an easy mistake to take it as the voice of a revolutionary movement. The freedom of mysticism is never against the Law, rather it is despite of it. Sufism belongs to Islam and sees no contradiction between the Path and the Holy Book. On the contrary, it considers them as perfectly complementary. It is not the *shari'a* to be wrong but, if ever, the lack of sincerity of the heart that enforces it. The Quran remains the main source of inspiration for Persian poetry and quotations form it are as frequent as the other recurrent themes discussed before. Mystics of all ages have always known the blade of persecution, just as orthodoxy of all creeds has always exercised the role of spiritual imperialism. But to identify Hallaj with a rebel would simply mean to underestimate his mystical value. “Kill me, O my trustworthy

49 A. Schimmel, *A Two-Coloured Brocade. The imagery of Persian Poetry*, University Of North Carolina Press, 1992, p. 9.

friends,/For in my being killed is my life!”⁵⁰, was his message, perfectly in line with the Sufi metaphysic of Love. Hallaj remains a martyr brutally and unjustly executed, but to ignore the depth of his faith would just make this injustice bigger. The heart of Islamic mysticism longs for Unity. Inclusion, not separation, is its true goal. As Shaikh Farid answered to whom brought him a knife as a gift: “Bring me a needle, instead. The knife is an instrument for cutting, the needle for sewing”.⁵¹

As far as thirteenth century northern India is concerned, the literary production was rich and diversified, going from *adab* (secular books of conduct), to *masnavi* (romances), *ghazals* (verses), sufi tales of love and collections of tales from oral tradition. But it is undeniable that the literary production of the Middle Ages was strongly affected by the presence of the many Muslim scholars migrated to India from the Islamicate world after the Mongol invasion. “Their presence gave a fillip to literary activities”⁵², so much so that “in Lahore alone out of every hundred persons ninety were scholars”.⁵³ Although many of them occupied themselves in the field of Quranic studies, it is a fact that *tasawwuf* (mysticism) was, in order of priorities and preferences, the main interest of the Indian Muslim. It is significant that in India mysticism gained popularity since the early formative stages of Muslim society. “This is why in the tangled skein of medieval Indian culture one comes across so many threads woven by the genius of Muslim mystics”.⁵⁴

We know that during the thirteenth century in Delhi “there was no quarter of the city in which a gathering of the pious was not held every month or after every twenty days with mystic songs that moved them to tears”.⁵⁵ And we have seen that one century later the same thing used to happen, at mosque Friday prayer, listening to Daud's verses.

50 Schimmel, *As through a Veil*, p. 32.

51 *Fawa'id al Fu'ad*, p. 334.

52 K.A. Nizami, *Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century*, Idarah Adabiyat, New Delhi, 1961, p. 265.

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.*, p. 277.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 197

We also know that the orthodoxy was fiercely opposed to the practice of *sama* (sufi concert) and Shaikh Nizamuddin, who passionately patronized it, was forced, in one occasion, to undergo a species of public trial, where he had to defend and justify himself in front of the religious leaders.⁵⁶ Eventually, under the pressing insistence of the *ulema*, Sultan Ghiyasuddin Tughluq (1320-25) imposed some restriction to the practice. However, rules and prohibitions were not enough to eradicate the love for mystic poetry from people's heart. "Poetry was [...] a most important part of cultural life in the East; it was not something for specialist but rather a form of expression that was loved, and to a certain degree practiced, by nobles and villagers alike".⁵⁷ The quarters and lanes of the cities resounded with the verses of famous poets, repeated and enjoyed endlessly. Amir Khusrau was, and still is, one of most quoted among all.

d) *Poetry and Christianity in the Thirteenth Century*

Although the Bible does not express any explicit judgment against it, the position of poetry in the Christian cultural system has not always been easy. Actually, the only problematic comment the Scriptures contain regarding art is one of the ten Sinai commandments (Ex.20, 3-4), forbidding to make sculptures or figures of what is on earth, in the ocean or in the sky. The anti-idolatry intent of the verse, given also by the majority of the translations, is confirmed in the following stanzas of the book of Exodus (Ex. 25-31/35-40), where the construction of the Ark of the Covenant is described. The instructions given clearly state that two cherubs statues were to be placed at top of the Ark, proving that the precept was against idolatry, and not against art.

A part from this single reference, the Bible rather seems a celebration of the "word", to start from the Gospel according to John (1:1): "In the beginning was the

56 K.A. Nizami, introduction to *Fawa'id al Fu'ad*, p. 36.

57 Schimmel, *Two-Colored Brocade*, p. 3.

word”. The entire process of the Genesis shows God as an “artist” using “words” to create (1:3): “*He said and it was!*”, and finally contemplating His work as “good”. The term used to express His satisfaction is “*tov*” which in Hebrew means “good, well done” but also “beautiful”. The scene, as it has been observed by Leibniz, portrays the Lord “as an artist that, after having created his work, moves at a certain distance to better evaluate it and judge it according to objective criteria of beauty”.⁵⁸

Thus, it is evident that the Bible deals with a spiritual creative activity (that is to say a “poietic” conception of the language), and it is very far from any explicit condemn or criticism on poetry.

We also know from a letter of Pliny the Younger (61-112 AD) that at the beginning of second century, in Bithynia, the Christians used “to gather on a certain day, before sunrise, to sing together, alternating one hymn to Christ and one to God”,⁵⁹ proving to follow the exhortation of Saint Paul to treasure the Grace of the Spirit also through “psalms, hymns and spiritual canticles”.⁶⁰

Few centuries later the Christian hymnography reached great popularity with the collection of the Bishop of Milan, Saint Ambrose (337-397), whose verses were a source of deep inspiration and supreme emotions for, among the others, Saint Augustine. Augustine himself (354-430), who mainly wrote in prose, as he did for his masterpiece “The Confessions”, left also some poetic verses.

But after that, and for many centuries ahead, the poetic scene of Medieval Christianity remained almost deserted. Although liturgical singing was a major component of the Benedictine rule from fifth century onward, such composition did not leave any work really worthy of note, so much so that the history of Italian literature

58 L. Amoroso, *Estetica della Bibbia*, (Aesthetics of the Bible) ETS, Pisa 2008, p. 4

59 G. Cremascoli, “*Il sacro nella poesia mediolatina*” (“The Sacred in Medio-Latin Poetry”) in *Lo spazio letterario del Medioevo (Literary Space in Middle Age)*, ed. By G. Cavallo, C. Leonardi, E. Menesto, Salerno Editrice, Roma 2006, Vol. 1, p. 112.

60 *Ibid.*

speaks of the “exclusion of poetry from the medieval cultural system”.⁶¹ What were the reasons of such an absence?

Despite the paucity of sources on the matter, we find a revealing evidence in the famous miniature illustrating the *Hortus deliciarum*, the unfortunately lost manuscript of Errada of Landersberg, abbess of Hohenbourg in twelfth century Alsace. The image intends to represent the relation between the arts and the disciplines of the medieval cultural system. In the central circle Wisdom sits on a throne under which Socrates and Plato exchange their knowledge. Seven chapels, set-out with a sunburst pattern, contain the liberal arts: Grammar, Rhetoric, Dialectic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy and Music. Outside the outer circle, in an intended down-towards position, four scribes are working at their desks, with a sinister presence on their shoulder: a little black bird, depicting the Devil, whispering into the scribes' ears. To make the message more clear, we read: “*Isti, immundis spiritibus inspirati, scribunt artem magicam et poetriam id est fabulosa commenta*”⁶² (Those, inspired by vile spirits, write magic art and poetry, that is to say, fabrication of fantasy).

The iconography clearly identify *poetria* (poetic art) as the production of a demoniac presence, while, in a transversal line, poets are associated to magicians of “filthy instinct”.

The systematisation of such an imagery is given one century later by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the outstanding master of *Scholastic* philosophy, who classifies poetry as the most despicable among the doctrines (*infima inter omnes doctrinas*),⁶³ due to the minimum quantity of truth involved in its production. Meanwhile, the Decretum Gratiani, as part of the Corpus Juris Canonici, the collection of Canon Laws of the Catholic Church which remained valid until the beginning of twentieth century, makes

61 F. Stella, “Poetica ed esegesi: creativita' e legittimazione culturale nella poesia mediolatina” (“Poetry and Exegetics: Creativity and Cultural Legitimacy in Medio-Latin Poetry”) in *Poetica medievale tra Oriente e Occidente*, p. 139.

62 Stella, “Poetica ed esegesi: creativita' e legittimazione culturale nella poesia mediolatina”, p. 139.

63 *Ibid.*, p.140.

the cultivation of poetry forbidden to clerics.

The Catholic Church, whose strong hegemony had been definitely imposed since the eighth century, was able to reach in a capillary every sector of society and to establish not uncommonly its supremacy even on the civil institutions as well. The production of culture, rigorously controlled by the *scholae* (from which the term *Scholastic* is derived), was based on the dominant theme of the “revealed truth”. The secular clergy and the religious orders exerted the function of guiding the conscience, of directing the culture, of orienting the ideology on every social stratum. Such homogeneity of thought, “often assessed with punitive expeditions like the internal crusades or with the intervention of the Inquisition, could easily confound the reasons of power with those of faith”.⁶⁴

However, if such a condition could well explain the rigidity and the scarcity of the poetic production for many centuries, it was not sufficient to prevent its future and unpredictable development. Indeed, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries very important changes happened in the Christian world: on the background of socio-economic transformations which reshaped the trade and urban life in Western Europe, the emergence of the heretical movements and the institution of the mendicant orders had a revealing and lasting impact on the history of Christianity, which also got reflected on the spirit and the form of religious poetry. A wave of intense spirituality and devotional practices spread all over, carrying along social and religious demands in the rural as well as in the urban area. Itinerant preachers roamed the streets and the valleys inviting the masses to follow their preachings, groups of flagellants warned the population announcing the end of the old era and the coming of the age of the Spirit heralded by the monk Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202), secular and religious confraternities were chanting *laudae* in name of the Virgin Mary, or repeating incessantly the Alleluia invocations. It was a “real movement of collective asceticism and mystic exaltation which had deep roots in

⁶⁴ M. Masuelli, *Letteratura religiosa e società del Medioevo (Religious Literature and society in the Middle Age)* Paravia Ed., Torino 1975, p. 5.

the heart itself of the popular soul”.⁶⁵ To get an idea of the nature of the socio-cultural processes happening in Western Europe it will be sufficient to look briefly – and not completely – at the main heretical groups that developed from the eleventh century on: Alleluiants, Flagellants, Waldensians, Humiliatis, Patarines, Arnoldists, Poor Lombards, Joachimites, Apostolicis, Dulcinians. Finally, we must add to the list the Catharis, who were the target of the sadly famous Albigensian crusade,⁶⁶ that put an end, with them, to the *trobadoric* poetic tradition. Transversal to all these movements, and simultaneously interacting and interweaving with them, is the so called phenomenon of Beguinage, the spiritual answer of women to the religious inquietude of the period.⁶⁷ It is necessary to underline that all these Orders and sects were not “isolated occurrences, independent from one another and determined by the will and the action of its founder or by the casual tradition of his heretical thoughts. Rather, they have been an integral part of the religious development of the West”.⁶⁸

Therefore, it is possible – and hopefully useful – to outline the common ideals and principles on which such a development rose upon, and that will provide the grounding themes of the religious lyrical production of the following centuries. Indeed, the mystic poetry of Saint Francis of Assisi and Jacopone da Todi was the ideological platform from which the great masterpieces of Dante and Petrarca later evolved.

The term “*pauperism*”, applied by and large to most of the religious movements and sects of the twelfth century, stands for their primary and original demand, together with a direct and passionate return to the evangelical message, at a time when the wealth and affluence provided by the reviving trade and urban life brought in huge materialistic elements into the society in general and Church in particular. However, the call for

65 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

66 C. Violantem, “Eresie urbane e eresie rurali in Italia dal XI al XIII secolo” (“Urban and Rural Heresies in Italy from eleventh to thirteenth century”) in *Medioevo Ereticale (Heretical Middle Age)* ed. Capitani O., Societa' Editrice il Mulino, Bologna 1977.

67 H. Grundmann, *Movimenti religiosi nel Medioevo (Religious Movements in the Middle Age)*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1970.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

poverty as an ideal of Christian life often came side by side with social protest, generating not little confusion in the historical interpretation. Indeed, a general resentment against the richness and corruption of clergy, together with the impatience for the ecclesiastic monopoly on worship and liturgy, must have played a relevant part on the historical scene. Moreover, the slow but inexorable erosion of the feudal system and the emerging of a communal economy, still fragile and unsettled, comports new social classes and different power relations among them, certainly contributed to the uneasiness and instability of the masses, who always paid the highest price of evolution. After the year 1000, demographic and economic development had reached its height: “steadily and sometime dramatically – as in north and central Italy – the population increased, in fact doubled. All these people had to be fed, materially and spiritually”⁶⁹ This meant new areas of cultivation, new systems of yoking, new forms of socialisation. And of course, new religious movements. Villages were expanding, cities growing fast, new classes were emerging. Urbanisation was the main result: towns were no more only military and administrative centres, but economic, political and cultural ones, where merchants, bankers and artisans could experience a new kind of social life, but also new kinds of poverty. However, to establish a direct link between heresy and the economical and social situation of the time might result problematic. First of all because the protagonists of the movements, as well as many of their followers, came from different social strata, and not always from the most unprivileged ones. For long time, heretics have been called “*rusticus*”, “*idiotae*” and “*illiterati*” (crude, stupid and ignorant) by their Catholic opponents, but this tells us nothing about their social belonging, which on the contrary have proved to be often quite refined and acculturated. Similarly, the French definition of “*texerantes*” (weavers) have been mistaken for the social class they were mostly coming from. Actually, “were not the weavers and artisans to become heretics, but the heretics to

69 J. Le Goff, *Saint Francis of Assisi*, Routledge, New York, 2004, p. 1.

become weavers”.⁷⁰ Many of them abandoned their family and security, renounced wealth and profession and chose the most menial tasks to follow their spiritual path. This was responding to the apostolic ideal to live of manual and humble work, as well as the disparaging epithets were taken upon them as blessing since the apostles themselves, whose imitation was the greatest ambition of the heretics, had been called “*idiotae et sine litteris*” by the priests and scribes of their time. For the same reason Saint Francis would call himself and his companions “*idioti*” and even “*pazzus*” (crazy), and Jacopone will describe himself as “crazy of God”.

Secondly, poverty was not a novelty for anyone: the peasants of the previous centuries had known no better times of those of the present. The *pauperism* of twelfth century was a voluntary choice made in name of spiritual values, due to a new consciousness raising, born by the urge for a deeper and keener return to the Sacred Texts, especially the Gospels and the Epistles of Saint Paul, and a re-evaluation of the Great Fathers of the Church. For the same reason, heretics chose itinerant predication, which became one of their most distinctive ideal: bare-foot, with long hair and beard, wearing poor and ragged cloths, they would constantly move from place to place, living on alms, chanting their hymns, and preaching God's word. Or else, they would retire in the isolation of forest and mountain, man and women alike, sometime looking for exasperated forms of ascesis, of voluntary harshness and mortification, or even death. They wanted to follow “the naked Christ naked”,⁷¹ making of the imitation of Jesus (*imitatio Christi*) their supreme goal. “There is, between the end of the eleventh century and the first half of the twelfth, a deep and total spur of renovation, based on the New Testament, and particularly the Gospels, its source, that sees in the apostolic life its way of realisation and, finally, it recognises in poverty its seal of Christ”.⁷²

70 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

71 R. Manselli, “Evangelismo e poverta” (“Evangelism and poverty”), in *Scritti sul Medioevo (Essays on Middle Age)*, Bulzoni Editore, Roma 1994, p. 112.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

The life of such a vibrant and fervent religious movement was not out of risk. The “*Inquisitio Haereticae Pravitatis*” (inquiry on heretical perversity), instituted by the Church towards the end of twelfth century with the purpose to fight heresy, did not use a soft hand. Hundred of thousands of heretics paid their faith with their life, burned on the stake, after brutal and pitiless tortures. Excommunication was, at best, the lesser evil. For the Medieval society, which used to firmly link every aspect of life, from public to private, to the religious belonging and recognition, excommunication was not a light matter. The only option to avoid any risk was to obtain the endorsement by the Church. Many monasteries and congregations dawned during the century, in order to find a new and stable way of life, guided by severe rules for the accomplishment of religious vows and purposes.

However, it was the institution of the mendicant orders, and among them the Friars Minor, to reach the highest and outstanding position in the history of Christianity, as well as to effect the religious poetic production with unparalleled results. The mystic fervour of the Franciscans created a space where faith and poetry could blend in perfect harmony. The ideals and the ardent spirituality untidily carried out by the religious movements of the twelfth century, found a spectacular settlement in the figure of Saint Francis (1182-1226), who was able to translate them into universal patterns. He also put such a miracle into words, singing the most ancient poetical composition of the Italian geographic area and, above all, an undiscussed masterpiece: “*The Canticle of the Sun*”. “The direct and indirect effect of Francis and of Franciscans on the literature of thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (and much further) is definitely and absolutely imposing”.⁷³

Regarding the Saint's spirituality, apparently not much has changed from the ideals we have analysed so far. Well-known is the image of Francis, son of a rich and

73 I. Baldelli, “La letteratura dell'Italia mediana dalle Origini al XIII secolo” (“Literature in median Italy from the Origin to thirteenth century”) in *Letteratura Italiana (Italian Literature)*, Einaudi p. 27.

respected merchant, undressing himself naked in front of the Bishop in Assisi and pronouncing his total vow of poverty. The first rule of his Order, endorsed by Pope Innocent III in 1210, strictly forbids any property to its Friars, as well as to accept any money, or any sort of gift. It urges them to work with their hands, to walk bare-foot and to wear ragged cloths. He exhorts them to be “*mild, peaceful, modest, gentle and humble*”, to pray for their enemies and to patiently accept injustice and offences. And, above all, they had live according to the Gospel, in the name of Christ, in obedience and chastity.

Where is the exceptional novelty that made his message so overwhelming? One word is the key, and that word is “love”. Francis not only chose poverty, as many other had done before him. He simply loved poverty, to such an extent that he married “her”. He called poverty “*my bride*”. His heart was an inextinguishable source of love that overflowed on every thing he looked at. The earth, the sun, the wind, the moon, the stars, all were triumphant elements of the divine generosity. His gratitude arrived to include death itself. He won the world with his joy. He was enamoured of the universe, and the intensity of his passion crossed all visible and invisible barriers, to collocate him above all the others, in an eternal space, very close to the feet of God. With him, the sacred function of word manifested itself through poetry, proving that, when the spirit reaches such a mystical altitude, the unutterable truth gracefully displays itself on a written page. To remain there for ever.

The attempts to compare the two cultural systems that we have so far outlined do not mean to superimpose the two frames looking for simple symmetry and discordance, rather to observe how do they respond to analogous situations and problems, to focus on what they eventually shared and what they did not, and to see what can we deduce from the data collected. The basic feature of medieval societies lies in the fact that the economic inequalities were transparent and given for granted. They found their

legitimation in the divine order: the Pope, the Emperor, the Calif, the King, they all reigned for God's will. This implied a sacralisation of political and social relations, which invested the cultural system as well. The secular space was very scarce indeed and, above all, much less influential and decisive than the religious one.

Such a condition was common to both the Islamic and the Christian world. The way in which the two systems had organized their spiritual values, and especially how these values had been represented in the lyrical field, is our main concern.

The Islamic cultural system is logocentric, “being the Word of the Holy Book central to every aspect of the Islamic culture”⁷⁴, and it is based on the notion of “*i'jaz*” (inimitability). The inimitability of the Quran is both ontological and linguistic, collocating it in the unreachable space of divinity, towards which poetry will incessantly stretch out. We can say that God is “embodied” in the Quranic word.

Although even the Bible, for the primacy given to the word, could be considered ontologically logocentric, the Scriptures have mainly come to us through translations (Latin first and Romanic later). In fact some of the books of Bible were originally written in Aramaic and Greek, while majority were in Hebrew. Therefore, the eventual original lyrical value of the language of revelation has been lost. The divine beauty of the Sacred Texts is primarily identified with its content rather than with its form. The role of the incarnation is here taken by the figure of Jesus Christ.

Interestingly enough, the devotion developed towards these two kinds of incarnations is emotionally very close, and involve to a certain degree of the concept of imitation. In both the cases this attitude runs on the sharp and dangerous blade of presumption, torn between the burning desire to adhere to the embodied subject, and the necessity of stopping respectfully one step back.

Moreover, poetry and mysticism seem to share the same destiny of condemn and

74 G. Lelli, “Elementi per una poetica comparata del mediterraneo medievale” (“Elements for a comparative poetry of Medieval Mediterranean”), in *Poetica medievale tra Oriente e Occidente*, p. 298.

contempt by the respective orthodoxies, which kept an attitude of suspicion and an attempt of control on both the cases. This is a historical trend which shows a continuity till the very present. The jails of all regimes have always been full of visionaries and *letterates*. If the reasons behind the mystical target are not so difficult to imagine – heresy, conversion, loss of believers, and so on – the perseverance against poetry somehow escapes a clear and rational explanation, and suggest the agency of an unconscious and uncontrolled fear of mysterious origin. Poets have never been very dangerous opponents, rarely they were involved in insurgency, conspiracy, or mass movements. Generally they have spent isolated existence, bended on their notebooks or assorted on their visions. But what troubles the orthodoxy is not precisely the poet as a human being, rather the poem, or better, the *sehr* of poems. The incantatory power of poetry is perceived as threatening by the alliance of orthodoxy and power. And this is a fear shared both by Islam and Christianity.

Another thrilling coincidence is the spiritual burst around the twelfth century. Although it took different directions and it produced diverse effects, the sense of timing is bewildering, considering the dimension it reached. The entering of Genghis Khan into the scene has been put forward by several authors as a cause with the event, but I find it difficult to take it as relevant since the religious movements started to appear, both in the Muslim and in the Christian world, one century before the Mongol invasion.

Indeed, it will be a very ambitious task to establish causes and motivations behind a set of religious and spiritual occurrences that took place in a geographic area stretching from Northern Europe to India, involving two faiths and a number of sects, confraternities and single individuals, spreading over more than two centuries and effecting the religious, cultural, political and economic systems of different countries and civilisations, beside influencing the thoughts and behaviours patterns of millions of people, and generating myths, cults, traditions and works still alive and circulating even

today after a gap of 700 years.

What is mandatory is to avoid simplifications, together with the mistake to localize the attention only on a restricted area, or on a reduced time. Rather, the effort should be to open the eyes wide to contemplate the whole picture as far as the sight can reach. We may not get any definitive answer, but at least, as historians, we will perceive the dimension of the historical fact we are looking at. Otherwise, we risk to be like the blind people of the sufi tale trying to describe an elephant each touching a small part of its huge body; each convinced of his little truth; and each betrayed by the partiality of his enquiries.

Finally, there is no comparison between the overflowing poetic production of Medieval Islamic poetry and the paucity of the Christian counterpart. And there is nothing more distant from the plane and simple style of the *Canticle* of saint Francis or the *laudās* of Jacopone, and the sophisticated arabesques of the Islamic poems.

However, concerning the themes and ideals of the two religious poetic systems, several and evident correspondences stand out. The unutterability of the divine message, the use of oxymoron and paradox to express the ambivalence of the mystical experience, the liminal images (the desert, the border, the ocean), the solitude and sufferance, the idealisation of death, the acceptance of humiliation and offence, the tradition of itinerant preachers, and even a semiotic of the appearance (bare-foot, ragged cloths and long hair). But, above all, love as a central theme.

Without hazarding any unwarranted conclusion, I will limit myself to pose here some questions. Are these similarities due to the reciprocal influence of the two cultures, to the osmotic contamination of civilisations, which bypass the political and religious borders, to mingle their thoughts, dreams and ideas? In other words, was the Mediterranean sea a space of sharing, rather than of separation, as Fernand Braudel has claimed in his brilliant essay "The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the

Age of Philip II"?⁷⁵ And can we extend such a sharing trend to a larger area? Finally, is this sufficient to do justice to the similar traits of the different paths? Or else, is there a common source that brings close distant mysticisms and poetries despite differences of faith, culture, geography and history? And be that the case, how can history relate to it?

e) *Saints, Shaikhs and Sainthood*

The term saint derives from the Latin *sanctus* (sacred), whose Indo-European root “sac-sak-sag” means to joint, to adhere, to be engrossed by a supernatural power, being it a divine or a demoniac entity. We first encounter the Greek expression “hagios”, in Herodotus (fifth century B.C.) referring it to places or objects of piety due to their connection with the divine, or even as a curse, caused by the offending of it. Later on, the word has been utilized by Christians, during the time of Roman persecution that began in the first century, to celebrate the martyrs' rebirth into heavenly lives. The power of attraction exercised by the grave of these martyrs was soon embraced by Christian officialdom, that made the popular veneration of saints the cornerstone of its faith.

In the fourth century, after the establishment of Christianity as the state religion persecution got diminished persecution, martyrs were substituted by other saintly figures: ascetics, solitaries, monks, and pious man and women in general. Many of them renounced food, money, marriage, human company, and even their own free will to follow the contemplative life. In order to standardize practices that had developed in numerous localities over many centuries, and to control the flow of devotion surrounding such activities, the Catholic Church found itself in the need to institutionalize the process. However, it was only in the early seventh century that the first official procedure for canonization, established by Pope Urban VIII, tempted to give a rigorous and

⁷⁵ F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996.

authoritative uniformity to the qualification of sainthood. According to Urban's decree, all candidates were supposed to satisfy three general requirements: doctrinal purity, heroic virtue, and miraculous intercession after death. The decree, however, remained mostly theoretical, leaving large margin of interpretation to the clerical elites, and for longer time canonisation “was used by the prelacy to reward its outstanding members as well as to give permanent recognition to the heathen kings and queens who brought their subjects into the Christian fold”.⁷⁶ The problem became dramatically essential around the twelfth century with the proliferation of heretical movements. More than six hundred years after Urban's decree, in fact, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), fixed for the first time the heroic virtues as seven: faith, hope and charity (theological virtues), and prudence, temperance, justice and fortitude (cardinal virtues). However, a truly detailed and precedent-setting examination of heroic virtue first occurred only in 1671, in the canonization process of Teresa of Avila.⁷⁷ Thus, for many centuries, the major force in the establishment of saints' cults was veneration by a community of believers, whether that community was the populace of a particular town or nation, or the membership of a monastery or order. The control exercised by the Church on matter of sainthood remained far from systematic for many centuries, and saints assumed an importance among the folk far beyond that specified by official orthodoxy. In other words, this “suggests that people had their own ways of deciding whom they would venerate. Believers were little concerned with the theological ideas of their heroes, much less with question of doctrinal purity. What interested the faithful was the holy life and, above everything else in that life, evidence of supernatural power”.⁷⁸ Even Thomas Aquinas, doctor of the Church and arguably its greatest theologian, attracted a cult during his lifetime not only due to his intellectual powers, rather because so many believed he possessed supernatural graces. It

76 D.Weinstein, M.R. Bell, *Saints and Society. The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1982, p. 4.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

is reported that the saint's companions saw him floating “two cubits” above the church floor while he was praying.⁷⁹ It is also known that in many cases the spontaneous popular veneration for some individual, grave or place was adopted and canalized by the Church for political or religious reasons. Indeed, even today the initiative for canonisation lies mostly with the community, though the cult must be prepared to undergo rigorous screening in Rome. The study of sainthood thus “sheds a light on the great differences between the official Church doctrine and the popular canon that influenced religious belief and practice”,⁸⁰ no matter how unspoken and unconscious they were maintained.

But who were these 'masses' who seem to hold a monopoly on the saints' cult? It would be misleading to consider them as a rigid, homogeneous entity. From the chronicles of the age we know that they were a widespread and heterogeneous phenomenon, which involved different groups, intermediate rungs of the social ladder. “Medieval cults and pilgrimages [...] cut across classes, involving rich and poor, clergy, and laity”.⁸¹ It is a proved fact that in the Middle Ages “the cult of saints was quintessentially a public phenomenon”⁸² involving very huge crowds of people. As an example, it will be enough to recall the 1,127 people killed by a fire burst among the enormous flow of pilgrims directed to the Mary Magdalene Cathedral in Vezelay, in Spain, during the year 1120. Pilgrimages as such were not an exception to the rule, rather were part of the habitual scenario of Medieval Europe. The crowd sometimes was so huge to resemble a real invasion for the town hosting the saint's ceremony, so much so to provoke the wild reaction of the citizens who, in many occasions, attacked the Church in fury. Similar grievances were recorded, for instance, in Santiago de Compostela, where enraged mob assaulted the church with stones, bolts and lances, and the bishop was

79 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

81 *Saints and Their Cults*, ed. S. Wilson, Cambridge, 1985, p. 38.

82 B. Abou-el-Haj, *The Audience for the Medieval Cult of Saint*, Essay for the State University of new York, Binghamton, International Centre of medieval Art, Gesta, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1991, p. 3.

nearly assassinated twice (1117 and 1136).⁸³ Describing the cult of St. Cuthbert at Duran, in 1104 a witness states that “men [and women] of all ranks, ages, and professions, the secular and the spiritual, all hastened to be present”.⁸⁴

But, which were the criteria the believers used, to give an individual the state of saint? First among all was the evidence of supernatural power. Miracle-working was the most important but not the only form of celestial blessing that attracted cultic veneration. Prophecy and clairvoyance, the faculty to foretell the future and the ability to know people's thoughts, were also compelling proofs of supernatural power. As for miracles, zeal and credulity usually prevailed. Before the advent of modern medicine any recovery from a serious illness might have well been seen as miraculous. However, miracles were not the only and indispensable criteria to prove sainthood: a combination of the force of personality, rigorous self-denial, humility, and good works led people to believe that a saint was in their midst. Indeed, “the saint was invariably a deeply penitential ascetic who regarded miracle-working as incidental, even an embarrassing obstacle in the drive to self-abasement.”⁸⁵ Isolation and reluctance was evidence of saintly humility: as the Bible dictated, the humble walked with God. The direct communion with the divine was another very important mark of their authenticity and power: “Many saints were observed to go on trance for hours, days, even weeks, without the normal signs of life. While they were communicating with God they drunk no water, ate no food, neither spoke nor moved. Dead to the world, they lived in God.”⁸⁶ These states of ecstasy were regarded as better proofs that the mystic union had occurred. “The saints are important primarily because of their special tie to the divinity. [...] Through the saint, the person is reached by and reaches towards God. The conception of a mysterious power, a sacred

83 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

85 Abou-el-Haj, *The Audience for the Medieval Cult of Saint*, p. 153.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

force, is ever present: through saints' days the entire cosmos is recreated".⁸⁷

Moreover, also extreme ascetics were likely to be regarded as holy. In a society where the overwhelming majority of people ate meat two or three times a year if at all, seldom tasted wine, suffered chronic illnesses, saw hideous deformities on every side, slept on hard mats or on the floor, and engaged in backbreaking labour, those men and women who willingly, even eagerly, pursued still greater physical deprivation and suffering in the name of their God were indeed considered saints.

Voluntary chosen and auto-inflicted physical sufferings were also distinctive signs of holiness. Pretending to be mad in order to attract people's insults and abuses, serene acceptance of injustice, physical deprivation and torture, like to sleep on the cold ground with a rock for a pillow, to walk barefoot in the snow, to sit in a tree for days or even years, to insist on cleaning the pigsty, to disfigure their faces and smash in their teeth, to place sharp stones in their shoes, to wear any kind of hair shirt, were all ways to constantly remind of Christ suffering on the cross and, therefore, evident signs of sainthood. "So popular was flagellation that became one of the chief activities in the confraternities of lay people that burgeoned in the thirteenth century, and flagellating processions were common sight in those days".⁸⁸ Also to practice charity to extraordinary degrees, to serve the others, to protect the weak, the unfortunate, the deprived, like orphans, widowed and infirm, were to be seen as holy actions.

To sum up, the saint of Medieval Christianity was, first of all, a man or a woman recognized as such by others. Canonization was necessary, but not sufficient. Of the more than ten thousands saints officially approved up today by the Vatican, only a narrow minority still enjoy popular devotion. And the situation is very likely to have been quite similar in the Middle Age. On the other hand, even figures who did not obtain

87 S. Gudeman, 'Saints, Symbols and Ceremonies', *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1976), p. 726.

88 R. Manselli, "Evangelismo e poverta" ("Evangelism and poverty"), in *Scritti sul Medioevo (Essays on Middle Age)*, p. 156.

legitimation by the Church – or even worse, who were persecuted as heretics – used to, and in some case still are, enjoying popular devotion. The case of Fra Dolcino (1250-1307), publicly executed as heretic in northern Italy after several decades of popular favour, is one of the many examples: his popularity has lasted to the present day.

Coming to the Islamic idea of sainthood, we encounter a first, fundamental difference from Christianity: no process of canonization is entitled by the *shar'ia*. Moreover, sainthood is a thriving, albeit controversial, concept in Islam. Some Muslims have opposed it as un-Islamic in conception and practice. The Quran repeatedly emphasizes that God alone is the helper, patron, friend of the believers (e.g., 3:68, 2:107, 9:116, 18:26). People are warned against taking 'friends' or seeking aid from any but God (6:14, 42:9), as have the wrongdoers who take each other as friends (45:19, 8:73) and those who are the companions of Satan instead of God (16:63, 4:76, 7:30). In addition, the Quran forbids intercession by anyone but God (2:48, 74:48). Orthodox *ulama* have thus deplored acts such as seeking intercession, belief in miracles, and pilgrimage to individuals' tombs; these are thought to violate monotheism by creating intermediaries between the believer and God, as well as by setting up others as equal to the Prophet.⁸⁹

However, during its evolutionary process Islam was forced, “by the influence of the inherited instincts of believer” to leave in many respects the line traced by its beginners: “In no other field has the original doctrine of Islam subordinated itself in such a degree to the needs of its confessors, who where Arabs only in a small minority, as in the field [...] of the veneration of saints”.⁹⁰ There are at least seven different Arabic words to define a person in relation with sainthood: *wali*, *murshid*, *shaykh*, *dervish*, *sufi*, *pir*, *marabout*.⁹¹ The Semitic root of the word *wali* (literally “friend”, plural *awliya*)

89 *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Islamic World*, ed. J. L. Esposito s. v. saints, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York, 2009.

90 I. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1971, Vol. II, p. 277.

91 For a survey of the terminology involved in the context of Islam in the subcontinent of India see “The Role of Saints in Islam”, in P.M. Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Mu'in al-Din Chishti of Ajmer*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992.

expresses the idea of “adherence, attachment and nearness”⁹², meaning someone who is close, fellow, friend or relative. In religious language, this idea of closeness was extended to the relation between human beings and divinity. *De facto*, there is an enormous gap between the principle dictated by early Islam and the position which the cult of saints was able to gain soon after. Indeed, popular Islam gave and recognized a very specific role to some individuals who were believed to enjoy intimacy with the divine, and to be able to intercede with God on behalf of supplicants. Their powers increased after death, and their tombs normally became pilgrimage sites. Often their deeds or sayings were recorded in hagiographies, that play an important role in preserving the saint's legend for posterity. Interestingly, the qualities and features possessed by these *awliya* strongly resemble their Christian counterpart: “the ability of performing miracles, the capacity of healing the body and the soul of suffering people, a tendency towards ecstasy, and a recognized charisma.”⁹³ Characteristic by which saints were commonly recognized included exceptional piety and the ability to speak through divine inspiration. Working miracles (*karamat*) based on action (*'amal*) and knowledge (*'ilm*) was another sign of sainthood. This could mean curing diseases, walking on water, subduing wild animals, controlling spirits, as well as to possess great mystical insight (*basirat*); it could include the ability to read thoughts and foretell the future. However, performing miracles was considered such as an hinderance on the Path, and a real *shaykh* would not indulge on such activities. But, as a popular proverb well known in the Muslim world says, “even if the *shaykh* does not fly, his disciples make him fly”.⁹⁴ Saints could act as doctors, psychiatrists, and spiritual counsellors to their adherents. Sometimes they became the *de facto* leaders of their communities, defending them against oppressors and guiding them through dangerous times. A lodge or shrine could be an important gathering place for a

92 Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Mu'in al-Din Chishti*, p. 1.

93 *Ibid.*

94 C. W. Ernst, *Ruzbihan Baqli: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism*, Curzon Press, Richmond, 1996, p. 124.

town or a village, where ceremonies would be regularly attended by residents.

Such skills varies from one case to another, however Currie detects as the only undisputed trait of Islamic sainthood the particular link with the divinity: “ That which unites *wali*, *pir*, *shaykh* and *murshid* into a single category is their relationship with Allah”.⁹⁵ Indeed, the union with God is the real essence of Islamic mysticism, and the primary occupation in the life of any saint. As one believer, interviewed by Katherine Ewing in her essay on sainthood, states in very simple but significant words: “It is my opinion that if there are any people who are near God, it is those who have loved God very much”.⁹⁶ It is such exclusive link with the divinity that entitles them with *baraka*, being, according to the Encyclopaedia of Islam the “beneficent force, of divine origin, which causes superabundance in the physical sphere, and prosperity and happiness in the psychic order”.⁹⁷ *Baraka*, which can be loosely translated as “divine blessing”,⁹⁸ is a kind of aura surrounding the saint, which can be transferred to petitioners through touch, and which inheres in his or her tomb after death. The idea of *baraka* seems to correspond very closely to the Christian concept of “grace”. Both of them are gift of the divine entities, who choose those whom they wish to make their privileged intermediaries. Both of them can vary in degree and intensity, and moreover both are phenomena which stand out of the reach of human rationality. The whole idea of sainthood is even unthinkable without the intervention, respectively, of *baraka* and “grace”.⁹⁹

The concept of a class of holy beings appeared in Islam's first centuries. Treatises on the subject were circulating at least as early as the ninth century, when visitation (*ziyarah*) of the graves of saints started to become a practice of devotion. This cult coincided with the development of Sufism, the name under which Islamic mysticism is

95 Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Mu'in al-Din Chishti*, p. 11.

96 P. K. Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood. Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1997, p. 123.

97 G.S. Colin, ‘*barakat*’, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., p. 1032.

98 *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, p. 23.

99 To use a Sufi metaphor, we could say that a saint without grace, as well as a *shaikh* without *baraka*, is like an ocean without water; yet, not every drop of water makes a saint, nor a *pir*.

generally grouped. However, to define Sufism is, till now, a very difficult task. The best definition that I have found so far is “a metaphysic of love”¹⁰⁰, referred by the theosophy of Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240), one of the greatest sufi saints, besides being a mystic of a global stature. The “prophetic hermeneutics” of Sufism has the aim to initiate human beings to the hidden sense laying beneath appearance. But “Sufism itself is no one thing.”¹⁰¹ Although it comprehends a variety of attitudes, mentalities, principles, rituals, and practices, yet Sufism maintains the essence of its own identity. And this is a feature that has not equivalence in Christianity. The set of mystical movements that developed in the West after the birth of Christ did not materialize in a shared and specified identity, no matter how heterogeneous and diversified that were. Probably because it was formally institutionalized, the spiritual self of Christian sainthood coincided with the religious affiliation, without feeling the need of a separate status within. Eventually, the single saints maintained or recognized their belonging to a certain order or monastery – a link that, in certain case, could be very strong and pervading. But the different orders missed a shared communion other than the Christian one. In other words, they were united by the common faith, but not as a distinct and specified category of believers comprehending all the different religious orders. On the contrary Sufism, although sub-divided into orders as well (*tariqa*), and notwithstanding the above mentioned heterogeneity that distinguished it, developed the awareness of a same path, a strong sense of belonging to the same mystical kinship. The Sufis were united by a double bond: as Muslim, just as the saints of the West were unified under Christianity; and as Sufis, meaning those walking the on the mystical Path, engrossed in the esoteric task of awaking the awareness of humanity, and of guiding their disciples along the sacred Way. From Arabic Spain to far East, those individuals who recognized themselves – or were identified by others – as Sufis would share, at least in theory, this same spiritual identity. It would be interesting to analyse if

100 Corbin, *L'immaginazione creatrice*, p. 102.

101 V. Crapanzano, ‘The Hamadsha’ in *Scholars, Saints and Sufis. Muslim religion Institutions in the Middle East since 1500*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie, University of California Press, Berkley, 1978, p. 327.

and as to what extent the development of Sufism benefited out of the absence of a formal canonization process. However, this is not the aim of the present study. What I am concerned with is to underline here the common traits and the divergences between the two faiths regarding sainthood.

Another distinctive feature of Sufism is the relationship between the master and the disciple (*pir* and *murid*), which finds in Islam an ancient and illustrious origin: Muhammad's relationship with his son-in-law Ali was considered the first *piri-muridi* example, through which the master passed the secret doctrine on to his disciple. Since then, and without solution of continuity, the sacred tread has been handed down by the descendants of the Prophet, establishing a practice which carries on till today. "However, since the knowledge passed on was experiential and came from the experience of the *pir* [...] different methods with their variations in experience were preserved and passed on by the spiritual successors of the first teachers. And these different methods with their different lines of transmission gave birth to the different Sufi orders in Islam".¹⁰²

The relation between master and disciple is regulated by complex and articulated rituals and ceremonies, such as initiation, *majlis* (assemblies), practices of *zikr* (remembrance), *tawajjuh* (concentration), all aimed to bring the *murid* to a state of annihilation, i.e. total surrender of his or her personal will to the feet of the *pir*. The stages of this path are epitomized in a Turkish saying:

Shari'a (law): 'Yours is yours and mine is mine'.

Tariqah (way): 'Yours is yours and mine is yours too'.

Ma'rifah (gnosis): 'There is neither mine or thine'.¹⁰³

102 D. Pinto, *Piri-Muridi Relationship. A Study of the Nizamuddin Dargah*, Manohar Publisher, New Delhi, 1995, p. 3.

103 R.L. Cohn, 'Sainthood', *Encyclopaedia of Religions*, ed. Lindsay Jones, Second Edition, Thompson Gale, USA 2005, vol. 12, p. 8035.

The modalities in which such an interaction is carried on vary from order to order, and from case to case. However, “It is a divine relationship which is sacred and private [...], it is an experience of Truth that is above the capacity of reason and normal understanding and, hence, beyond description and discussion. It is a relationship of divine love.”¹⁰⁴ Dissolving the self in the *pir*, becomes dissolving the self in divinity. To use a celebrated sufi image, the disciple abandons himself or herself like “a dead corpse in the hand of the washerman”.¹⁰⁵ This novitiate takes place in the *khanqah*, the monastery where the saint lives along with many disciples, during a life-time length. Actually, it does not even terminate with the death of the *shaikh*, since it is believed the saint will continue to guide and train the disciples also after the dissolution of his physical presence. The *dargah* (tomb) itself would continue to emanate the saint's powerfulness and *baraka*, for the time to come. As a matter of fact, shrines like that of Shaikh Nizamuddin, in Delhi, enjoy a continuity of devotion of more than seven centuries.

It is evident that there is no equivalent of such a distinctive pattern in the history of Christian sainthood, if not for some extraordinary figures such as Saint Francis of Assisi. However, the structure is not totally alien to Christianity. Rather, it reminds very closely the model *par excellence* of its entire religious system, in the figure of its divine founder. The relationship between Jesus Christ and his disciple responds to many of the requisites of a *pir-murid* engagement. Interestingly, such a pattern has not created a precedent-setting, and has not become an institutionalized modality in the transmission of the faith. Only the symbolism has survived – the priest as a spiritual guide for the community, the confession, the Eucharist, the intercession. But the individual relationship as vehicle of spiritual growth is occasional and incidental. Above all, it is not recognized as *the Way*. While, for the Sufis, it definitely is. Indeed, during the first centuries of Christianity some

104 Pinto, *Piri-Muridi Relationship*, p. 7

105 Lawrence, *Morals of the Heart*, p. 143.

forms of master-disciple relationships, especially in the Eastern regions, were common practices of cult and devotion. As well as they were present in the pre-Christian Era. And during the twelfth century, with the outburst of the heretical movements in Europe, and the example of Saint Francis in Italy, mendicants and itinerant predication, confraternities, and discipleship were enriched by a renewed fervour. But by no means they became an institutionalized practice.

Stephen Gudeman, in “Saints, Symbols and Ceremonies asserts that “the meaning of any saint lies not only in what it represents and who venerates it, but also in what it is not, and who does not venerate it.”¹⁰⁶ It would be definitely worth exploring as to why some aspect of the life of Jesus Christ has been maintained and adopted, and why some other have not been. But again, this is not the place for such an elaborate discussion on these aspects. It will suffice here to notice the interwoven semiotic and ontology of the phenomenon of sainthood in both the belief systems in order to advance some hypothesis of comparison.

The age-old question between Islamic and Christian historiography is that of influence. The two faith shares prophets, myths and mysteries. They have been involved politically, economically and on the battle-field for many centuries. They have lived and mingled, side by side, so far. Indeed, influences have been multiple and reciprocal. But the risk of overestimating influences is to loose the drawing to follow the tread. Marijan Mole', in his essay on Muslim mystics¹⁰⁷, tries to analyse the external religious and spiritual influences present in sufism. He starts giving to Christianity the predominance, but he is compelled to recognize the heterogeneity of the impact: Orthodox, Syriac, Maronite, Nestorian and Armenian Churches, all contribute to different levels and degrees. So he identifies traces of Monophysitism, Origenism, Messalianesism, Anacoretism, Hesychasm, Hycetism and Cenobitism. Syriac and Egyptian monasticism

106 Gudeman, *Saints, Symbols and Ceremonies*, p. 711.

107 M. Mole', *I mistici musulmani (Muslim Mystics)*, Adelphi, Milano, 1992.

and asceticism are also seen there. Not missing are Hellenic and Jewish-Christian resonances, connections with Manichaeism, Mazdeism, and Mazdakism, as well as with Buddhism and Vedanta, of course without forgetting the neo-platonic movements. But to say all, is like to say nothing.

Restricting the focus on the idea of sainthood, we can sum up the common traits of the phenomenon as follows. To begin with, it is recurrent in the etymological meaning of “adhere”, implicitly meaning to be close to, to be friend or intimate to God. Secondly, it is quintessentially a popular affair, based on spontaneity of devotion, on which the religious institutions exercise a relative, but not absolute control. In Islam, the so called “hierarchical intention” had “very little influence on the development of the Muslim veneration of saint”,¹⁰⁸ but this does not mean that the ecclesiastic hierarchies did not try to take, whenever it was possible, advantage of it. As a matter of fact, in both the faiths “the formal and the folk sometimes coincide, sometime conflict, and sometime complement one another”¹⁰⁹; then, many of the skills and requirements necessary to be regarded as saint, are very much the same: union with the divine, supernatural powers, ecstasy, clairvoyance, healing, humbleness, moral virtues and saintly life; the veneration persists after death through the graves of the saints, believed to hold the blessed energy of the dead soul for eternity. The main discordances are, a part all the theological aspects, the question of the identity, and the relationship of master-disciple. Rituals and ceremonies, of course, also differ.

The problem is that, if we enlarge the glance to the pre-Christian Era, to include the traditional cultures, we again come upon the same patterns. “The shaman is the ecstasy specialist *par excellence*. Thanks to the ability of leaving his body to his liking, and undertaking mystical journeys in every cosmic regions, the shaman is either healer, or spiritual guide, both mystic and visionary. Only the shaman can reach the rotten and

108 Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, p. 319.

109 Gudeman, *Saints, Symbols and Ceremonies*, p. 711.

lost soul, and reintegrate it into his body; he is the only one who can accompany the dead souls to their new abodes. In short, the shaman is the great specialist of spiritual questions, that is the one who better knows the many dramas, risks and problems of the soul. Shamanism represents for primitive societies what, in more elaborate religions, we are concordant to define with the terms mystic and mystical experience.”¹¹⁰

Indeed, if we superimpose the three religious phenomena – shamanism, Christian mysticism and Sufism – the resonance appears even more vivid, suggesting new analogies: the motif of the ascension, reached through the ecstatic flight; the link with the souls of the dead; the veneration of relics, and more to come. Drumming, dances and songs go with the mystic journey almost ever. “Magic and chanting [...] are often indicated with the same term [...]. *Bardo*, poet, musician, diviner, [the shaman] takes upon himself the commitment of being the custodian of the religious and popular traditions, to keep and to hand down centuries old legends”.¹¹¹ He befriends with animals, and understands their language. Interesting are also the circumstances related to the syndrome of vocation: the future shaman is identified by an unusual behaviour, by the urge to retire into solitary and deserted places, and the occurrence of visions or dreams. The elected can also “fall ill, behave insanelly, throw himself to the burning flames or into the deep water, or injures himself with blades.”¹¹² They run away from the world, and are often taken for mad-people. Others realize their vocation thanks to an extraordinary event: a sudden lightning, a fallen tree, a disease. But is a fact that the experience always implies a deep crisis, coming close to the borders of insanity. “What is above all indispensable, is the total *adherence* (the italic is mine) of the subject to the spiritual universe that he wishes to penetrate.” Only doing this, he will be able “to die to the

110 M. Eliade, *Miti, sogni e misteri (Myths, dreams and mysteries)*, Rusconi Editore, Milano, 1876, pp. 72-73.

111 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

112 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

profane sensibility, to be reborn to the mystic reality”.¹¹³ The shamans distinguish themselves from the community for the intensity of their religious experience: “they live the sacred in a deeper and more personal way”.¹¹⁴ The richness of the similarities is no doubt impressive. Mircea Eliade concludes: “It does not exist one single shamanic miracle not attested in the eastern religious traditions as in the Christian tradition”.¹¹⁵

But how are we to take all these analogies? Do they stand as preceding influences? And how do we know that they are not, in turn, the result of previous and lost models? One possibility is to suspend the expectation to identify the original source of derivation, and to focus instead on the question of continuity. For instance, exploring how and why some phenomena enjoy a continuity transversal to time and geography, while other do not. “Folk traditions, archaic religions, and even shamanistic phenomena could be usefully investigated and compared. A real taxonomy of sainthood should attempt to define the historical and cultural conditions under which we can observe the emergence and the flourishing of the phenomenon.”¹¹⁶ Such an investigation, enlarged to include other religions as well, could prove what is transitory and what is not, and help to eventually find out if an essential core does really exist. I argue it does. I believe that the saint is definitely a historical figure, influenced and influencing the cultural conditions and political situation under which he or she lives. Yet, saints are also something else. They are the symbolic representation of a universal human need. “Saints are preeminently symbols, by which I mean they are things which stand for or represent other things, such as moods, groups, objects, or activities. One, but not the only, referent of these symbolic systems is the social order.”¹¹⁷ Symbols are not abstracted figures resembling reality, rather essential keys to comprehend reality. They dispose a complete and autonomous modality of knowledge. “The symbol reveals certain aspects of reality –

113 *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

114 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

115 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

116 G. Gedaliahu, *Stromusa, Journal of Religion*, Vol. 70, No. 4, Chicago Press, 1990, p. 670.

117 Gudeman, *Saints, Symbols and Ceremonies*, p. 709.

the deepest aspects – those who escape any other means of knowledge.[...] Rituals, symbols, myths respond to a need, and fulfil a proper function: to lay bare the more secret modalities of the self”.¹¹⁸ Ritual actions, in general, are a universal pattern of human behaviour. They are not limited to the sacred context, rather they forge almost every aspect of existence, not only of human beings, but also of most animals as well. “The ritual is a non-verbal statement which communicates something about a situation or a person. [...] Like language, ritual may be deciphered, decoded, and translated. But rituals are not merely expressive events, they also *do* things...”.¹¹⁹ Actually, through the ritual experience, people and situations are changed. Birth, marriage and death are essentially transition rites in that they alter the ritual status of a person in relation to others. The making of vows and votive offerings to saints are also aimed at changing some aspect of an individual's life, such as ridding himself or herself of an illness, solving some problem or ending some sufferings. But rituality is always a sacred affair, since “every ritual has a divine pattern, an archetype”.¹²⁰ “Every action that has a precise sense – hunting, fishing, agriculture, games, conflicts, sexuality – takes part to some degree in the sacred”.¹²¹ In other words, although if in course of time all these activities have undergone a long process of desacralization to make them profane, still they originates in the sacred. A feature that resembles very closely the poetic composition, as we have seen in the previous pages. What seems highly significant about the saints' ritual system is its repetitiveness. This system is not only the collector of unwritten memories and important cultural data, as well as the preserver of a set of meanings which might otherwise be lost. The symbolic value of this repetitiveness goes far beyond: “the imitation of a archetypal patter is an updating of the mythical moment in which the

118 M. Eliade, *Immagini e simboli. Saggi sul simbolismo magico-religioso (Images and symbols. Essays on magic-religious symbolism)*, Jaca Book, Milano, 1980, pp. 15-16.

119 Gudeman, *Saints, Symbols and Ceremonies*, p. 710.

120 Eliade, *Immagini e simboli*, p. 39.

121 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

archetype has been revealed for the first time”.¹²² The events repeat themselves because they imitate an archetype: the exemplary event. The imitation of something immutable takes its roots into the first myth *par excellence*, the cosmogony. However, it is not a static act, rather it implies the power of renovation, the eternal rebirth. All these ritual tend towards the same aim: to abolish the time as past, to cancel the history in a continuous return to *illo tempore*, to the lost paradise, to the primordial union. “The mystic, like the primitive human, lives in a constant present”.¹²³ For the mystic as for the traditional human, the only reality is the sacred one. The profane reality is like an interval, an illusion, a veil.

The ritual system of sainthood, being mainly, as we have seen, a folk affair, is not rigidly dogmatic, but also “inherently flexible”¹²⁴, i.e. adaptable to times and places. Goldziher, in his extensive analysis of Islamic sainthood, gives many examples of “how popular Islam uses elements which belong to the new religion to serve for the reinterpretation of old ideas which derives from pre-Islamic traditions”.¹²⁵ As far as Christianity is concerned, eastern as well western, the phenomenon is also amply documented.¹²⁶ The cult of saint became a religious space capable to absorb and accommodate past and alien beliefs, partially keeping them alive along the centuries, and partially incorporating and transforming them into something else. In other words, repetitiveness and transformation are closely interwoven, both present and functional. This ambivalence recalls the recurring motifs we have encountered in the previous section dedicated to poetry. Just as the poetic verse does, the saint stands at the edge of reality, balanced between the past, remembered and recreated as a series of meaningful events, and the future which these events can revive and remodel. “More than a static

122 M. Eliade, *Il mito dell'eterno ritorno (The myth of the eternal return)*, Edizioni Borla, Roma 1968, p. 104.

123 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

124 Gudeman, *Saints, Symbols and Ceremonies*, p. 727.

125 Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, p. 300.

126 *Ibid.*, p. 297

memory bank which can be used to legitimate the present, this mythical system is in constant need of the future in order to justify its existing pool of meanings. And, as new events take place, some are drawn into the system, modifying it, expanding it, and replacing old events. Structure feeds upon event and the present becomes the remembered past, which itself is carried into the future, in the unfolding cycle of the saints.”¹²⁷ The individual always holds a range of personal choice and interaction within the saint's veneration, drawing a space of inviolable spiritual freedom, where no one else is allowed to interfere. The unique position of being part of the eternal and at the same time agent of the evolution produces the taste of a sacred experience, which is the very core of the saint's cult. “...the person drowns upon an accepted set of beliefs for his ends, and in so doing he regenerates and redefines – he changes – himself as an existential being”.¹²⁸

The foregoing discussions on the communicative uses of poetry that the saints of both Christianity and Islam resorted to at different times show that, in both belief systems, poetry and hymns were developed as the most fitting literary vehicles to transmit the mystical experiences of saintly personalities and to arrive at the spiritually ecstatic level of trance, despite the immense criticism drawn from the orthodoxy. Having looked into the *raison d'être* of Amir Khusrau and Jacopone's poetry as a literary device to ventilate the experiences of their spiritual journey, I would be moving over to locate these two personalities in their historical contexts and to analyse the socio-economic milieu within which their compositions originated.

127 *Ibid.*

128 *Ibid.*

Chapter 2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The type of mystical tradition and literary genre practiced by Jacopone da Todi and Amir Khusrau in two different parts of the world were shaped by the socio-economic context within which their living experiences were located. Both represented the new category of religious and quasi-personalities who appeared in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries at junctional centres of trade and urban life in Europe and India, where their immediate audience was the emerging segment of urban dwellers, who celebrated their poetry and mystical writings with intense religious fervour. Despite this commonality, there had been a wide variety of difference in the socio-economic and political contexts within which their thinking and emotional experiences were shaped. In this chapter an attempt is made to discuss the different layers of historical processes that moulded the perception of both these poets.

a) *Medieval Italy: Socio-Economic Setting*

The mentality and character of Jacopone da Todi was shaped very much by the long chain of socio-cultural processes that appeared in Italy in thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Thirteenth century Italy, as the heartland of the reviving trade and urbanism, experienced a unique socio-cultural process with mutually conflicting desire for wealth accumulation on the one hand, and earnest craving for negating wealth and embracing poverty on the other. The process of accumulation of mercantile wealth and consequent urbanization appeared in Italy, once the Italians, who initially used to carry crusading armies, eventually got quarters in the Levantine towns and the Venetian, Pisan and Genoese merchants started flooding Italian markets with oriental wares. Milan, being the

centre of a reputed armaments industry, was a major hub in the process of circuits that appeared by this time.¹²⁹ Italian merchants crossed the Alpine passes, particularly the mountain passes of the Rhone river system comprising Grosser St. Bernhard, Theodul pass, Monte Moro, Antrona pass and Simplon as well as the passes of the Rhein river system like Lukmainer, Greina pass, Bernhardin, Splügen, Septimer and Julier to attend the great fairs of Champagne. The frequent commodity movements between the Mediterranean and Germany and the booming textile manufacturing activity in Italy led to the emergence of several hubs of trade and urban centres, of different size and varying economic value, in central and northern Italy.¹³⁰

The revival of trade and the consequent concentration of wealth in the hands of a few in the towns of Italy, where a large segment of urban dwellers continued to live in abject poverty, created a new type of religious response among some of the urban dwellers, who started looking at wealth as a hindrance to apostolic life and the sublime spiritual life that the gospel was preaching. The Medieval Church had been ignoring the problems of social life in the evolving cities, as its focus had long been the social life and activities of the countryside, particularly life in monasteries, churches and parishes in the manifold manors at a time when Europe remained rural for about a millennium. The big gap between the wealthy merchants in the town and the poor settlers of the same space created a new type of social problem, for addressing which the monastic orders and pattern of religious life introduced at the time of ruralization were not enough. The rural community was stable and tamable with organizational devices. But the evolving towns represented anarchic space, where people were engaged in all kinds of doubtfully permissible (in canon law) pursuits, with extremes of wealth and destitution and problems of over-employment and unemployment. The inadequacy of the existing

129 V. H. H. Green, *Medieval Civilization in Western Europe*, London, 1971, pp. 87-8; F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, London, 2002, pp.131-2.

130 P. Malekandathil, *The Germans, the Portuguese and India*, Münster(Germany), 1999, pp. 5-7; Green, *Medieval Civilization*, p. 87.

religious institutions and platforms to address the social issues and problems of the times led to the appearance of different mass movements, hysterical exercises and a variety of movements clamouring for return to the gospel values of poverty and simplicity, despite the fact that some of the participants of these movements were tried and punished in the inquisitorial court under the suspicion of being heretics. Southern speaks of the hysterical outbursts that appeared as a part of the medieval urban mentality in the process of getting Christianity adapted to the new urban environment.¹³¹

Several private spiritual ventures came up against this background, mostly in towns, both on individual initiative and as a collective spiritual effort, very often outside the official strand of the Church, to get back to the gospel values of poverty and simplicity. There were cases when a small minority of people wanting to lead a life of poverty used to form association of Apostles and at times going from town to town preaching conversion from the 'vices' of affluence to the virtues of poverty.¹³² Very often itinerant weavers carried the message of this new cultural process from town to town. Some of them stuck on to their way of life and their continued fighting against the official strand of Church despite them being punished, persecuted and tortured.

The Cathars or the Albigensians, who as preachers of extreme poverty got a great amount of acceptability in the evolving towns of western Europe (Cologne, Champagne, Liege, Vicenza, Verona, Mantua, Florence, etc.), were condemned as heretics by the Pope. Repudiation of material things stood as the central task of this group, that also meant renunciation of flesh and sexual relations, maintaining that they stemmed from Satan.¹³³ Catholic Church mobilized a crusade against the Albigensians in 1208, which lasted for twenty years killing a large number of them in most of the towns. However the desire for bringing in gospel values of simplicity and poverty still continued to spread

131 R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, Harmondsworth, 1970.

132 *Ibid.*, pp. 274-6.

133 Donad Logan, *A History of the Church*, p. 203.

from places to places through another mass movement often known as Waldensians.¹³⁴ The Church immediately tried to appropriate this movement by making them embrace Catholicism under the name of Catholic Poor or “Poor Lombards”.¹³⁵

Thus the central and northern Italy, which happened to be the junctional centres of trade, and core areas of urbanity experienced the intensity of the protest and dissent movements fomenting against the Church, in the process of fighting against the inordinate accumulation of wealth happening among few in the towns and also among the church-people. In northern Italy the artisans took up the social issue of accumulation of inordinate wealth in the hands of few. They did not chalk out any confronting strategy; instead they formed an association called *humiliati* (humiliated), to get back to gospel values. The artisans of Milan and Verona, which were also places where Albigensians and Waldensians had some influence, avoided luxuries and, started wearing coarse woollen dress, donated the surplus portion of their income to the poor. Though *humiliati* were initially condemned as heretics, they were later absorbed as a group leading a spiritual life acceptable to the mainstream Church.¹³⁶

Simultaneously, there emerged a perception that against the background of turbulent changes happening in the urban society and economy, the end of the world would happen soon, the fears about which got intensified with the foretelling of Joachim del Fiore and got magnified with the recurring outbreak of famines, pestilences in the fourteenth century.¹³⁷ Hundreds of people formed groups of flagellants and moved from town to town beating themselves in atonement for their vices and sins and beseeching God’s mercy. The practice of the ‘spiritual touring’ of flagellants through the towns, beating themselves and allowing themselves to be beaten by others in the market places and the courtyard of churches took hysterical circuits during the thirteenth and fourteenth

134 *Ibid.*, pp. 205-211.

135 *Ibid.*, p. 211.

136 *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

137 *Ibid.*, pp. 275-293.

centuries, at a time when the towns were affected by famine, pestilences and Black death in particular.¹³⁸

Thus, the towns experienced a new type of spiritual expression at a time, when the problems of urban life raised new questions to be answered in spiritual life and faith-expression. The old monastic pattern developed for a realized social milieu was no longer compatible for the new category of urban-dwellers of the evolving towns. The sudden destitution of wealth, leading to abject poverty in towns, was something that the new order of Franciscan Friars, again basically an urban religious order banking upon the donations of the urban dwellers, took as the central part of their spirituality to which Jacopone da Todi got immensely fascinated with. Southern writes that “the poverty of a rural society is so deeply rooted in the nature of things that it could never in itself seem a very important part of renunciation [...] However Francis saw poverty and wealth as perhaps only a man brought up in the rapid accumulation and sudden destitution of an urban community could see them. He did not have the comfortable sense that all wealth is natural, whether it consists in the command of labour or the fruits of the earth, and that no man is so poor as to be wholly destitute of wealth. He could see only that wealth is profit, which men create for themselves; it is something corrupt. Hence poverty shone as an ideal of purity and romance, and it occupied the first place in his attempt to follow the life and poverty of Jesus Christ”.¹³⁹ The town-centric activities of Franciscans were such that where there was a town in western Europe there were Friars, and without a town there were no friars.¹⁴⁰ It was their spiritual way of life that necessitated linkages with towns; “A single beggar can survive in the countryside; but an organized community of beggars cannot. The mendicant order could not survive without the support of a fairly large population of the towns”.¹⁴¹

138 *Ibid.*, pp.284-6; Southern, *Western Society*, p. 275.

139 Southern, *Western Society*, pp. 282-3.

140 *Ibid.*, p. 286.

141 *Ibid.*

Jacopone da Todi, who was deeply attracted to the practice of poverty that Francis Assisi resorted to and followed his mystical traditions, was a child of the times, shaped not only by the Franciscan perception of wealth/poverty binaries and uses of wealth by city-dwellers and its deprivation as the only way for finding God; but also by the various category of people and spiritual men who abhorred wealth as a hindrance in realizing God-experience.

c) *Jacopone da Todi*

When Jacopone (1230/36-1306) came into being, the idea of Italy was more or less what Dante will define, by the end of the Thirteenth century, as the community of those who “to affirm say *si*”.¹⁴² *De facto*, it was a very fragmented and diversified territory, comprising a complexity of cultural and religious elements, and a multiplicity of political and geographical scenarios. Most of the cities of the North were organized in “communes”, a form of city-state with different degrees of independence. Ruled by a local government, the *communes* were constantly trying to defend their autonomy from bigger forces willing to incorporate them; therefore, they were making and breaking alliances with each other, as well as with kings, popes and political and religious factions. Moreover, *communes* were quite busy with their own internal instability, ungovernability being their undiscussed and unresolved weakness. A part from few exceptions, like the later Medicean Florence and yet, only for a given period of time, the fortune of the different *communes* remained mutable and depending on many variables along the centuries. Still, their political autonomy and their commercial prosperity somehow managed to survive for more than fine hundred years, becoming a distinctive feature of the Italian peninsula. The *communes* of the North “played a substantially eccentric and

142 Arnaldi G, Marazzi F., ‘Il quadro storico’ (‘Historical Context’) in *Storia della letteratura Italiana (History of Italian Literature)*, ed. Malato E., Salerno Editrice, Vol. I, Roma, 2005, p. 18.

aversive role in respect to the pyramid of powers that were making roots in the rest of the territory”.¹⁴³

The centre of Italy was occupied by the State of the Church, whose spiritual and political leader was the pope himself. Ruling from the Holy See, the pope had the task to govern and defend his territory, as well as to be Head of the Universal Church, that is to exercise his control over the entire Christian world; and beside, of course, to be its spiritual guide. The problem was that all these different goals often were in collision with each other provoking, instead of resolving, weakness and unstableness. From the very beginning of its existence, right after the fall of the Roman Empire, the State of the Church was torn between the need of a strong and protecting allied, and the fear of succumbing to its domain. The entire history of the Christian policy followed the swinging between these two options. On the other hand, a similar attitude was shared from time to time by its allies, who fought to obtain the sacred investiture, but later suffered the pope's interference. The entire history of Europe has been marked by the so called “struggle between the throne and the altar” till very recent time. For the Empire the recognition by the Holy See was indispensable to establish its authority in respect to the other European powers. Similarly, the papacy, in order to be a universal and supreme reference for the Christian world, needed to move within the frame of a single territorial sovereignty. Thus, the two powers, although naturally prone to be in conflict, were constantly in the need of each other. “The juxtaposition and the opposition between the two universal powers were the supreme theme of the political and institutional life during the entire Middle Age”.¹⁴⁴

At the beginning of Thirteenth century such a struggle had reached a very high pitch, since the crown of the Holy Roman Empire was headed by Frederick II of Swabia, invested by Pope Honorius III in Rome, in 1220. Known as “*stupor mundi*” (stupor of the

143 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

144 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

world), Frederick established his court in Sicily, in the city of Palermo, creating a fabulous and efficient kingdom with no equivalent for the age. Giving proof of unusual tolerance, the emperor's palace became an extraordinary lively centre of culture, attracting scholars, mathematicians, astronomers, physicians, philosophers and poets from every corner of the world. Not only Jews, Muslim and Christians, but also the few heretics survived from the bloody crusade against the Cathars - launched in France by Pope Innocent III, in 1208 - found a welcoming shelter within the regal palace. Indeed, the first recognized tradition of Italian poetry, the so called "Sicilian school", took birth at the court of Frederick, by the works of a group of king's officials who wrote in the style of Provençal lyrics.

However, the concern of the Holy See was more strategic than cultural. What mostly worried the leaders of Christianity, one after the other one, was the capacity of the new Holy Emperor to build a centralized and powerful State with all the credentials to conquer an hegemonic position over Europe. Moreover, the Swabian sovereign showed no mystery about his intention to force under his command the *communes* of the North, as his grandfather Frederick Barbarossa (red-beard) had stubbornly tried to do, in vain as well. In the eventuality of his success, the State of the Church would have dangerously been squeezed between the Emperor's domains, with very few chances for maintaining its autonomy, not to talk about its ambition to be an universal power. That is way pretty soon the crowned Swabian king became a mortal enemy, legitimating any effort and strategy to eliminate him from the scene. Frederick was excommunicated several times, and his reign was interdict, relieving his subjects from the duty to obey him. Moreover, Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241) made all the possible alliances with his enemies and rivals, so much so to change the future and destiny of the entire peninsula for ever. As a matter of fact, after the death of Frederick in 1250, the South of Italy will fell under the influence of two new powers: the French Angevins will govern from Naples, and the

Spanish Aragonese from Sicily. The Lateran policy did not put an end to the troubles of the Church, on the contrary it laid the foundations of the following “Captivity of Avignon” (1309-1377), the 70 years forced transference of the Holy See in France, under the rigid control of the French King Philippe the Handsome. However, it definitely ended the golden era of the South of Italy, plunging it into centuries of misrule and maladministration, whose consequences are visible up to the present days.

The foreign policy was not the only problem of the Christian kingship. Rome shared with the *communes* of the North the internal instability that, from time to time, reached dramatic peaks. Several were the Popes never able to reside in the capital, or forced to hastily escape from it in order to save their lives. Few noble families were fighting tooth and nail to establish their influence over the city; Orsini, Colonna, Savelli, Annibaldi, all shared aristocratic lineage, both in the secular and the sacred sphere, beside enormous richness as well as strong connections, often obtained through marriages, with powers out of the State. Turmoils and betrayals were daily routine. According to its self-interest, each noble family blatantly chose to align itself with the more convenient partner from time to time. After all, it was not an uncommon attitude, on the contrary it was the undisputed norm of Medieval Europe. Competition was fierce, and means subdued to the end. Even those not directly involved into the straggle between the altar and the crown were taking sides, so much so that the entire peninsula was divided into two main factions: the Guelphs, supporting the Pope and the Ghibellines, supporting the Holy Roman Emperor. The distinction, however, was not so sharp and, in course of time, ended adapting to local realities, as well as being susceptible to sudden changes or compromise. Therefore, there could be Ghibelline cardinals and clerics, Guelph cities in war with Popes, or agents of each side moving from one party to the other according to better opportunities.

Lastly, the Church had the difficult task to defend the Christian doctrine from

alterations and contaminations that could dangerously menace its unity, and therefore its right to exercise its universal control over the Christian world. Being so involved into worldly matter such as political and economical affairs, no much space was left for spirituality, creating a void deeply felt by the majority of the believers; void that, during the Thirteenth century, was filled by the spread of the heretical movement and by the institution of the mendicant orders. We have already spoken of such a phenomenon, which reached such proportions, not only in Italy but all over Europe, to be defined the main features of the late Middle Age.

This was the broad historical and cultural context of Jacopone's life and career. He was born in Todi, a small town about one hundred kilometres from Rome, right in the heart of the State of the Church, and fifty kilometres from Assisi, the natal city of San Francis (1182-1226).

There are many legends about his life, but reliable historical sources are scarce and meagre. We know he was born in an upper class family, that he studied law, probably in the famous Bologna University, and that he held some official position as “notary or accountant”¹⁴⁵ in his home-town. Around 1265-67 he married Vanna di Bernardino di Guidone, daughter of one important family of the region, but the marriage did not last long since the wife died during a feast, due to the collapse of the pavement, three years later. The legend relates to this incident the conversion of Jacopone, who had been, until then, a very worldly man. According to the angiography, the uncovering of a spiked belt hidden under the fancy clothes of his wife's dead body, was for him a sort of shocking illumination. Being that the case or not, we know from his own written words that he discovered his spiritual vocation when he was already a mature man, and thereafter he left his house and occupation to roam the forest barefoot for ten years, to become a “*bizzocco*”, the italian term for “Beghard”. In 1278 he entered the Friars Minor

145 Huges S., Introduction to *Jacopone da Todi. The Lauds*, tr. by S. and E. Hughes, Paulist Press, New York-Ramsey-Toronto, 1982, p. 24.

Franciscan order, maintaining however his secular status, a possibility that was given to those who were not interested in the clerical career, and that San Francis himself had formerly chosen.¹⁴⁶ By that time, the Franciscan order was already divided into two currents; the Spirituals, who were faithful to the first and original rule dictated by Francis, which strictly forbidden any kind of property; and the Conventuals, more inclined to compromise and ready to accept donations and the edification of monasteries and churches. Jacopone was a passionate supporter of the Spirituals, and was actively involved into the troubled and sometimes dramatic events related to their movement. Almost one third of his poetic production deals with some religious-political matter. He speaks with the eyes of a very well informed and attentive observer of his time. No doubt he was an intellectual before conversion, and he remained such thereafter. After all he had probably been a notary, a Medieval category “whose services gave certitude of right to inter-subjective relations, [and] constituted a class of secular intellectuals, never existed before”.¹⁴⁷ In the second half of thirteenth century, notaries in Bologna were second in number only to barbers.

During his lifetime, Jacopone saw 17 Popes sat on the sacred throne; after his conversion, he probably spent a decade or two if not in Rome, very close to the Roman Curia, of which he proves to know well covert and uncover matters. The thirteenth century was a time of few illusions. Relations were governed by interest and violence, and the popes made no exception. Contradictions were striking and bewildering. Gregory IX (1227-1241), the first Pope to excommunicate Frederick II, and the institutor of the tribunals of Inquisition, was a protector of the Franciscan order, and he himself canonized “Francis, Antony from Padua and Dominic de Guzman”.¹⁴⁸ Innocent IV (1243-1254), beside deposing Frederick in 1245, five years later celebrated the death of his Swabian enemy with “letters to the European sovereign sadly famous for the scornful

146 F. Suitner, *Jacopone da Todi*, ed. Donzelli, Roma, 1999, p. 57.

147 Arnaldi, Marazzi, *Il quadro storico*, p. 19.

148 Rendina C., *I Papi, (The Popes)*, Newton Compton Editori, Roma, 1983, p. 460.

tone toward the dead emperor and truly not too decorous for the vicar of Christ on earth”.¹⁴⁹ Plus, in 1252 he authorized (with a papal bull) the tribunal of Inquisition to use torture during their probings. The cardinal council in charge to elect the Pope was a very complicated assembly, that often turn out to be a farce. Quite frequently, the twelve cardinals were unable to come to a decision, and the see remained vacant for years. In one case, in 1241, the senator of the city of Rome barred the cardinals inside a room of the monastery of Septizonio, and the hygienic conditions became so bad that one of them died. In 1270, the exasperated population of Viterbo, were the council was being held for too long, walled up all the entries and lost the roof of the building. In 1273, the cardinals were left to bread and water, to force them to come to a resolution. Sometimes the elected Pope was so weak and old he could not even be seated. In 1276 Pope Adrian V lasted only 38 days after his election, while Onorio IV's health (1285-1287) was so poor, he could not even lift the host during Mass, so that a mechanical device had to be arranged. Niccolo' III (1277-1280) was so greedy for richness to remain famous for his unlimited treasure: “he finalized the papal sovereign to his personal interest, first among the popes to pursue it in such a categoric manner, to create a pattern for many of his successors”.¹⁵⁰ He is one of the pope we meet in the Dante's Hell. Such was the cultural and political climate in which Jacopone lived. So it will be not surprising that, when in 1294, after 27 months of unfruitful council, was finally elected pontiff the eremite Pietro da Morrone, at age of 79, Jacopone dedicated to him a very worried and skeptical laud. The poet was a man who had already seen a lot, and by no mean a naive. And although the new pope went to take his charge humbly riding the back of a donkey, it did not slip Jacopone's notice that the bridle were hold by the king of France and his brother Charles of Anjou. The eremite entered the Holy See with the name of Celestine V, and went down in history as the only pope to have voluntary abdicated his mandate, five months later. It was 1294,

149 *Ibid.*, p. 465.

150 *Ibid.*, p. 490.

and the cardinal who helped the old ex-hermit to come out of the papacy, was also the one who put him to prison in the fortress of Fumone, where the abducted pope died two years later. According to someone, he was poisoned by order of that same cardinal who had become, meanwhile, the next pope with the name of Boniface VIII (1294-1303); and, moreover, arch-enemy of Jacopone. His secular name was Benedetto Caetani, he was coetaneous of Jacopone and grew up in the same town of Todi. Although they were not exactly friends, they knew each other since childhood. Against him Jacopone wrote the most inflamed lauds, describing him as the worst of the Popes, a judgement shared by Dante who for him alone made the exception to prepare his place in Hell even before his death. Proving a very modern sense of tourism-economy, he was the pope who instituted the first Jubilee Year, granting a plenary indulgence for all of those who would visit San Peter and San Paul Cathedrals in Rome on that year and on the following centenaries. The event obtained an enormous success, driving to the capital several hundreds thousands people, and bearing abundant economical advantages to the Church and to the city itself. Boniface took the most of the situation, appearing many times in front of his citizens exclaiming “I am Cesar, I am the Emperor”. Indeed this was his goal and great dream, to establish once for all the superiority of the altar on the throne. He made it clear in the papal bull he signed in 1302: “in the Church authority there are two distinct swords, the spiritual and the temporal. The first is hold by the Church, the second is hold for the Church; the one is in the hand of the clergyman, the other is in the hand of the king, but under the guidance of the clergyman”.¹⁵¹ Obstacles to his project were not only the growing European powers, but also the strong Roman families who took decisive side in the matter. In particular, the Colonnas became fierce enemies of the pontiff, in an escalating struggle that will involve Jacopone as well. The despotic rule of the pope had earned him many rivals. In 1296 he prohibited any secular official to impose taxes or

151 *Ibid.*, p. 513.

revenues to the clergy without the permission of Rome, as well as he prohibited the ecclesiastics to pay them; for all the transgressor the penalty would have been excommunication and interdiction. The papal bull created great turmoil in the courts of Europe, and was finally accepted in Germany and England, not without malcontent. But in France, king Philippe the Handsome answered banning the permission of residence for foreigners, so preventing the Curial legates to collect the revenues. Feeling strong of the support of the French king, the Colonna seized the opportunity to launch a major attack on the pope. In may 1297 one young exponent of the family “took hold *manu-militari* of a huge sum of money belonging to Caetani's family”¹⁵² on the way to Rome. The enraged pope asked not only for the sum back, but claimed the punishment of the culprit and the requisition of some of the Colonna's proprieties. They refused, and open conflict began. On the tenth of May 1297, assembled in the family's castle of Lunghezza, the Colonnas signed a bill declaring illegitimate the pope, and asking for his abdication. One of the signature of the document is that of Jacopone da Todi. Boniface responded excommunicating the two cardinals of the rival family and announcing the confiscation of all its proprieties. Then, called for a crusade against the “damned progeny and damned blood” to crush for ever “their heads full of pride and contempt”.¹⁵³ All the soldiers enlisted were promised forgiveness for their sins, and one hundred days of indulgence for who ever will listen to the preaching against the hated family. The rebels retired within the Colonna's fortress of Palestrina, and resisted the siege for one and a half year. But finally they were defeated. The two excommunicated cardinals were exiled, and took shelter in French at the court of the king. All the proprieties of the family were confiscated and divided between the pope's family and the Orsinis, traditional enemies of the Colonnas. Jacopone was excommunicated and imprisoned in a monastery, probably in Todi itself, condemned to life sentence. He was almost seventy years old. We know

152 Suitner, *Jacopone da Todi*, p. 152.

153 Rendina, *I Papi*, p. 510.

about his custody conditions from his own word, in the famous laud “Che farai, fra Jacopone?” (What will you do, friar Jacopone?). The cell was dark and cold, filthy by his own excrements; his ankles were chained and he eat bread and water every day. However, it was in such a hard environment that he produced his best poetry. Although he was used to hardship, his resistance weakened in course of time, and he wrote twice to pope Boniface, asking for forgiveness. But he will be realised only after the death of his enemy, by the next pope Benedict XI (1303-1304), after seven years of prison. Jacopone will retire in one convent, where he will die three years later.

c) *Medieval India: Socio-Economic Setting*

With the advent of Turkish invasion of northern India a new form centralised state administration began slowly to emerge.¹⁵⁴ The ancient self-governing village-assemblies did not disappear, but were gradually incorporated and partially transformed by the new economic system sustained by a town based ruling class. Meanwhile, new centres of political and economic power rose along the horizon. Due to the attraction of the new state system as well as due to unsettled political, economic and social condition of the Caliphate, during the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, “large number of scholars, poets, traditionists and administrators turned to India as a haven or refuge.”¹⁵⁵ This flow of elite immigrants established the tradition of Muslim scholarship in the country, strongly influencing the social composition of Indian cities and towns, that became dream destinations for the world over. “The suddenness with which many towns of northern India rushed into prominence as centres of Muslim learning is a phenomenon inexplicable except with reference to the impact of these central Asian scholars”.¹⁵⁶ Sites

154 R.C. Majumdar, *The Delhi Sultanate*, Bharatya Vidya Bahavan, Bombay, 1960.

155 K.A. Nizami, *Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century*, Idarah Adabiyat, New Delhi, 1961, p. 265

156 *Ibid.*

of exchanging cultures, ideas and arts, the cities of the Sultanate also contributed to the formation of new social classes like artisans, merchants, money-dealers, and to the interchange between them. But it was the capital city to rise to the status of “a second Baghdad and a second Cordova”.¹⁵⁷ The urban society of a cosmopolitan vibrant metropolis like Delhi, where Amir Khusrau spent most of his life, produced a multi faced and intricate cultural setting, rich of challenges as well as opportunities. A constant flood of migrants was overflowing into the capital from the Islamic countries devastated by the Mongol expansion. If many were escaping from ruin, others were just searching for fortunes. Indeed, in course of time, the city started to attract people also from all over India: “Delhi became the home of all arts, fine and coarse, and opened a door to clever and talented men. In the suburbs and slums of the great capital the pimps, prostitutes and gamblers of Hindustan collected together to ply their abominable trades; and along with them, as a Heaven-sent antidote, came innumerable mystics and preachers...”¹⁵⁸ After their conversion to Islam, several thousands Mongols migrated to Delhi, “their settlements being known as Mughulpur”¹⁵⁹. All of these migrations gave the city the character of an agglomerate of people and cultures quite unique and unusual for the time. Another constant of the urban settlement of the capital was indeed the defence from the north-west invaders. When the envoys of the Mongol prince Hulagu visited Delhi in 1260, the future Sultan Balban “took pains to overawe them by staging a review of some 200,000 foots and 50,000 horses”¹⁶⁰. Seventy years later we read that the military forces allocated in the capital were reputed to be above 600,000. Although some of them probably did not reside within the city, a vast number of soldiers and officers must still have been allocated there, pouring into the local culture their mentality and customs.

157 *Ibid.*

158 H.C. Verma, *Dynamics of Urban Life in Pre-Mughal India*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publisher Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1986, p. 218.

159 M. Athar Ali, “Capital of the Sultans. Delhi during the Thirteen and Fourteen Centuries” in *Delhi through the Ages*, p. 36.

160 P. Jackson, “The problem of a Vast Military Encampment” in *Delhi through the Ages*, p. 20.

Then, there was the court, that also implied an enormous concentration of different people. Starting from the ladies of the Sultan's harem, who could reach into the several thousands, including wives, concubines, female relatives, servants and slaves. There were 50,000 slaves under Alauddin, and more than 200,000 under Firuz Shah;¹⁶¹ to end with a huge number of other salary-earners: according to the *Masalik-ul-absar*¹⁶², at the court of Muhammad Tughluq were employed 1,200 physicians, 10,000 falconers, 3,000 attendent of hunting, 2,200 musicians, and 1,000 “poets of the three languages, Arabic, Persian and Indian”.¹⁶³ To these we must add the favourite courtiers (*nadim*), theologians, scholars, artists, astrologers, dancers, jugglers, acrobats and any kinds of entertainers; and finally the household staff to take care of all of them.

Apart from the court, the whole population also needed daily provisions of an unlimited quantity of items. Most of them were coming from the *Doab* regions, but some luxury products could also arrive from very far. The transportation and distribution of goods were difficult, expensive and dangerous; therefore they involved a large number of people who were constantly moving back and forth from the city, and many others who were selling the items themselves. “10,000 to 20,000 load-cattle”¹⁶⁴ supplied the provisions to the capital under the control of the Hindus *naiks* (army officers). That the dependence of Delhi and its suburbs on the *Doab* and other contiguous areas was problematic can be traced by the several famines that infested the city in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, causing the death by starvation of many of its inhabitants. However, during times of abundance, commerce and trade was a source of well-being for a large section of the population. “The bazars were thickly congested; and the congestion was only made bearable by the absence or rarity of wheeled traffic in the street, the better

161 Amir Kusrau's maternal grandfather is said to have had 60 slaves for bringing betel-leaf to his assemblies, and 200 Turkish and 2000 Indian slaves and servant for attending to his person. M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslim*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publisher Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1985, p. 209.

162 Sihab al-Din b. Fadl Allah al-'Umari, *Masalik-ul-absar*”, cited in Ashraf, *Life and Conditions*, p. 65.

163 Ashraf, *Life and Conditions*, p. 65.

164 *Ibid.*, p. 194

mode of locomotion for those who could afford it being horses and litters”.¹⁶⁵

The cloth market was open from early morning till late at night and was crowded with people at all times. The slave market of Delhi was the biggest of the Sultanate and was famous in all of Asia. There were also markets for cattle and horses, for sweets, spices, fruits, weapons, shoes and many other kind of supplies. “The class of merchants as a whole was literate and prosperous”.¹⁶⁶

The frequent shift of the court, the damaging of the previous settlements, the constant need for fortifications, the necessity of new water supplies and, last but not least, the importance of architecture as a media of prestige and grandness, created another peculiarity of the city: an incessant building activity, which involved skilled and trained workers in great numbers. Masons, architects, stone-cutters, wood-carvers, ironsmiths, carpenters were all employed night and day in every part of Delhi, contributing, with their temporary presence, to the mobility of the social setting that, like a sponge, was constantly absorbing and releasing some of its components. Such a fluidity was invitingly suitable to create unexpected combinations, and unusual social interactions that became peculiar features of life in the capital city.

The high standard of living of the ruling classes, who were perpetually trying to emulate the court-style and competing among each other for luxury and extravagance, created the opportunity for other social figures to gain a crucial position in the society: money-lenders, middle-men and traffickers became indispensable to the organisation of the city life. The aristocracy, relying on the land revenues of the *iqtas* (revenue yielding administrative units) assigned to its nobles, was always in the need of current money to organize its parties, to lavish its donations, to boast its opulence. It was a class in perpetual debt, to the advantage of the usury¹⁶⁷. Prostitutes lived in specific districts (*mohallas*) or areas of the city, in private houses or in brothels (*kothas*). To work, they

165 *Ibid.*, p. 205.

166 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

167 Mujeeb, *Indian Muslims*, p. 209.

needed an imperial permit, and during Alauddin's campaign of controlling the prices, their rates were fixed by the Sultan, together with the value of horses, cattle and slaves. Some of these women were acculturated and trained in several arts. Often their houses became meeting places for scholars and notable men to discuss freely on several subjects or, in times of prohibitions, to drink wine. Spies were everywhere, from the Sultan down to the merchant, justified by the highly suspicious atmosphere of the time, whereby the most common means to gain power or settle businesses were to blind or poison all the rivals. Assassins, robbers and thieves were along each route and around every corner. In such a condition, travelling from place to place was a risky matter. However, we must imagine that the danger did not stop the population from moving, if we consider that Firuz Shah enacted a law forbidding Muslim women to visit mausoleums outside the city of Delhi alone.¹⁶⁸

There were sinners, but there were also saints. Long before the establishment of Turkish rule in India many Muslim saints entered the country and set up mystic centres at a number of places. “Systematic organisation of *silsilahs* (orders), began almost simultaneously with the foundation of the Sultanate of Delhi when two of the most important mystic orders – the Chishtiya and the Suhrawardiya – spread out and wide, built up their organizations and established themselves in their respective zone of influence.”¹⁶⁹ A traveller of the early fourteenth century informed that “in Delhi and its neighbourhood are *khanqahs* and hospices numbering two thousands”¹⁷⁰ Although such a number was probably overestimated, still their presence must have been quite relevant. These *khanqahs*, numerous and extensive as they were, wove themselves into the complex culture-pattern of Muslim-India becoming essential elements of the cosmopolitan tendencies of Indian society. People of the times felt very attracted to

168 Indu Banga, “Gender Relations in Medieval India” in *State and Society in Medieval India*, Vol. 1, ed. J. S. Grewal, Oxford University Press India, 2005, p. 456.

169 K.A. Nizami, *State and Culture in Medieval India*, Adam Publisher & Distributors, New Delhi, 1985, p. 180.

170 *Ibid.*

magic and superstitions, and the capital bursted with every kind of yogis and fakirs, but also true devotion played an important part in the life of Delhi. During Friday prayer, mosques were crowded and, as we have seen, some particularly intense sermons could lead people to tears and ecstasy. “Sufism exercised a profound levelling influence”¹⁷¹ on the society of the time. The *khanqahs* of the Sufis became in Medieval India “veritable centres of cultural synthesis where ideas were freely exchanged and a common medium for this exchange was evolved”.¹⁷² The pivotal point of the philosophy of the early Indo-Muslim saints was very socially oriented. When asked to define the highest form of religious devotion Shaikh Muinuddin Chishti, founder of the Chishti order in India, explained: “It is nothing but feeding the hungry, providing clothes to the naked and helping those in distress”.¹⁷³ Salvation, for a Muslim saint of Medieval India was a very practical goal, attainable in everyday life behaviour, every time he was able to impart solace and comfort to another human being. Each visitor was suppose to leave the hospice with his or her heart relieved; to bring a smile on a sad face was, for Shaikh Nizamuddin, the priority of his service to others. “This identification of religion with the service of humanity had revolutionary dimensions and while extricating religion from the narrow meshes of ecclesiastical formalities and ego-centric religious practices, invested it with tremendous possibilities to strive for the moral and spiritual culture of man”.¹⁷⁴ According to Nizami, three were the main causes of social distress in early Medieval India: “the caste-ridden structure of society, the racial and narrow ideology of the Muslim governing class, and the rigid orthodoxy of the *ulama*.”¹⁷⁵ For the victims of these social constrictions, the Sufis were the one and only hope. The principle of social equity was pragmatically applied within the *khanqah*; there, princes and beggars had the same seat and obtained the same attention. Sufi saints completely rejected the idea of human

171 *Ibid.*, p. 212.

172 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

173 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

174 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

175 *Ibid.*, p.184.

pollution, so entrenched in the Hindu culture, and they normally mixed with low-casted, rejected and even lepers. Indeed, “the *palace* and the *khanqah* assumed during the Sultanate period the significance of two distinct symbols, representing two diametrically opposed approaches to life”.¹⁷⁶ While the scions of the royal families were murdering each others' siblings and close relatives to assure themselves an unchallenged throne, while kings and princes were fighting their enemies daily, and piling the decapitated heads of the defeated in the yard of their palaces to discourage further defections, saints and devotees set quietly in their *khanqahs* to talk about love and compassion, to listen to each other, and to pray. Their presence “acted as a corrective to the political hysteria of the period”.¹⁷⁷ The Sufis contributed as counterweight in maintaining the moral equilibrium of medieval society. Moreover, although they never took a rebellious position against the orthodoxy, they offered to the believers a realistic alternative to the acrimonious debates and casuistical controversies of the *ulama*. And finally, in a country like India where many and different faiths already coexisted, the tolerance of the Sufis favoured a religious syncretism, creating a fundamental bridge between the ruling Muslim and the ‘Hindu’ subjects. Similarly, their open platforms, where people of different status and provenience set together, greatly favoured the development and circulation of vernacular languages. Concerning their relation with the State, a clear distinction must be done between different orders, since their attitude in this regard could be diametrically opposed; the Naqsbandis and the Suhrawardis, for example, visited the courts of the Sultans, accepted gifts and government services, and many of them amassed considerable wealth; while the Chishtis refused proprieties, and abhorred any involvement with kingship and power institutions, to the cost of their own life. Sometimes, within the same order, there were saints who refused wealth and power, while other were actively involved with both. Therefore, any generalisation on the matter

176 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

177 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

risks to be hasty and imprecise.

d) *Amir Khusrau*

The Turkish invaders of Northern India were not themselves a community, rather “Muslims from diverse ethnic, class and regional background, groups of dissociated people sharing few, if any, social ties with each other”¹⁷⁸. As we have already mentioned, following the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, the cities of northern India received a constant flood of immigrants from eastern Iran, Khurasan, Transoxiana, Afghanistan, and the rest of Central Asia. Moreover, after Baghdad had become the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate, a strong Persian influence had flown into the Arab world. The Turkish ruling class of the Delhi Sultanate embraced the tradition of ancient Persia and applied it to their idea of state and society. Persian became the language of administration and high culture, and Turko-Iranian traditions were adopted and often woven with Indian customs. The Persian theory of the divine right of the king surrendered the sultan by a halo of divinity, which found emblematic expression in the Mughal iconography. The elaborate ritualisation of attitude and behaviour towards the king utilized a language of complete submission and accepted inferiority. Prostration, kissing of hands and feet or other ritual of deference symbolised total obedience.

Among the refugees escaping the Mongols' fury were the ancestors of Amir Khusrau, probably belonging to a Turkish tribe of Central Asia. We do not know exactly when they arrived in India, but we know that his father was employed at the court of Sultan Iltutmish (1210-1236), where he married the daughter of an Indian nobleman. Amir Khusrau was born in 1253, in the township of Patiali, in the Etah district of Uttar Pradesh. Eight years later, at the death of his father, he was cared for by his maternal

178 Sunil Kumar, ‘Politics, the Muslim Community and Hindu-Muslim Relations Reconsidered: North-India in the Early Thirteenth Century’, in *Rethinking a Millennium*, p. 148.

grandfather, a rich and educated noble, Imad-ul-Mulk, who “had in his personal service two hundred Turkish and two thousands Hindu slaves and servants, and a thousand troopers”.¹⁷⁹ He used to give splendid and sumptuous feast where all the officials of the state were invited and varieties of delicious food offered. According to Khusrau, “the corner of his tablecloth stretched up to the skirts of the resurrection itself”.¹⁸⁰ This was the world where the young poet grew up, surrounded by luxury and high society. In the magnificent assemblies of his grandfather's residence he listened to musicians and poets, scholars and mystics in grand number and variety. He belonged to the privileged class of Turkish bureaucracy, that during the Sultanate of Balban (1246-1287) enjoyed the best social position. Balban, a Turk himself, adumbrated a very strong idea of kingship, and invested all means to carry it out, murdering, intelligence, iron discipline, and an efficient and centralized army. The absence of any definite law of succession for the Sultanate made the “ability to wield sceptre rather than legitimacy [...] the accepted principle of the period”.¹⁸¹ At the price of enormous loss of life and energy, every war of succession eliminated the weaker elements in favour of the fittest. And the same means were used to keep hold on power, once obtained. However, Balban's blood and iron polity succeeded in providing the first long term and fairly peaceful stability to the Sultanate.

As well as the monarchy, nobility too was not entirely hereditary, and merit and personal achievement were recognised by the Sultan. Fortune and favour could be acquired in a relatively short time, but as quickly they could be lost. This situation created lots of opportunity, but also fuelled rivalries and jealousies among different ethnic groups aspiring to share power. On the whole, nobles lived a very gay and lavish life, trying to emulate the Sultan in all his social and cultural activities, and to recreate in their residences “miniature courts” with all kinds of luxury and extravagance. Many of

179 M. W. Mirza, *The Life and Works of Amir Khusrau*, Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, New Delhi, 1935, p. 31.

180 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

181 Nizami, *Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century*, p. 112.

them attired under their generous protection scholars, poets, artists and intellectuals, actively contributing to the cultural development of the period. The development of art and poetry in Medieval India deeply depended on patronage, as it did elsewhere during the medieval period; “it is a well known fact that the growth of fine arts all the world over in the past was indissolubly connected with patronage”¹⁸². The poets and artists had to attach themselves either to kings or noblemen, for whom they worked and by whom they were maintained and rewarded. To begin with, patronage stirred wild competition and bad blood among the poets, thorn by rivalries and jealousies. It also led to much flattery and demoralising obligation. It compelled the poets to give what the patron wanted, i.e. what was calculated to please the patron, to adapt themselves to their patron's taste or whims. On the other hand, it is undeniable that the development of poetry in Persia and India was intimately connected with the munificence and liberality of patrons and their sounds taste. More than often the aristocracy had an impeccable taste and its influence on poetic production was more salutary than otherwise. To organize their parties, to lavish their donations, to boast their opulence the aristocrats were always in the need of cash money; “it was a class in perpetual debt, to the advantage of the usurers”¹⁸³. To this heterogeneous amalgam of migrants that formed the ruling class of the Sultanate, soon a new group was added: those Hindu-converts, who strove to climb to the top of power, sometimes succeeding to reach even the throne. They suffered, especially under the first phase of the Sultanate, many discriminations, but took bloody revenge under the Khalji; Alauddin Khalji was murdered by his favourite Hindu slave Malik Kafur, as well as Qutbuddin Mubarak Khalji by yet another, Khusrau Khan, a Hindu convert of low caste who, eventually, managed to sit on the throne of Delhi for almost a year.

The progressively growing dimensions of the reign made mandatory for the

182 M. Sadiq M., *A History of Urdu Literature*, Oxford University Press, London, 1964, p. 11.
183 Mujeeb, *Indian Muslim*, p. 209.

kingship to rely on an administrative web that generated the *iqta* system. “The *iqta* had existed since the early days of Islam as a form of reward for service to the state”.¹⁸⁴ Portions of land were assigned to officials in exchange for military service and maintenance of law and order. The problem of defending the frontiers, especially the north west under the constant threat of the Mongol raid, was a priority for the Sultanate. A strong and well trained army was also necessary for fighting back the frequent rebellions of both Hindu and Muslim chiefs in search of independence. The military service was supplied both by the *iqta* system and by centralized troops under the command of the sovereign.

The system of rule included a religious class which was by no means homogeneous. In the case of Islam we cannot talk of a downright clergy comparable to the Christian one. The most prestigious religious figure of the Sultanate was the Shaikhu'l Islam, appointed by the Sultan for taking care of the ecclesiastical affair of the Empire. It was both an honorific title and a high office given to scholars of eminence, whose intrigue and agency could reach, in some cases, dramatic consequences. During Iltutmish's reign the Shaikhu'l Islam Najmuddin Sughra was so jealous of other religious figures that forced Shaikh Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, the saint of the Chishti order, to leave the city. Only the reaction of the population of Delhi, which followed the departing saint in a spontaneous procession, joined by the Sultan himself, was able to reverse the situation and bring back the Chishti Shaikh to his residence in the capital. Beside the Shaikhu'l Islam, there were a good number of *ulama* (theologians cum jurists cum religious scholars). Although not organized in a hereditary system, nor in a fixed hierarchic structure, still “the *ulama* constituted a very influential section of Muslim society in the Middle Ages”.¹⁸⁵ As a matter of fact, anyone who had acquired a certain standard of religious knowledge could become an *alim*, but his prestige and influence

184 Nizami, *Religion and Politics in India*, p. 129.

185 *Ibid.* p. 150.

strongly depended on his personal piety and morality. Usually, after completing their formal education, *ulama* devoted themselves to teaching in *madradas* (college), or training students in their private residences. However, their opinion and judgement on many matters were looked upon by masses as final and decisive. Another religious role was that of the *qazi*, or judge, charged to settle civil litigations according to the principles of *shari'a* (Islamic law). Actually, “it was considered so necessary to have a *qazi* in every town of any dimensions, that the first administrative business always included his appointment”.¹⁸⁶ Finally, there were the mystics, Sufi saints or ascetics, mainly organized into chains or *silsilas*, dividing the territory into separated areas of influence (*walayats*). As we have seen, the *khanqahs* (monastery) of the saints became important centres of welfare and aggregation for the surrounding communities, making the position of the Sufi influential in shaping the opinion of the masses. To sum up, in order to consolidate his position the Sultan had to ensure the fidelity of nobility, the obedience of army officers, the efficiency of the administrative apparatus, the cooperation of *ulama* and mystics, and the favour of public opinion. The expectations of each of these groups of people differed from one another other, rendering the equilibrium of power a challenging task.

This was the world in which Amir Khusrau became a well known and acclaimed poet. He was 20 years old when his grandfather and guardian died; by that time as a young poet he had already composed his first *diwan* (collection of poems). In the following fifteen years he joined the court of several prestigious personages: one nephew and two sons of the Sultan, and the governor of Awadh. His career was a never ending ascent. In 1288, at the age of thirty-five, he finally entered the court of Delhi as poet of Sultan Muizzuddin Kaiqubad (1286-91). When the era of early Turkish Sultans had come to an end, and a new dynasty of Turkish-Afghan origin, the Khalji, had occupied the

186 I. H. Qureshi, *Administration of the Sultanate of Delhi*, Lahore, 1944, p. 152.

throne, Khusrau was not deprived of royal patronage. He was appointed *mushafdar* (keeper of the royal library) by Sultan Jalauddin Khalji (1291-96). His fame “spread far and wide...[so much so that] he was known even in Iran”.¹⁸⁷ Under Alauddin Khalji (1296-1316) the Sultanate witnessed twenty years of strong rule and a new phase of expansion that pushed the borders of the reign till the south of India. Alauddin worked to consolidate his power, improve administration, strengthen army, reorganise the *iqta* system, expand cultivation and increase taxation. His “measures to control the markets was one of the great wonders of the world”.¹⁸⁸ He fixed the prices of all commodities, from food grains to sugar, from cloths to horses, from slaves to prostitutes. Land revenues were to be paid mostly in cash according to the size of the land, based on measurement, and yield. The army was centralized and paid cash. Although his means were rigorous, his state granted a better subsistence to many of its subjects. However, society was deprived by its favourite sins; wine was prohibited “on pain of death”¹⁸⁹; taverns were closed, “kegs and tubs of the red juice were emptied into gutters so that the streets overflowed with it”.¹⁹⁰ The huge quantity of liquor stored in the royal cellars was fed to the court elephants that, happily, for once, “enjoyed themselves”¹⁹¹. Private meeting of every kind were also forbidden, and the order was carried into effect so rigorously “that no man durst to entertain his friends without a written permission from the Vizir”.¹⁹² Alauddin was almost illiterate, and was not very generous with artists. Yet, according to Barani's *Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi* his reign could boast of a great number of poets, scholars and saints, “great men of all nationalities, masters of every science and experts in every art. The capital of Delhi, by the presence of these peerless men of extraordinary talents, had become the envy of Baghdad, the rival of Cairo and the equal

187 Mirza, *Life and Works of Amir Khusraw*, p. 53.

188 Satish Chandra, *History of Medieval India*, Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2007, p. 101.

189 Firishta, *Rise of the Mahomedan Power in India*, Vol. 1, Edition Indian, Calcutta, 1829, p. 196.

190 Mirza, *Life and Works of Amir Khusraw*, p. 95.

191 *Ibid.*

192 Firishta, *Rise of the Mahomedan Power*, p. 196.

of Constantinople”.¹⁹³ There may be some degree of exaggeration in these descriptions, but there is no doubt however that under Alauddin's kingship the lyrical production of Amir Khusrau reached its apex. And even if we know from his own words that he struggled hard to obtain his remuneration (“But as I want to praise you, how can I write verses without some reward?”¹⁹⁴), he was definitely the chief poet of his time. The reasons of his popularity and prestige all along the Sultanate period were both artistic and material. Being undisputed his talent (on which there will be more later), it is also undeniable that he was able to serve six different monarchs, and to survive their political intrigues, thanks to a large amount of pragmatism. He acclaimed Alauddin in Delhi with his prizing verses although the new king's hands were still dripping blood of the previous Sultan, his uncle Jalauddin, who Khusrau had liked. He avoided conflict with Sultans even when they were hostile to his spiritual master Shaikh Nizamuddin. He passed from one dynasty to the other, from kingship to kingship “as part of the royal paraphernalia that changed hands at the death of each successive monarch and like the black canopy, the crown and the throne, the palaces, the slaves and elephants became the propriety of the new master”.¹⁹⁵ No doubt that court poets of that time were part of a complex network of patronage and their job must have been neither easy nor safe. “Poetry served as a medium for communicating with the world at large...A court poet was the spokesman for a ruler and the ideals he wished to espouse. The relation between patron and poet was a delicate one”.¹⁹⁶ However Khusrau submitted his creativity to power without restraint, without the slightest hint to rebellion. He adopted the utmost prudence, barefaced adulation and conspiracy of silence to each and every king. How much his behaviour was due to the position of an artist within the Middle Age society, or rather how much it was the result of his personal inclination and voluntary choice, it could only be a matter of

193 Barani, *Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi*, p. 341.

194 Mirza, *Life and Works of Amir Khusraw*, p. 109.

195 *Ibid.* 78.

196 Sunil Sharma, *Amir Khusraw. The Poet of Sufis and Sultans*, Oneworld Publication, Oxford, 2006, p.19.

speculation which does not fit into the present research. However, it is relevant to underline the complete absence of rebellious tendencies in Amir Khusrau's life, opposed to Jacopone da Todi who dedicated an important part of his existence and of his lyric production to rebellion. Interestingly, Khusrau's strong connection with the highest ranks of the Sultanate ruling class did not prevent him from pursuing a spiritual path which eventually became the ultimate inspiration of his poetry. He was follower, friend and finally disciple of Shaikh Nizamuddin, the reputed Sufi saint we have already encountered in the previous chapters. In the second half of thirteenth century, the Shaikh established his hospice (*khanqah*) on the banks of the river Yamuna, at Ghayaspur, which later became suburb of the imperial city when Muizzuddin Kaiqubad moved the capital to Kilokhari. The *khanqah* of the saint was visited daily by thousands of people, for more than forty years. We are informed by Barani that “from early morning till late into the night, nobles and plebeians, rich and poor, learned and illiterate, citizens and villagers, soldiers and warriors, free-men and slaves [...] men and women, young and old, shopkeepers and servants, children and slaves”¹⁹⁷ visited the *khanqah*. The *khanqah* served as a welfare centre for the Muslim community, helping and supporting people living in the neighbourhood, as well as travellers coming from other districts or from abroad. If a house caught fire, money was sent to the family who was left without shelter, if some widow was starving, the saint would provide for her sustenance, and on his way to Qutb Delhi, the Shaikh would distribute money to the prostitutes living on the site. Some received stipends from him.¹⁹⁸ His presence in Delhi was a fundamental element in the process of social identity of the capital city, creating a bridge among different social and religious groups, and holding them together within a moral frame that the State was not capable to offer. The saint preached a spiritual philosophy of tolerance, acceptance, goodness, of overwhelming and universal Love. The rule of his order had only one clear

197 Lawrence, *Morals for the Heart*, p. 3.

198 Mujeeb, *Indian Muslim*, pp. 142, 229.

and straight ban: never to get involved with power. How it was possible for a man like Amir Khusrau to simultaneously belong to the lavish court of the Sultans and to the holy *khanqah* of Shaikh Nizamuddin is a fascinating question. As a matter of fact, he reached such a deep spiritual level to be considered a saint himself, and his mystical verses boast a continuity of celebrity of seven hundred years, being the most acclaimed *qawwali* still sung today.

Amir Khusrau died in 1325, at the age of 72, few months after his master. The intensity of their relationship can be tasted by the following statement of the Shaikh: “I hope on the Day of Judgment to be expunged of all blames by the fire that burns in the heart of this Turk...I shall not set foot in paradise without him. If it were lawful, I should have instructed you to bury him in the same grave with me, so that we two always remain together”.¹⁹⁹

199 S. A. H. Abidi, ‘A Persian Poet par Excellence’, in *Amir Khusrau – Memorial volume*, Publ. Division Ministry of Education, New Delhi, 1975, p. 66.

Chapter 3

LYRIC FEATURES: DIFFERENCES AND ANALOGIES

a) *The works*

Amir Khusrau was a very prolific author, a sort of “encyclopedic writer”, as his contemporary Dante was called for the extent and the variety of works he composed. His literary production seems boundless, so much so that it overlaps with legend. It was believed that “the number of his works was ninety-nine”, containing “more than four hundred thousand verses”.²⁰⁰ He wrote both in prose and poetry: historical chronicles, epics, elegies, works modelled on famous masterpieces, lyrics, riddles and folk songs. However there is a considerable amount of discrepancy among biographers and historians on the number of Khusrau's works, and in many cases attribution is disputed. Authenticity becomes very difficult to prove especially on the wide number of his *ghazals*, a form of poetry derived from the pre-Islamic Arabic *qasida* (panegyric ode). Sa'di (1184-1283), the “wizard of Shiraz” was the first poet to make abundant use of ghazals, that later will be magnificently developed by Hafiz (1315-1389). Yet, it was Khusrau, years before Hafiz was born, to “firmly establish the claims of ghazal to superiority over all other branches of Persian poetry”.²⁰¹ Unfortunately, the majority of his ghazals were handed down orally, or collected into anthology by others, creating some degree of confusion and misattribution. The latest edition of Khusrau poems (published in Tehran), “counts 1,726 ghazals”.²⁰² The extraordinary life of these verses, that continued to be sung without interruption for more than seven hundred years, have somehow transformed them into a collective cultural propriety, gaining some degree of

200 Mirza, *Life and Works*, p. 142.

201 *Ibid.*, p. 204.

202 Sharma, *Amir Khusraw*, p. 46.

autonomy. The name of Khusrau became guarantee of specific theme and style, while the lyrics could live a life of their own, absorbing, incorporating or modifying the text in course of time. It was a very slow and unconscious process, that left untouched and crystalline the faith in the original, unshakeable even in front of historical evidence; although some verses have been proved to be spurious, they are still sung and attributed to the beloved “parrot of Hindustan”. Today, so many attributions exist to his name that the musicologist use the term “Khusravi style, to describe compositions that may have been influenced by Amir Khusrau or whose core can be traced to him”.²⁰³

A similar destiny is shared by Jacopone da Todi, although from a completely different prospective. He was not a prolific writer, since he wrote less than one hundred poems as a whole; for many centuries the exact number was believed to be ninety-nine, on which however attribution was disputed, finally reducing them to ninety-two. Still today, the authenticity of many verses is doubtful and controversial. This is partly due to the fact that Jacopone did not consider himself a writer, and the purpose of his lyrics was mainly didactic. He was addressing his works to friars of his order, or else to spiritual seekers, or to Christian believers in general. He was writing in the form of *laud*, lyrical compositions to be sung by groups or confraternities of lay people that used to gather periodically to pray and discuss spiritual matters. However, only few of his lauds became part of the repertory of these groups, being too difficult or too polemic to fit into their *laudaris* (collection of *lauds*). Almost one third of Jacopone's poems, in fact, deal with religious-political matters and events of his time. Another conspicuous part is dedicated to very difficult mystical themes, of not easy divulgation. A few of them, however, consecrated to the Virgin Mary, have gained tremendous popularity and have found constant collocation in most *laudaris* for the following centuries. But the absolute masterpiece attributed to Jacopone is the *Stabat Mater* (*The Mother was*), that was not

203 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

only an overwhelming popular success, but have been set to music by the greatest Western classical composers and performed uninterruptedly for seven hundred years. Among the most famous composers who signed its music are Palestrina, Pergolesi, Scarlatti, Vivaldi, Haydn, Rossini, Listz, Dvorakh, and many, many other till the very present day. It is one of the most interpreted text of the history of Western music. It also became part of the liturgy, during the week before the Palm Sunday, and was adopted as hymn for the *Via Crucis* ritual.

However, historical evidence has proved that the author of *Stabat Mater* could hardly be Jacopone, although one of his most famous laud, “Donna de Paradiso”, is very similar in style, pathos and atmosphere. Actually, the two lyrics evoke the same heartache, the identical and uncontrollable emotion, the contagious and passionate entanglement. The name of Jacopone has been so tightly linked to the *Stabat Mater*, so intensely connected to it during processions, liturgies, concerts, functions, rituals and performances, that has become property of the collective culture as well, against any evidence.

Interestingly, in both cases, the twisting has gone against history, but not against the true spirit of the two poets. There has been no distortion, not imposition. Rather, a sort of natural continuity, of instinctive communion, seal the link to their names, transforming both of them into a myth. Their spurious attributions betray neither the authors, nor the lyrics. They simply stand there, against evidence, like the absurdity of any mythology.

b) *The style*

Very distant, indeed, is the lyrical style of the two poets, as far as, perhaps, their geographical length. Khusrau's words are elegant, charming, musical and elusive.

Jacopone's are rustic, churlish, frank and often out of tune. The former was writing to please his patron and an elite audience, the latter to hit it in the stomach. One was addressing kings and princes, the other friars and common men. Khusrau was extremely conscious of his role as a writer, frequently falling into presumptuous statements of self-appraisal, as when speaking about his own style "which baffles all writers, the miraculous epistles written in it being like semi-revelation".²⁰⁴ On the contrary, Jacopone had no artistic awareness, and was critical of prestige and scholarship an end in itself. His main objective was humility, and defeating the dangerous traps of ego and presumption.

Amir Khusrau's critics have not missed to regret the author's dependence on conventions and ideals, making his verses often "dull and insipid".²⁰⁵ Especially some Persian critics have found fault with his style "for its excessive use of similes and metaphors, and an over abundance of figurative words and constructions." His lyrics are sometimes criticised "for being burdened with artificiality and verbosity, exaggeration and far-fetched ideas".²⁰⁶ It is unavoidable that, among such a vast production, the quality may not maintain constantly its high standard. But there can be little doubt that, even the most adventurous readers, in front of any collection of Amir Khusrau, sooner or later will find themselves puzzled by some very dreary and tedious pages. Obsessive recurrence of rhetoric *topos*, repetitions, never ending lamentations, mawkish adulations will prove the resistance of any genuine admirer. But then suddenly, in the next page or even in the next unexpected line, here is an arrow of absolute splendour that pierce the patience of readers to strike right at the centre of their heart. "Weak and puerile in his lyrical poetry [stands] side by side with poems of the highest order and the most sublime genius".²⁰⁷ Something unspeakable happens between the word and the receiver of it; being it read or listened to, it creates a inviolable space where there is no more place for

204 Mirza, *Life and Works*, p. 217.

205 *Ibid.*, p. 205.

206 S.A. Abidi, 'A Persian Poet Par Excellence', in *Amir Khusrau-Memorial Volume*, p. 69.

207 Mirza, *Life and Works*, p. 205

anything else rather than enraptured emotions.

Very similar will be the experience for Jacopone's readers. One advantage is that his production is meagre compared to that of Khusrau, sparing the exhaustion of a never ending search. But the hurdles are pretty much the same. "At times his pious ejaculations are shallow, and make dull reading...Not only is the reader put off by occasionally coarse singsong sermonizing or by ditties good for whipping up cheap feelings at Franciscan rallies; Jacopone's growling and snarling and scoffing can be more than we may wish to condone..."²⁰⁸ Just to give an example, in his laud dedicate to the "evil of womanhoods" (sic!), he reaches "his worst, boorish and shrill".²⁰⁹

Then, at a sudden turn of a phrase, he is lifted to the "third sky" and he becomes a "master of incantation". His words penetrate readers like a miracle, without letting any space untouched and unchanged. It is a bewildering experience, shaking to the roots. "His light-word inflames poetry of such an impetus, that leaves no smallest corner the same."²¹⁰

This common feature of the two poets is more than singular. It anchors their enlightenment down to the earth of their human limits, connecting their genius to their wordily nature, to their historical times, to their concrete beings. Leaving their marvels intact, return them their flesh and bones.

c) *The language*

During the Middle Ages, the literature of the Italian peninsula was forcibly multi-linguistic. Being a territory where many different ethnic groups and cultures had cohabited, communication was entrusted to different idioms; "texts were written, beside

208 Zolla E., Preface to *Jacopone da Todi. The Lauds*, p. xii.

209 *Ibid.*

210 Ungaretti G., Introduction to *Jacopone da Todi. Amore omne cosa clama*, Il Saggiatore S.p.A., Milano, 2003, p. 17.

in Hebrew, Arabic and Greek, at least in four fundamental languages: Latin, Provençal, ancient-French and vernacular”.²¹¹ In the Medieval West the development of the literary form of expression took place thanks to the presence of Latin, for its legacy to both the great classical and Christian traditions. “For more than a millennium after the fall of the Roman Empire, classical and Christian Latin is the super-language of culture for Western Europe, although since many centuries nobody feels it as a natural language”.²¹² The Church, with its monasteries and religious orders, held the monopoly on scholarship and culture, on which it exercised a strong control. However, it was also in the need to communicate its messages to the masses which understood no Latin at all. Around the thirteenth century there were in the peninsula at least fourteen different regions, each of them speaking a different local language. The great majority of the Christian population was illiterate and if the bishop wanted his Sunday sermon to be understood, he was forced to speak the local language. But, beside the practical motivations that towards the beginning of thirteenth century started to push officials and clergymen to resort to local idioms, some exponent of the intelligentsia began to feel the importance to give credit and value to the vernaculars, as part of a process of identity. The task will be taken with new vigour and determination by the great literary personalities of the following century, like Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio, and Dante will dedicate an entire work to the issue, entitled “*De vulgari eloquentia*” (1303 - the vernacular eloquence). However, during the thirteenth century the highest contribution to the cause was given by the works of Jacopone da Todi. Of all his lyrical production, only the *Stabat Mater*, whose attribution, as we have said, is controversial, was written in Latin, and however its language is not the classical Latin, rather is already effected by linguistic contaminations and modernisation. All the other ninety-two lauds were written in what is considered the first

211 Antonelli R, ‘Storia e geografia, tempo e spazio nell’indagine letteraria’ (‘History and Geography, Time and Space in Literary Research’) in *Letteratura italiana. Storia e geografia (Italian Literature. History and Geography)* Vol. I, L’eta’ medievale, (Medieval Age) a cura di Alberto Asor Rosa, Einaudi Editore, Torino 1987, p. 23.

212 Baldelli I., *La letteratura dell’Italia mediana dalle origini al XIII secolo*, p. 27.

example of *volgare italiano* (vernacular). Actually, Jacopone's poetry is second in time only to the single masterpiece of san Francis, *Il cantico di Frate Sole* (1224 – The Canticle of Brother Sun) which stands undisputed as the most ancient piece of Italian Literature. However, it is with Jacopone that the adoption of the local language attains the formal dignity and recognition deserved. Behind the choice of the author to express himself in the vernacular, there were very plain and clear motivations. First of all it was a sign of humbleness, a way to declare that he did not aspire to the prestige and superiority of the top spheres of knowledge. Secondly, in line and emulation of his Master Francis, Jacopone addressed himself to the common man, to people of the street, to the villagers or at most to the poor friars of the Spiritual order. Finally, reading his lauds, especially in the original, it is easy to understand that Jacopone could have not written them but in vernacular. His tone is full-blooded, coloured, at times rude and vulgar. He wrote in the spoken language, as if he was talking out loud. He did not concede mediations, “adamant in his insistence that only God-permeated poetry that spoke to the simple and learned alike was of value”.²¹³

Thirteenth century Northern India was also a multi-linguistic territory. “Arabic was the language of the religious sciences and technical disciplines, while Persian was more widely used, both in his written and spoken form”.²¹⁴ Although some of the Muslim rulers of India were of Turkish origins, Turkish was never adopted by the court, neither it became a literary language. The inhabitants of Delhi and its surrounding were speaking Hindawi (Khari Boli), a melange of Persian and the local dialects, that had not achieved yet a high literary status. Persian was the common media among the Muslim intelligentsia all over the Sultanate. “It was the literary and cultural language of the eastern Islamic world and the literature written in it circulated in a large cosmopolitan literary world often described as Persiante, which extended from Anatolia and the

213 S. Hughes, ‘Introduction’, *Jacopone da Todi. The Lauds*, p. 7.

214 Sharma, *Amir Khusraw*, p. 11.

Caucasus to Bengal at this time”.²¹⁵ Amir Khusrau wrote both in Persian and Hindawi. Actually, he is considered the first author to have elevated Hindawi to the status of poetry. His contribution to the development and adoption of vernacular is estimated decisive.

The reason behind his vernacular writing, however, greatly differ from those of Jacopone. Khusrau was all but humble, especially concerning his artistic production. But he was a man “of very ardent and passionate nature, [and] with an insatiable thirst for life”.²¹⁶ Although his father was of Turkish origin, his maternal grandfather was Indian, whose complexion was described by his nephew as dark as “the colour of the stone of Ka’ba”.²¹⁷ For all these reasons, Khusrau fervently loved India, and especially Delhi. He has left many pages of ecstatic description of the capital city in *Qiran u’s Sadain* and *Nuh Sipihir*. He has praised India profusely, some of it hard to comprehend for a modern western reader like, for example, the climate of Delhi. He loved the food, the flowers, the animals; he admired the rituals, the ceremonies, the feasts; he was very fond of Indian human beauties, of both genders; he was fascinated by the many religious beliefs, by the disciplines of learning, by the number of languages, among which he recognized a special esteem to Sanskrit considered, in his opinion, superior even to Persian; among all the idioms, he had a passion for Hindawi, that he found sweet and charming, as he wrote: “question me in Hindi that I may talk sweetly”²¹⁸; he had great respect for the many Indian scholars of the past and of the present; he loved the textiles, the handicraft, the magicians; and, above all, he adored Indian music, to which he significantly contributed, as we will see in the next section. He is a key-figure in the process of integration of Muslim and Indian cultures, more out of an instinctive impetus, than as the consequence of a rational choice. However, this does not change the result. “The fact remains that

215 *Ibid.*

216 A.A. Ansari, 'Persian Love Poetry of Amir Khusrau', *Memorial Volume*, p. 75.

217 S. Sarmadee, 'Musical Genius of Amir Khusrau', *Memorial Volume*, p. 33.

218 S.S.A, Rahman, 'Affectionate Response to the Indian Environment', *Memorial Volume*, p. 134.

Amir Khusrau's Hindawi is the precursor of the modern languages Urdu and Hindi”.²¹⁹

d) *The music*

Music was an essential aspect of Medieval Persian culture, that was promptly assimilated, like many other were, by the Sultanate courts. New rhythms and melodies entered the country, where a extremely rich and powerful musical tradition already existed. What history was not able to do, music did. The two cultures merged into each other, to such an extent that it would be difficult, from now on, to keep them clearly separated. Tunes and ragas, notes and techniques blended in the wide and open ocean of music. The man who embodies the emblem of such a miracle was Amir Khusrau. Not because he was a musician of the highest level, but because he actively lead this process. Again, legend made its course, accrediting to his genius the creation of *tablas* and *sitar* (the two traditional Indian musical instruments, one percussion, the other string). Actually, it is very unlikely to be, but it is definitely true that his contribution to music was more than brilliant and original. Shahab Sarmadee lists fifteen melodies and musical innovations that can be traced back to him.²²⁰ For fifteen years he had travelled “between Delhi, Samana, Lakhnauti, Multan, Awadh, Devagiri, Cambay, Chittor, Telanga, Dwarasamudra, Ma'bar, Madurai, Chidambaram and also probably Tanjore”.²²¹ In most of these places he stayed long enough to discover and absorb the culture and the arts. In those days each region was an independent cultural entity, with its habits, its traditions and its music. Khusrau assimilated them all. He was a singer himself and used to perform both in the courts and in the *khanqahs*. If for the royal entourage music was just one of the many entertainments, in the religious assemblies music became *sama* (Sufi concert), the sacred ritual of listening to music as a practice of closeness to God. “From its very

219 Sharma, *Amir Khusraw*, p. 81.

220 Sarmadee, 'Musical Genius of Amir Khusrau', *Memorial Volume*, p. 56.

221 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

beginning, Persian and Turkish classical music has been associated with the Sama ceremony”.²²² Arabic *qaul* (ode) and sufism have been linked since the spiritual movement spread over the Muslim world around the ninth century. But the practice also generated, as we have seen, an interminable debate between adversaries and advocates of the musical audition and, to some extent, to music in general consigned, by the orthodoxy, “in the category of hateful things such as usury, fornication and intoxication”.²²³ However, for the sufi tradition *sama* was the act of hearing with “the ear of the heart”, with the intent of increasing the awareness and the perception of the divine object described, and of favouring the mystical union. It was a serious matter, so intense that could lead the listeners to death. Many of such cases are scattered in the biographies of Sufi saint of the Muslim world. Shaikh Nizamuddin, a great patron of *sama*, used to say: “To what use are singers and musical instruments to a man who is a stranger to cosmic emotion?”.²²⁴ Amir Khusrau was one of those man who could reach out to “cosmic emotion”. His personality “was marked by a certain degree of abandon and ecstasy...[He had] the remarkable gift of merging himself with the object of his love and devotion”.²²⁵ As a matter of fact, the verses he composed for those sacred reunion, are still sung today, after more than seven centuries. They evoke what we could call a “trance-like condition”,²²⁶ a state the poet showed to know well himself. Notwithstanding all the controversies and oppositions, the practice had survived all the hurdles and had reached India, where it found a very fertile terrain. The Persian counterpart of *qaul* was the quatrain. “Khusrau gave new lyrical contents to this counterpart and crowned it afterwards with similar outpourings of a spontaneous nature in a form of musical poetry

222 L. Lewisohn, *The Sacred Music of Islam: Sama in the Persian Sufi Tradition*, British Journal of Ethnomusicology, Vol. 6 (1997), p. 2.

223 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

224 Lawrence, *Morals for the Heart*, p. 32.

225 Abidi, 'Persian Love Poetry of Amir Khusaru', *Memorial Volume*, p. 76.

226 *Ibid.*

described by him as *flowing magic*".²²⁷ This is what we call *ghazal*. Love is the core of the "two-line universe" of the ghazal verse. The etymology of the word comes from the root *gh-z-l*, meaning to spin, to create, to beautify, and it is true that has become one of the most powerful means of love-communication in South Asia, not only among the literates but also among the common people. The ghazal form consists of couplets called *bayt*, meaning 'house', so that Rumi²²⁸ could write that his beloved would not fit into any 'house' – nor 'verse'. Each *bayt* is complete in form and meaning and the mood of one couplet can vary, or even be opposed, to that of the other. In two lines, the ghazal is suppose to transport the listener into an emotional state, made of desire, sensuality and despair. The motif of sufferance is central and pervading. "At the centre of poetry stands someone who can never be reached, and should never be reached".²²⁹ That Absolute Beloved is one with God. The ghazal is meant to provoke pain, to make the scars bleed. It has to sank the reader into longing and melancholy. The burning of separation is the soul of the ghazal, its life blood. The absence of Beloved is unbearable, still that absence itself becomes the sweetest of the sorrows, because is led by, and directed to the Friend. Khusrau called his verses written for *sama* "the ghazal all fire", meant to rise the emotional flame as thick and high as possible. And indeed, he has been able to inflame his audience up till now, for seven hundred years. "It can be said with a ring of certainty that Khusraw was the greatest ghazal singer who ever lived".²³⁰

Very different appears the musical scene in Italy during the same period. To begin with, the history of European musical tradition starts with the chanting of the first Christians. "For twelve centuries chanting is connected to the spiritual life of the first

227 Sarmadee, 'Musical Genius of Amir Khusrau', *Memorial Volume*, p. 38.
228 Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273), one of the greatest mystic poets of Islam.
229 Schimmel, *A two-coloured Brocade*, p. 10.
230 Sarmadee, 'Musical Genius of Amir Khusrau', *Memorial Volume*, p. 46.

Christian communities, and is integral part of the liturgy itself".²³¹ All components, words, sounds, rhythm, interval and harmony were finalized to the prayer that music was supposed to interpret. For at least ten centuries, this repertory, called "Gregorian chant has been the only musical expression of true artistic and spiritual value known by Western Europe".²³² The Italian society in the middle ages was completely identified with Christianity, that exercised its monolithic control over almost every aspect of life. However, in order to promote and reinforce the social process of identity, the Christian system needed a series of signs recognizable both by the clergy and the laity. Thus, feasts, rituals, and celebrations started to be organized with growing involvement from the fifth century on. Many of these occasions comported the recitation and chanting of psalms too. But it is only around the ninth century that the psalms dedicated to the Virgin Mary acquired new creative impetus, together with the ritual of procession which implied, beside the recitation of texts and the chanting of hymns, a scenic set too. For these purpose the first collections of psalms started to circulate, first in Spain (eighth century), and later in France and Italy (ninth and tenth century). Around the eleventh century a new kind of hymnography of extraordinary beauty and quality, not directly connected with liturgy or even outside of it, started to develop. It was dedicated to saints and therefore was also adoptable outside the liturgy and the canonical solemnities, for example in patronal or urban festivities, where the population was involved in a more spontaneous and immediate relationship. The procession, which interested the entire population of a locality, was a highly significant occasion for every man and woman of the time. The parade was rigidly divided into sections, depending on gender, profession, authority, and religious affiliation. Every section was guided by a chief, carried different banners and flags, and was often dressed differently. The ritual symbolized the

231 G. Acciai, 'Il testo musicale e le sue esecuzioni' ('Musical Text and its performance') in *Lo spazio letterario del Medioevo (Literary Space in the Middle Age)*, 2. Il Medioevo Volgare, (Medieval Vernacular) Vol. II La circolazione del testo, ed. by Boitani P., Mancini M., Varvaro A. p. 260

232 *Ibid.*

pilgrimage toward a sacred destination, the ultimate salvation, the abode of the God of Love and Compassion. The path was not silent, on the contrary it was accompanied by texts, some recited only by the clergy, some by both laity and clergy, some by one section at a time. And, for very imposing processions, chants were also sung along. They were called “*lauds*”, from the Latin *laudare*, meaning “to praise”, since they were praising the divine qualities of the protagonists of Christianity, or of the patron saint of a certain locality.

With the advent of the heretical movements and the institution of the Mendicants orders the practice of religious chanting took a decisive turn. The *laud* became the medium to divulge new ideas and new principles. It was direct, immediate, effective; it was “the expression of the religiosity of the crowd”.²³³ Movements like the Flagellantes or the Alleluja adopted *lauds* during their collective ritual of penitence and expiation; their groups would invade villages and cities, whacking their half-naked bodies with lashes, sticks or stones, inviting the population to join them; most of the women would follow the examples behind doors of their houses, the sound of their *lauds* being the only sign of their invisible penitence. It was a very contagious phenomenon, of impressive proportion. But the order that really transformed the use of *lauds* into a popular pattern was the Franciscan. “San Francis' preaching was decisive in transforming the simplicity of popular music into a formidable vehicle of *propaganda fidei*” (faith propaganda)²³⁴ Not only because he wrote himself the absolute masterpiece of the genre (The Canticle), but also because he expressly invited his friars to “chant” the praises of God. “Urging his brothers to be *joculatores Domini* (jesters of God), he fostered the natural osmosis between spiritual fervour and popular expression”.²³⁵ From then on *lauds* became the poetic form *par excellence* of religious poetry. The Franciscans' contribution to the

233 G. Cattin, *Contributi alla storia della Lauda spirituale (Contributions to the History of Spiritual Laud)*, Quadrivium, Bologna, 1958, p. 10.

234 Acciai, *Il testo musicale e le sue esecuzioni*, p. 271.

235 *Ibid.*

fortune of *lauds* was decisive for its future evolution, both in its lyrical and scenic form. The style of predication of the friars of Assisi greatly favoured all kind of sharing with the audience, to begin with the structure of the church itself, “granary or shed-like, lending itself to great effect scenographic solutions”.²³⁶ The Franciscan architecture was meant to delineate an enlarged space, capable to receive the public and create an emotional unit, symbolically mystical. For the same reason, around the half of the century the *laud*, which did not possessed a fixed structure so far, adopted the metric form of the ballad, “a profane structure originally linked to the dance practice”.²³⁷ All Jacopone's *lauds* followed the ballad structure. However, his lauds were very different for the mainstream and, a part from few exceptions, they did not appeared in many *laudaris*. The novelty of Jacopone did not concern the themes he dealt with, which were in line with the traditional *lauds* of his time, mostly dedicated to the Madonna, the Passion of Christ, the saints. Rather, it was the way he treated the religious subject, the originality and the audacity of his reasoning, to make his *lauds* often difficult for an enlarged and unprepared public. But his most important innovation was the introduction of “scenic devices” to express his mystical concepts. Vices, virtues, parts of the self and agents of the supernatural became in his *lauds* personas, talking and interacting to each other. Truth, Conscience, Humility, Lust, Greed, Pride, Soul and Body encountered each other on the stage of his verses, debating freely their views, exposing their expectations, their weakness and their desires. *Coups de theatre*, drama, catharsis are frequent presences on his pages. The strong theatricalism of Jacopone's *lauds* is today recognized as the very origin of Italian theatre.

The *Stabat Mater* stands above everything else. As we have already mentioned, its authorship is controversial. First because it started to be associated with the name of Jacopone only one century after his death. Second, because it was written in Latin, while

236 Delcorno, *Il testo musicale e le sue esecuzioni*, p. 310.

237 F. Suitner, *Jacopone da Todi. Poesia, mistica, rivolta nell'Italia del medioevo*, (Jacopone da Todi. Poetry, Mysticism, Revolt in Medieval Italy), Donzelli Editore, Roma, 1999, p. 51.

all his other lauds were in vernacular. Some critics adds that the style also differs, while others wonder why should have he written a rerun of *Donna de Paradiso* in Latin, or vice versa a rerun of *Stabat Mater* in vernacular. The fact is that the two lauds are almost overlapping. Emotionally, they are one. But the mystery remains. The *Stabat Mater* is almost a unique case in the history of religious music. It is considered one of the seven greatest Latin hymns of all time. No other single lyric has received so many attentions, uninterrupted, for seven hundred years. The first illustrious composition dates back to Josquin des Prez (1450-1521), but before that the *laud* had already become a popular hit in the *laudaris* of half Europe. The last authorships include the French composer Bruno Coulais (2005), two metal bands (Anorexia Nervosa and Epica) and the Welsh composer Carl Jenkins (2008). It has been and still is interpreted by the most acclaimed opera singer and chorus of the world. Be as it may, the name of Jacopone lingering on it.

Chapter 4

POEMS TO POEMS: THE METHAPPHYSIC OF LOVE

a) *The Spiritual Masters*

Amir Khusrau was devotee of Shaikh Nizamuddin. As Bruce Lawrence state: “Nizamuddin Auliya, is at once a Muslim Mystic and a mystic of transcreeadal, which is to say universal, stature”.²³⁸ His thoughts and principles have been recorded by Amir Hasan Sijzi, one of his disciples, renowned poet and friend of Amir Khusrau. During a period of 15 years, from 1308 to 1322, Hasan attended 188 *majlis* (assemblies) with the Saint and other disciples, meticulously transcribing atmosphere, events and discourses. The book, was entitled *Fawa'id al-Fuad* (Morals for the Heart), belonging to the literary genre called *mal'uzat* (discourses of the saint). Prior to its completion, the work was revised and corrected by the Shaikh himself, who largely approved the writing. *Fawa'id al-Fuad* is an extraordinary historical source that offers a very detailed testimony of the teachings and philosophy of the saint. Shaikh Nizamuddin was close to his 70 when the recording began, and left this world only three years after its conclusion, at the age of 83. He was a man – and a saint – at the apex of his maturity, who showed an extraordinary lucidity for his age (in 15 years only once a story is repeated twice); an enlightened being who is also certainly well aware of dictating his last message. These conditions favoured a very rich and intense outcome, to make it one of the “inspired works” of religious studies. *Fawa'id al Fuad* is today considered “a pillar of Sufi metaphysic”.²³⁹ The nuances of this metaphysic are reflected in Khusrau's ghazals. In fact, the court poet, the rich and acclaimed artist, the full-blooded passionate lover, was also the enamoured

238 Lawrence, *Morals for the Heart*, p. 61.

239 *Ibid.*

devotee, the *murid* (disciple), the worshipper. “It is not possible to fully appreciate the poetry of Amir Khusrau without realising his intimate relationship with his spiritual guide and master”.²⁴⁰ *De facto*, his most popular and universally celebrated verses are those inspired by his *Pir* (spiritual master).

The rule of Chishti order was adamant and essential: never to ask for anything, never to desire nor search for anything and, if unsolicited gifts were received, to share them immediately; never eat alone; never meddle with power. Renunciation of worldly goods was the precondition to salvation, purity of heart and sincerity of intentions the steps to enter the universe of divine acceptance. Love remained at the centre of the metaphysic, as a source of inexhaustible energy. No rigidity, no pre-constructed behaviours to save from fall, only the heart as the leader; and the capacity to follow it, as the measure. And then poverty, assistance, support. For forty years the *khanqah* was visited by thousands of people everyday, and most of them were freely fed. “Food was distributed to visitors and inmates round the clock”.²⁴¹ Once a week the kitchen was completely emptied, every item distributed to the poor, to avoid the danger of any hoarding. The saint himself was mostly on fast, starving at the limit of survival. “In this very moment, someone is dying of hunger. How can this food go down my throat?”²⁴² was his answer when his disciples insisted him to eat. An overwhelming goodness filled every space. And, above all, infinite, transforming Love.

Nearly one century before Shaikh Nizamuddin had established his *khanqah* in the dusty and busy village of Ghayaspur, near the capital city of Delhi, another saint had chosen the crumbling ruins of a little church in Porziuncola, close to Assisi, as his spiritual residence and as the monastery for his followers. The little chapel, according to the legend dating back to the fourth century, was in very bad shape and Francis, helped by a few devotees, restored it with his own hands. Son of a rich merchant, Francis had

240 Abidi, 'A Persian Poet Par Excellence', *Memorial Volume*, p. 67.

241 K.A. Nizami, introduction to *Morals for the Heart*, p. 31.

242 Mujeeb, *Indian Muslim*, p. 144.

lived his youth between feasts and wars, as was the fashion of the age. Pretty soon, however, several events and visions awakened his spiritual vocation urging him to live his wealthy life and dedicate himself to God. His renunciation took the symbolic action of his public undressing in the square of Assisi, in front of his father and the bishop, at whose feet he left his clothes and his worldly duties. He walked away naked, in a scene that has become a worldwide legend, known as “Francis' Marriage with Poverty”, superbly immortalized, among the many artists, by Giotto. Indeed, the idea of “poverty” will be central in San Francis' theology, together with that of assistance and service to others, especially the weak and the infirm, included the leprous. However, it was poverty to remain the undisputed value and precious guide for the spiritual path of the Franciscans, so much so that the interpretation of this rule will lead to the first schism of the order. Humility, gentleness, patience, care of others and acceptance of offences and injustices were Francis' recommendations for his friars. The Poor Little Man, as he called himself, forged his faith with love, an unconditioned and inexhaustible devotion for every beings on earth. “He was a lover of God and he was really and truly a lover of men; possibly, a much rearer mystical vocation”²⁴³. Francis did not desire to found an order, he was not interested in politics, nor ecclesiastical career; on the contrary he was very worried about the institutionalisation of his followers. During his brief lifetime, he deeply suffered for the dissensions raised among his friars, and in the last years he resigned the running of the order into the hands of others. As a matter of fact, he never became a clergyman himself, preferring the more humble profile of a lay devotee. “His religion was not like a theory, but a thing like a love affair”.²⁴⁴ So badly he deprived his body with fasting and mortification, that he succumbed to illness at the age of forty-four, blind and weak. He has been described as “the first hero of humanism” and as “probably

243 G.K. Chesterton, *Saint francis of Assisi*, Hendrickson Publisher, Usa, Canada, England, 2008, p.

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244 *Ibid.* p. 7.

the world's one quite sincere democrat”.²⁴⁵ He has been called a *trobador*, a revolutionary, a prophet, a visionary. But all his features put together are not enough to justify his ever lasting fame, and the mysterious fascination of his personality, escaping any tentative of rational explanation, has survived strong and vivid till up today. “Eight centuries after his death, this humble Italian sage is the most popular saint in the world.”²⁴⁶

Although only briefly outlined, the features of the two saints still prove an impressive coincidence of principles and ideals, a sort of spiritual resemblance that bring them close in spite of the distances of faith and geography that separate them. The ideal of voluntary poverty, the repulsion of propriety, the style of life, the service to others, the humbleness and, above all, the primacy of Love as essential core of the spiritual experience, as the real Path to enlightenment. Moreover, Francis is one of the few Christian saints who developed a very intense relationship with his disciples – his *fraticelli* (little brothers) as he used to call them – very similar, under many aspects, to the *pir-murid* relationship of the Sufi tradition. Indeed, speculation raised after his death on his successor, according to different interpretations of Francis' last will. Without anticipating any conclusion, I feel such resemblance is relevant to my research since the lyrical production of both Amir Khusrau and Jacopone da Todi are unmistakably and deeply influenced by their respective spiritual masters. Not only because their poetry reflects the charm and the value of the two saints, but also because through their verses the two poets try to convey the spiritual messages of their masters. In both the cases, it would be impossible to understand and fully appreciate their lyrics, without linking them to the metaphysic of love of the saints that inspired them.

b) *Poems to poems*

245 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

246 M. Starr, *San Francis of Assisi*, Sounds True Publisher, Luisville, 2007, p. 2.

In this section, I am confronting the verses of Amir Khusrau and Jacopone da Todi along the Way of their spiritual experience, following the steps that lead towards their respective destination.

“For this Love I have renounced all,/traded the world and myself”²⁴⁷ writes Jacopone, introducing a well established principle of most mystical paths, and a milestone of Sufism. Indeed, renouncing worldliness is the precondition for the encounter with the divine, the necessary detachment from the material reality in order to approach the spiritual sphere. Only a naked soul can offer itself to God. The process of dissolution include the renunciation of the self: “Yearning for you, no trace of me remains”²⁴⁸, repeats Khusrau, and adds:

“O Khusrau, why do search inside love the value of your heart?
Life and sprit before it annihilate instead”

The annihilation of the self is an inevitable step on the path of the mystic union. God is the great transformer, the One who “with just one glance” is able to provoke an unprecedented revolution, an irreversible metamorphosis. The force of the impact is a tremendous marvel, impossible to resist, bewildering and unexplainable. Only poetry can dare to describe the experience; here, in the words of Jacopone:

“At the sight of such beauty I am swept up

247 All quotations of Jacopone are taken from Hughes S., *Jacopone da Todi, The Lauds*, Paulist Press, New York-Toronto, 1982

248 Quotations of Khusrau are taken from Nafisi S., *Diwan-i Kamil-i Amir Khusrau Delhavi*, Mahmud Darvish, Teheran, 1982 ; Tabassum S., *Do Goneh*, Kitabi Duniya, New Delhi, 2005; Paul Losenky and Sunil Sharma, *In the Bazar of Love. The Selected Poetry of Amir Khusrau*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2011; *Amir Khusraw – Memorial Volume*, Government of India Publication Division, New Delhi, 1975.

out of myself to who knows where.

My heart melts, like wax on fire:

Christ put His mark on me and, stripped of myself

(O wondrous exchange!), I put on Christ.

Robed in this precious garment,

crying out its Love,

the soul drowns in ecstasy!”

The same ecstasy is described through some very popular verses of Amir Khusrau:

“You've taken away my looks, my identity, by just a glance

By making me drink the wine of love-potion

you've intoxicated me, by just a glance;

I give my life to you, oh my cloth-dyer

you've dyed me in yourself, by just a glance”

“The sense of self disappears”, reaching that mystical stage that Jacopone calls *nihil* (meaning 'nothing' in classical Latin, *nichil* in medieval Latin), the nothingness where the real Truth resides. It is a total surrender, absolute and definitive: “Within and without I am shattered,/reduced to nothingness”, explains Jacopone. In such a void, a new awareness is raised, a vision that goes beyond reason and intellect:

“The heaven is founded on *nichil*,

where purified love lives in Truth.

You see that things are not as they seemed to you,

so high a state has been reached”

In Khusrau words:

“God himself was master of ceremony where you spent the night, o Khusrau
in that *no-place*, it was the Prophet to light the assembly ”

“Love for you brings news of a world
beyond consciousness”.

Lost all sense of self-consciousness, the soul enters into infinity. In such a place
all the rules are subverted, all certitudes dissolve, logic and rationality cancelled. It is the
reign of ambivalence, where, as Jacopone says, “day is night” and “light is darkness”:

“To live as myself and yet not I,
my being no longer my being.”

“You run and stand still, you rise and you fall...
in being possessed you possess...
As you drink you are being drunk.”

Ambivalence is the natural language of the lover who wonders lost in the infinity
of the divine vision; says Khusrau:

“You took the life from my body
And still you dwell in my soul.

You inflicted such pain, yet still
you are the cure. You cleft my breast
for everyone to see,
yet still you lurk there hidden.”

In such a place even faith and religion become inconsistent, compared to the one
and only Presence. States Jacopone:

“Faith at this point ceases, for the soul sees.”

And Khusrau agrees:

“The one whose principle is nothingness,
he do not need any belief, any wisdom and any religion,
because in his soul there is no more of himself,
there is only God.”

“Because of you I have lost my wisdom and my faith...”

Once tasted the savour of the mystical union, it is impossible to turn away. An
indissoluble chain hold the heart. Submission is the only option, slavery becoming the
most desirable state. In Jacopone's words:

“Friends have urged me to change my ways,
to take another path. I cannot.
I have already given myself away

and have nothing left to give.

A slave cannot escape from his master;
stone will liquefy before Love lets me go.”

And Khusrau's ones:

“I am enslaved by the face
no one's allowed to see...

Wise counsel won't bring me back...

Put a ring in Khusraw's ear.
He is your slave and heeds your call.”

The experience of such a closeness to God has an overwhelming and devastating effect; nothing can remain still, not one single particle of the individual can spare the transformation. Love, like an irresistible flood, submerges them all. Certitudes and securities are lost. Identity is forgotten. The divine passion drives the heart into a blessed madness. Khusrau tells us about it:

“You drive my ruined heart and soul insane...”

“But take no pity on me:
madness is the best thing to pack for this path.”

And Jacopone as well:

“A great wisdom it is to go mad
out of one's mind with the love of God.
The University of Paris has yet to formulate
a more profound philosophy.”

Khusrau:

“If you want to make me mad in this desert,
I am ready for whatever you want to do with me.
I have fall down and I am burned,
my ashes at your feet, and I am waiting to see
what will you do with them.”

Jacopone:

“Let no man mock me, then,
if that Love drives me to madness.
Once captured, no heart can shield itself,
or escape Love's hold.
How can it withstand the searing flame
without turning to ashes?”

Khusrau:

“Why do you call me crazy?”

I have become mad for the face of my Beloved.

You will also grow mad
when you will see the beauty of my Friend!”

Jacopone:

“I know well, O Highest Wisdom,
that if I am mad, it is your doing -
this dates from the day I surrendered myself to Love.”

The madness of lovers cannot be understood by those who have not gone through it. It is an experience not translatable into words, not comprehensible from outside. Says

Jacopone:

“Only those who have experienced this madness
have an inkling of what it is...

He who has not experienced
this fusion of rise and fall
can never understand.”

And Khusrau:

“If the learned-men want to judge my madness,
first, they have to go mad themselves.”

“The bliss of Union
is known only to Lovers
who reaches the Loved One
from tremendous distance”.

But the mystic path is never straight nor plane, rather it implies turns, diversions and hurdles. The worst of them all, being “separation”. Incredulous, lovers are impelled to face the pain. “My heart is no longer mine;” says Jacopone, “and I cannot see what I should do”. Suffering the same dismay, Khusrau repeats: “Why is that heart, no longer mine, still bound to you so”? After having experienced the divine Union, distance is an intolerable torture. An overwhelming sadness imposes itself on everything. No hope, no light left, only endless and unbearable sorrow. The lost and desperate soul gropes in search of the Beloved, demanding his return like a stubborn child invoking his mother. In Jacopone's verses:

“O God of righteousness,
why have You hardened Your heart?

I hear the gate is shut...

Tongue cannot say,
nor can mind conceive,
they only approach the threshold of pain -
pain deeper and wider than the sea.”

Khusrau:

“I came to you unbid, unmasked,
but you went away from me”

“So devastated is my heart from separation,
that it seems it has never been inhabited”

“I will keep rolling down your street
with just my eyes, for my legs are worn down
to the knees in searching of you.”

Jacopone:

“Love, beloved Love, why have you left me?

Love, why did You give my heart such sweetness,
Only to strip it then of joy?”

Khusrau:

“I am destroyed by your separation.
O God, heal me with your grace!”

“I am mad without you:
come again and have mercy upon my situation”

“But when he promises union,
he covers his face and hides himself away”

Jacopone:

“Love, a thief when caught must make restitution;
in tears I beg the Heavenly Court
to bring You to justice -
you are the thief who has robbed me, Love.”

Khusrau:

“Since you, O Robber, took away my heart
sleep is gone and life is miserable.
my nights are never ending darkness,
I implore you, my love: come back to where you belong!”

Jacopone:

“Had I never caught a glimpse of what You offer,
Love, I would not now suffer so.”

Khusrau:

“If your scent was not in the air,

I would have not lost my sanity.”

Jacopone:

“Love, my heart is crushed,
starved, close to death.

Will you wait until it is lifeless
to give it back to me?”

Khusrau:

“I am about to brake my last.

Come, so I may live.

What good will do for you to come
once I am no more?”

The final stage of the journey is a total and unconditioned surrender. Death is invoked as the nuptial bed, the coveted condition for the eternal union. The wound is happy, if the sword is hold by the Friend. To die for Love is a longed mystic goal. Says

Khusrau:

“I heard the news that you will come

to see your friend tonight.

I offer my head, a sacrifice

to the road down which you ride”

And Jacopone:

“Catch me on Your hook,
like a fish that cannot get away -
that will be the sign that You love me.
Do not spare me: I long to die drowned in Love”.

Khusraw:

“How beautiful is to be killed in front of the Friend's gate,
if the sword is hold in his hand”

Jacopone:

“O happy wound, full of delight,
he whom You wound
is joyous indeed.”

In both the poets, the invocation for death resounds like a litany, a mantra, an insistent repeated desire. In Khusrau, it has become one of his most famous lines, dedicated to his spiritual master, and still sung today by every *qawwali* performer:

“Nizam, I am ready to die for you
ready to die, Nizam – let me be sacrificed
Nizamuddin Auliya, I am ready to die for you”

Jacopone could easily join the choir, with one of his most celebrated laud:

“I want to faint, Love; may I always be close to You:

Love, I beseech You, let me die of Love...

Love, Love, I am close to dying.

Love, Love, so tightly You claps me;

Love, Love, make me die in You!”

Union is the ultimate destination. Merging with the divine, the lover becomes the mystic Bride, the sacred spouse held in the embrace of the Beloved, according to a well established *topos* of sufi poetry where the implicit eroticism of the male-female encounter, sublimated in the mystical discourse, is often played upon with intentional ambiguity. Interestingly, Jacopone is one of the rare cases of Christian mystics who resort to the same pattern with great and instinctive naturalness. He defines the last stage of mystic-love the “conjugal love, the love of the bridegroom”:

“Do You ask more of Your Bride,
who longs to embrace You?”

“Love, You have taken me for Your bride;
is it your honour if I have not one penny to spend?
I have given myself to You, put myself in Your hands,
and all despise me, fallen to low estate”

Khusrau:

“Khusrau dies for nizam -
you made me a married woman
when our eyes met”

“I have come and fallen at your door step,

for you to safeguard my pride, my dignity,
You are my man, Oh beloved of Almighty”

Jacopone:

“Lovers, come to our festive wedding;
where is Love, there is joy...”

Hurry to embrace your spouse
Who gathers you into His joy – O Love, Love!”

“...Love leads me to the conjugal bed,
and I lie in the embrace of the Son of God...”

“The bridal chamber and wedding bed richly draped.

(I speak to you in images -
The chaste splendour is beyond your imagining)

Khusrau:

“Protect my honour, Oh beloved Nijam.
Qutab and Farid have come in the wedding procession,
And Khusrau is the loving bride, Oh Nijam”

“Khusrau spends the eve of her wedding
awake with her beloved, in such a way that
the body belongs to her, but heart to the beloved,
the two become one”

Within the joy of Love, lovers feel drunk and intoxicated, another recurrent figure of Islamic mystic poetry, where the tavern is a metaphor for the sacred space of the encounter, and the *saqi*, the cups-bearer, for God. In Khusrau's couplets:

“The drinking cup becomes like a rosary
in the hands of the saints,
until they taste a sip
from your ruby lips, o Saqi!”

“The soul of Khusrau became water
from the hope of wine.
But I didn't get to taste
a sip of desire”

“A number of time I have repent from wine,

but again, your intoxicated eyes,
have brought me back to the tavern”

Although the metaphor do not find great favour within Christian mysticism,
Jacopone also resorts easily to the symbolism of wine and drunkenness:

“Love, keep us drunk with love,
keep us in Your embrace, in Love that unites”

“In my love of God I go about like a drunken man”

“Thus, Jesus, if I am enamoured
And drunk with sweetness,
how can You reproach me?”

However, what really happens within the divine embrace is not something that can
be divulged nor told to anyone. On the contrary, Jacopone says that the fortunate elects
should “learn to conceal the bliss”, and keep the secret:

“Wordless love hidden in silence,
unheard by those without,
hide your riches beyond
the reach of the wildest thief”

The lover who has lit his candle should hide it”

And Khusrau agrees:

“Do not reveal the Truth;
in this world blasphemy prevails, Khusrau;

O wondrous source of mystery,
o wondrous knower of secrets”

Once the divine intimacy has been reached, words will do no more, giving place to a new silence, a new kind of awareness nourished by dreams and signs invisible to the most. Says Jacopone:

“I know where He is hidden,
for though I see Him not,
I recognize the signs of His presence”

Khusaru:

“If the Beloved's beauty is not in sight,
its phantom can still make me happy.
In poor homes, moonlight makes the best candle.”

Within such intimacy, even poetry does not dare to enter. It stops on the threshold, giving just few glimpses of that mystic folly. More it is impossible to say. The journey ends here, as my research does. I would like to conclude with few verses of the two poets that, although do not exactly tally, still they carry, in my opinion, the same imposing

emotional appeal.

Jacopone:

“What happens to the drop of wine

that you pour into the sea?

Does it remain itself, unchanged?

It is as if it never existed.

So it is with the soul: Love drinks it in,

it is united with Truth,

its old nature fades away,

it is no longer master of itself”

Khusrau:

“All the gazelles of the desert

have lowered their heads to the ground

hoping that you will come

back to the hunt one day.

Coming once, you carried off a hundred

like Khusraw, heart and soul.

Coming like this two or three times,

and who will survive?”

CONCLUSION

From the very beginning, I was aware that the comparison between two figures as distant as Amir Khusrau and Jacopone da Todi was a task fraught with difficulties. It could end up as a list of resemblances and differences, with little or scarce historical value; or worst, it could give in to temptation of forcing the data in order to render the effort worthy. Moreover, a comparative study on such an unexplored subject it was forcibly based on hypothesis, not being able to take advantage of previous researches and contributions. Hypothesis that could go completely wrong. Still, I was driven by a strong sense of plausibility. I had on my side two essential motivations: a vibrant but irrational intuition, and a clear intention. Intuition had grown out of my readings of the two poets I deeply admired, although I had never really confronted them one another [?]. Somehow, I think I have been the real link between them, with my personal inclination towards mysticism, and my taste for music which, since a very long time put, out of any logic at the very top of my list, *Stabat Mater* and *qawwali*. Long before I could even think of this dissertation, I came to India with a complete collection of the best of *Stabat Mater* in my suitcase, and Nusrat Ali Khan and Abida Parveen in my laptop. On the other hand, intention was, and still is, firm and crystal: to look for constancy among contingencies, to search for universal beneath particular. In other words, what Henry Corbin has aptly called “*un dialogue dans la metahistoire*”, that is a meta-historical or trans-historical dialogue. I believe the evolution of knowledge, as well as of human kind, should proceed towards a global perspective, capable to include, rather than to exclude, as many parts of the entirety as possible. Segregation, separation and mutilation are stages of the infancy of humanity; however, in maturity we cannot but strive for unity and completeness. Judging from the results of the present time, the process seems to be a very long and slow

one, and it gives us not much to be proud of, so far. Still, it is undeniable that direction is there and, although it may take years or centuries, we are bound towards an unavoidable global consciousness. To be part of this process, to contribute to find out what remains constant and durable beyond the contingent changes of history, and so doing to shorten the distances between opponents, was my unfaltering intention.

However, in front of me, hurdles were many. To begin with, the comparison included different fields: poetry, religions and mysticism, beside of course the cultural and social environment. If comparisons between poems and poets do exist, it is also true that the quality of verses is directly proportional to their unicity. The unexplored geniuses of poetry, even if they belong to some lyrical current or genre, somehow stand above it, detaching themselves from the mainstream. The standardisation occurs mostly among groups of not very talented artists. The great poet always has a unique talent, inimitable. However, as we have seen in the first chapter, all these geniuses have also something in common, that is the *raison d'être* of poetry itself. To use a liminal language, for example, stretched between the primordial collective memories and the earthly and barren contingencies. To reveal the unseen, the concealed truth hidden behind appearance, to enlighten and to transform. To reach out to the sacred, i.e. to the transcendent, so much so that poetry becomes a prophetic language, even without the intention or the choice to make it such. In brief, there is a sort of inevitable mysticism in every poem of superior quality. Interestingly, we can also say that there is a sort of inevitable poetry in every mysticism of superior quality. The two languages complement each other, or better merge into each other naturally, given as an essential requisite the high quality of both. As far as poets are concerned, any effort of comparison should keep equal distance both from the unicity of their language and from the intrinsic metaphysic of their art, so to avoid excessive isolation in one case, or naïve simplification on the other.

Coming to mysticism, the question of comparison is complicated by religious

identity and faith. All existing religions had their mystics, although mysticism existed also before and without specific religious systems. However, every single faith traits and considers its mystics as generated and directly depending by its own religious beliefs, traditions and doctrines. In their turn, mystics of all faiths identify willingly and without reserve with the faith they belong even if, along the path of the divine union, many of them reach a stage where they perceive God, as we have seen, even beyond faith and religious barriers. Such awareness, however, does not mean, nor provoke a change of faith, because it happens *through* the union with God, and not outside of it; indeed, once that embrace is reached, no shift is needed anymore, no change is requested.

Similarities between different mystic visions and philosophies have generally been explained so far in two ways; either as result of religious contaminations, i.e. derivations; or due to the fact that all the languages of transcendent tend to be very similar, if not identical and, therefore, tally. The question of religious derivations, as we have analysed in the first chapter, is a very delicate one, since it is threatening the identity and autonomy of the different faiths. Most of the discourses on religious influences are also implicitly defending the superiority of one system on the other, and the claim of one God as the true and only, automatically consigning others divinities to falseness and idolatry. However, this theory is applicable only to those system of thoughts that could be historically in touch, thanks to their geographical closeness and cultural exchanges. But it is absolutely of no use, for example, in case like the study of Izutsu on Sufism and Taoism, two spiritual traditions that share no historical and cultural links. Similarly, the all discourse of derivations proves its weakness if we find the similarities recurring between more than two religious or spiritual systems, as I showed in the last section of chapter one, dedicated to sainthood. In short, if saints of different faiths and traditions, so distant as Christian, Islamic and shamanic, share similar features it becomes very problematic to talk about derivations and influences; therefore the comparison suggests

the need for other keys of interpretation.

Coming to the second hypothesis, if mysticism of different creeds share common features because after all they deal with the same subject, i.e. transcendental experiences, then we have to suppose the existence of common experiences behind the cognizable. And that only subsequently such common experiences would have fit into different spiritual systems to the point of being assimilated and incorporated as their own. If this explanation was to be taken as true, then also other discipline dealing with the same subject should be mostly coinciding. But this is not the case even with philosophy, although it specifically deals with the relation between the cognizable and the transcendent. What distinguishes mysticism from other field of study is that it is based and constructed exclusively upon personal experience. Indeed, it cannot be confused with theology or theosophy. Actually, some of the greatest mystics of all times were uneducated or illiterate, and dictated their ecstatic visions to scribes. The fact that many of such experiences, although occurred within the frames of different religious or spiritual systems, were often coinciding, or very similar to each other, should rise the interest and attention of scholars very seriously. Without pretending to give a definitive answer, I suggest that the discipline of mysticism should be no longer considered a branch of the different faiths, and left to be analysed within their respective courtyard. I rather believe it hold a continuity that merits to be looked upon in a trans-historical perspective.

The case of Amir Khusrau and Jacopone da Todi is an emblematic example. Their historical backgrounds clearly show their wide distance. Not only socially and culturally they were very apart, but also as human beings they had little in common. Rich, cautious and acclaimed was the former; humble, hot-blooded and rejected was the latter. One was an artist well conscious of his profession, the other a mendicant who despised scholars and literates. One left thousands of written pages, the other scarcely one hundred. And

moreover, Jacopone called his god *Dio*, Khusrau called him Allah. If it is undeniable that some contaminations have occurred between the two cultural systems – Islam being not only very close to the Italian peninsula, but also present on the territory for several hundred years – it is highly improbable that the two authors ever heard of each other, and nevertheless that they could read each other's poetry. But one thing they definitely had in common: a personal experience with the divine. They did not write what they had learnt from books or heard from sermons. They talked about their own ecstasy, they rapture they had gone through themselves. They described the taste lingered on their tongue, after the encounter, the aroma attached to their soul. As two travellers who have visited the same locality, they depicted each step of it. The correspondence is indeed bewildering. Only those who have shared deep intimacy could be so punctual and precise. Human experiences are generally quite relative. Even the same object can be perceived very differently by different minds. Absoluteness indeed is a divine attribute, while humanity is bound to relativism. This makes the concomitance of the mystic experience even more extraordinary. Belonging to different faith, different culture, different class, and living very different lives, still they perceive union with and separation from different Gods in the same manner. Emotions are identical, and intensity is the same. Sometimes, even words are almost coinciding. Even the most rationalists of the historians cannot dispense themselves from acknowledging it. But what historical value can we give to such a coincidence?

The resemblance of two authors is not enough to venture any guess; more data would be mandatory. Until mysticisms of different religious systems and spiritual traditions are compared extensively, and discussions based upon the results, hypothesis have to be deferred. So far, we can only consider the case of these two poets of thirteenth century, and take note of their singular connection, that apparently have to do with some of their transcendental experiences.

They also share a strong and singular link with sacred music, beside seven hundred years of uninterrupted fame and devotion. Lastly, the fact that they were active agents of the advent of vernacular languages. To begin with, their relation with music does not stand any comparison. Jacopone was not a musician, nor a singer, and the future musical developments of the *Stabat Mater* were completely independent from his intention and knowledge. His contribution was only restricted to the text, and that is controversial too. While Khusrau was a talented musician, a composer, a singer, and was well conscious of what he was doing. So, concerning music, they stand on two very different platforms, and it is probably correct to say that the fact that their names have been linked for seven centuries to two different sacred music genres is nothing more than a mere coincidence. True is that, when more than one coincidences occur, we are tempted to look for some kind of reason to explain them. And in the case of Khusrau and Jacopone, as we have seen in the previous chapters, several of these curious similarities are there: a mixture of genius and triviality; the manipulation of their figure and works along the centuries, transforming them into collective properties of the masses; the long lasting devotion and fame they enjoyed; and their active contribution to development of the vernacular. Although I personally find these connections quite extraordinary and very fascinating, I strongly doubt they can have historical or transhistorical motivations. I rather see them related to the field of predestination, which does not, in any case, falls within this study in particular, and history in general.

However, the question of vernacular language deserves, in my opinion, some more attention. What struck my interest is not strictly related to the comparison between Amir Khusrau and Jacopone da Todi, rather to the socio-cultural systems they belonged to. Indeed, I find quite interesting that the process of developing vernacular occurred simultaneously in Italy and in India. Also in the rest of Europe more or less in the same period, we witness the emergence of local idioms which will lately develop into national

languages. Since thousands of pages have been written on the differences between the Indian kingship and its Western counterpart, I find it very problematic to justify such simultaneity with socio-cultural explanations, especially since the process was involving areas so vast and diversified. But if we exclude motivations related to the local historical settings, then we have to consider the possibility of an evolutionary trend on a larger scale, which once again opens the gate to meta-history. Of course, in order to formulate a serious hypothesis, more data would be needed; interesting would be, for example, to find out how and when the exigency of vernacular languages emerged in other areas of the globe, and to confront the information collected. Similar attention I would dedicate to the spread of the spiritual movement that interested an area going from Northern Europe to Central India (as far as my study is concerned), from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. Both the phenomena seems to cut across boundaries and geographies, and it would be worthy to know if they share other correspondences the world over. Being that the case, these events could be looked upon not only as consequences of local socio-cultural settings, but also as trends and needs shared by enlarged and heterogeneous communities able to influence and effect the development and the asset of vast areas of the planet. I personally look forward to this possibility.

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