Series: **From Ego to...?**

Episode:

9. Christian and Sufi Stages on the Path to God

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Are Christian and Sufi mystics describing a similar inner journey? This brief exploration traces five stages on the path to God – from awakening to union – and concludes with a striking meeting of voices across the centuries: Isaac of Nineveh and Rumi on the heart that has learned to love everything.

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Earlier in this Series...

Episodes 1–3 – The Ego Unmasked
We began by exploring how the ego forms as a survival structure that narrows our vision of God and ourselves. Transformation begins as the ego loosens its grip and rhythms of silence, surrender, and honesty open space for healing.

Episodes 4–6 – Turning, Silence, and Surrender
The journey moved deeper into contemplation: the *Inner Turning* that notices grace already at work, the *Objectless Awareness* of Centring Prayer, and the dramatic crossing from the "First Nothing" of collapse to the "Second Nothing" of grace in *Two Nothings and a Bridge*.

Episode 7 – Stillness Returns to Gratefulness
After the depths of silence and emptiness, gratitude re-entered the journey. Simple thankfulness loosens the ego's narrative of scarcity and helps the heart rediscover the quiet gifts of ordinary life.

Episode 8 – Are Joy and Sorrow the Same?
Reflecting on Meister Eckhart's teaching on detachment, this episode explored how the soul grounded in God can inhabit both joy and sorrow without being ruled by either.

Episode 9 – Stages on the Path to God
The present episode widens the horizon by comparing Christian and Sufi descriptions of the spiritual journey. Across traditions we encounter similar movements – awakening, purification, transformation, union, and compassionate return – revealing how the path leads beyond ego toward a heart widened by divine love.

Introduction

One of the quiet surprises of Christian history is how many of its greatest contemplatives – Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, Thomas Merton – describe the interior life in ways that resonate, sometimes startlingly, with voices from outside the tradition. The quotes and reflections gathered here bring some of those Christian voices into conversation with a selection of Sufi mystics: figures such as Rumi, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Arabi, and the extraordinary Rabia al-Basri, a woman who was writing about disinterested love for God in eighth-century Basra with a directness that can still stop you in your tracks.

The arrangement follows a five-stage contemplative sequence – awakening, purification, illumination, union, and compassionate return – that both traditions recognise, in their different ways, as describing the shape of a life drawn toward God. The parallels are real and worth sitting with. So are the differences, which are noted honestly and not papered over.

If you are a Christian, why might this material be useful for you?

You might reasonably wonder why a Christian would spend time with Sufi sources at all. Here are a few honest answers.

First, it can give you a clearer view of your own tradition. There is something about seeing a familiar idea expressed in an unfamiliar voice that makes you notice it properly for

the first time. When Rabia refuses to worship God out of fear of hell or hope of heaven, and you then turn back to Eckhart saying the same thing in his own way, both of them come into sharper focus.

The Sufi material here is not a replacement for Christian teaching – it is more like a second light source that throws your own inheritance into relief.

Second, it may deepen your prayer. The contemplative stages described here are not abstract theology – they are maps of lived experience, drawn by people who took the interior life with great seriousness. If you have ever felt the restlessness Augustine describes, or struggled with the purification that never seems quite finished, or caught a glimpse of something steadier underneath the noise of daily life, then you are already somewhere on this path.

Reading how others have navigated it in another tradition can be quietly encouraging, and occasionally clarifying in ways you didn't expect.

Third, it takes seriously something that Christians have always believed: that God is at work in human hearts beyond the visible boundaries of the Church. Christ, the Word, the Logos, the self-expression of God in continual creation, is hardly a small or exclusive entity that can be limited or possessed by one group of humans.

The prologue to John's Gospel tells us that the Word was the light that enlightens every person coming into the world – not every Christian, not every religious person, but every person. That is a remarkable claim, and it has significant implications. It means that when you encounter genuine holiness, genuine love of God, genuine self-emptying in another tradition, you are not standing at the edge of alien territory. You may, in fact, be meeting the same Light from a different angle.

Engaging with Sufi mysticism on those terms is not a concession to vagueness about truth – it is an act of faith in the scale and generosity of the God you already believe in.

Can we speak of stages?

Classic Christian frameworks for the spiritual path consonant with medieval mystical tradition, have four stages:

Awakening; Purification; Illumination; Union.

A more modern insight and analysis helpfully adds a fifth stage: *"Compassionate Return"*, echoing themes in John of the Cross, Teresa of Ávila, and Thomas Merton, among others. Briefly understood in Christian terms, this final stage describes the movement in which the person who has been inwardly transformed begins to live outwardly with a new quality of presence. Divine love is no longer primarily an interior experience but becomes visible in love, humility, compassion, mercy, patience, and service.

Many Christian writers imply this stage even when they do not name it explicitly. For example, Meister Eckhart emphasised that the person united with God returns to ordinary life with greater freedom and generosity. Likewise, Teresa of Ávila repeatedly insisted that the test of deep prayer is not spiritual

Stages of the Spiritual Path

1 – Awakening *(the search begins)*, leads to purification

2 – Purification *(the ego loosens)*, opens the way for transformation

3 – Transformation *(a new centre of being)*, deepens into union

4 – Union and the widening heart; this flowers into compassionate presence in the world.

5 – Compassionate return *(love expressed in the world)*

experience but growth in love of neighbour.

Such a five-stage framework, it turns out, fits quite well with the more complex framework of Sufi spirituality

Stage 1 – Awakening

You probably know the feeling – a quiet but persistent sense that something is missing, even when life is going reasonably well. The mystics across both traditions would say that this restlessness is not a problem to be solved but a signal to be followed. Augustine put it with disarming directness: God has made you *for* God, and your heart will keep fidgeting until it finds that rest. The longing itself is a kind of homing instinct, built into the soul before you were even aware of it.

Augustine of Hippo

What makes the awakening stage so striking – and so consistent across Christian and Sufi sources – is that the search tends to turn inward just when you expected it to lead outward. Augustine famously spent years looking in entirely the wrong direction before realising that God was already within, closer than he was to himself. Rumi makes the same point with characteristic wit: he looked everywhere for God, only to find that the seeker and the sought are discovered to be more intimately related than we first imagined.

This is not the end of the journey, of course – it is barely the beginning – but it is the moment when you stop running away from the question and start taking it seriously.

For Sufis, the awakening is understood less as a spontaneous interior event and more as something that happens *in relationship* – specifically, in the presence of a *shaykh*, a spiritual master who has already travelled the path and whose very company can kindle longing in the student. This is a genuine structural difference worth noting. In the Christian framework, awakening is typically described as the work of grace, mediated through Scripture, sacrament, prayer, or the beauty of creation.

But if you think about it, there is a real case that Christ himself functions as the Christian counterpart to the Sufi *shaykh* – the one whose presence awakens, whose words disturb comfortable lives, and into whose company the disciple is invited to enter. The disciples on the road to Emmaus didn't recognise what had happened to them until afterward: their hearts, they said, had been burning the whole time.

STAGE 1

Theme	Christian sources	Sufi sources
Restless longing for God	"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." – Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions I*	"Where there is ruin, there is hope for a treasure." – Rumi, *Mathnawi*
God discovered within	"Late have I loved you… you were within, and I was outside, and there I searched for you." – Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions X*	"I searched for God and found only myself. I searched for myself and found only God." – Rumi, Sufi teaching tradition
Self-knowledge begins the path	"Enter eagerly into the treasure house that is within you, and so you will see the treasure house of heaven." – Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies II*	"He who knows himself knows his Lord." – cited in Sufi teaching and discussed by Al-Ghazali

Stage 2 – Purification

If the awakening stage is about recognising the longing, the purification stage is where things get genuinely demanding. This is the part of the path that requires you to look honestly at yourself – your habits, your pride, your tendency to dress self-interest up in spiritual clothing – and to begin, slowly and imperfectly, to loosen all of that.

The Desert Fathers called this *nepsis*, a kind of sober watchfulness over the inner life. Al-Ghazali used the image of a mirror: the heart is already capable of reflecting God, but it has become tarnished, and the work of purification is simply the slow, patient polishing.

What both traditions are at pains to point out is that this is not a grim or punishing process, even when it is hard. Rumi's instruction to "sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment" *(Mathnawi IV)* is not a counsel of despair – it is an invitation to stop managing everything and to let something larger take over. Eckhart's "Love God without why." and Rabia's refusal to worship God out of fear of hell or hope of paradise are pointing at the same thing: genuine purification eventually strips away even your reasons for being good, until what is left is love for its own sake. That is a high standard, but knowing it exists is already clarifying.

For Sufis, purification is not merely a moral or psychological process but a precise interior science, mapped out in the *maqamat* – the stations of the path – each with its own character, demands, and dangers. Classical Sufi manuals such as Al-Qushayri's *Risala* list stations like repentance, abstinence, renunciation, patience, and gratitude as distinct territories to be inhabited, not just virtues to be practised. Here a difficulty in comparison arises: Christian accounts of purification tend to be more fluid and less formally codified, trusting that the Holy Spirit leads each person differently.

The Sufi framework is, in this respect, more structured and more explicit about what stage you are at and what is required of you next – which can feel either helpfully clear or somewhat rigid, depending on your temperament. The *shaykh* is essential here precisely because the stations can be misread or faked, and only someone who has passed through them can reliably tell the difference between genuine progress and spiritual self-deception.

In the Christian tradition, that discerning function belongs partly to the spiritual director, but at a deeper level to Christ himself, who in the Gospel narratives consistently sees through self-deception – in his disciples no less than in his opponents – with a gentleness that is more unsettling than any rebuke.

STAGE 2

Theme	Christian sources	Sufi sources
Humility and self-knowledge	"The one who knows his sins is greater than one who raises the dead." – Isaac of Nineveh, *Ascetical Homilies*	"Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment; cleverness is mere opinion, bewilderment is intuition." – Rumi, *Mathnawi IV*
Cleansing the heart	*"The soul that is purified... becomes like a mirror, and in itself it sees the image of God." — Gregory of Nyssa, On Virginity XI*	"The heart is the mirror... remembrance of God is the polishing." – Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*
Love purified of self-interest	"I ask nothing of God, I seek nothing from God, for I love God without the why." — Meister Eckhart, *Talks of Instruction*	"O Lord, if I worship You from fear of Hell, burn me in Hell... but if I worship You for Your own sake, withhold not Your eternal beauty." – Rabia al-Basri

Rabia el-Basri

Stage 3 – Illumination

By this stage, something has quietly shifted. The disciplines of purification have done their work – not perfectly, and never finally – but enough that the inner noise has settled and you begin to notice a steadiness underneath it. Thomas Merton described it as a point of nothingness at the centre of the self that is, paradoxically, where the glory of God resides.

You don't manufacture this awareness; you clear enough ground for it to become perceptible. Junayd of Baghdad's image is helpful here: water takes on the colour of the cup it is poured into, and a heart that has been gradually emptied of its own colourings begins to take on the quality of what it holds.

The illumination stage is not about dramatic visions or extraordinary experiences, though those sometimes occur. It is more like a growing reliability of inner light – the sense that the presence you were searching for in Stage 1 is now recognisably present, not as an idea but as something you can orient yourself by. Macarius the Great and Bayazid Bastami, from their very different worlds, arrive at the same startling conclusion: that the Kingdom of God and the deepest self turn out to be, in some mysterious way, the same address.

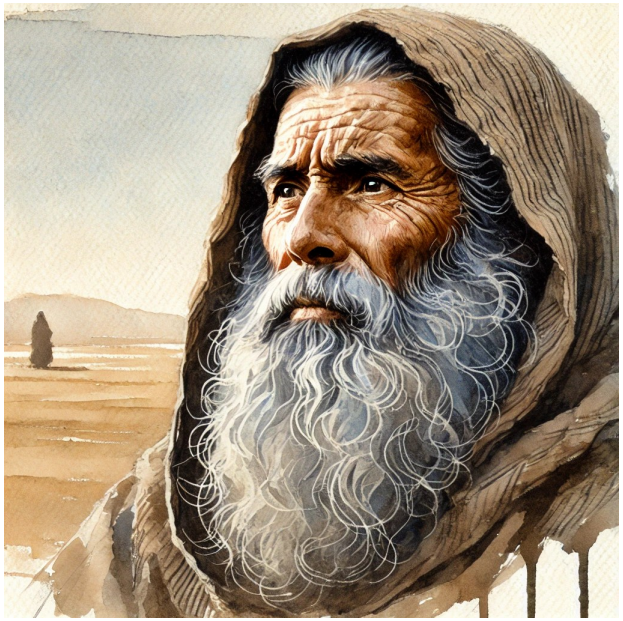
You find God not by travelling away from yourself but by entering more deeply into the life God has placed within you.

For Sufis, what the Christian tradition calls illumination corresponds broadly to the higher *maqamat* – stations such as *tawakkul* (radical trust in God), *mahabba* (love), and *ma'rifa* (gnosis or direct knowing) – as well as to the *ahwal*, the transient states of grace that begin to visit the traveller with increasing frequency. The *ahwal* are important to understand because they introduce a direct comparison with Christianity becomes less straightforward. These states – among them *uns* (intimacy with God), *wajd* (ecstatic finding), and *hayba* (awe) – are not earned but received, arriving and departing independently of the practitioner's effort.

Christian mystical theology has an equivalent category in what it calls *infused* contemplation, as distinct from the *acquired* contemplation that comes through practice. But the Sufi tradition developed a far more detailed phenomenology of these states, almost a spiritual cartography, which has no precise Christian parallel. Where the two traditions converge is in insisting that none of these experiences, however luminous, are the destination: they are signs, not the thing itself.

STAGE 3

Theme	Christian sources	Sufi sources
Divine light within the soul	"At the centre of our being is a point of nothingness… the pure glory of God in us." – Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*	"The water takes on the colour of the cup." – Junayd of Baghdad
God known in the depths of the self	"The Kingdom of God is within you – and whoever knows himself will find it." – Macarius the Great, *Spiritual Homilies*	"I went from God to God, until they cried from me in me, 'O thou I!'" – Bayazid Bastami



Macarius the Great

Stage 4 – Union

Union is the word the tradition reaches for when ordinary language starts to strain. It does not mean that you dissolve into God and cease to exist as a person – the mystics are generally careful about this – but it does mean that the boundary between your life and the divine life becomes increasingly transparent, until love is less something you *do* and more something you *are*. Meister Eckhart's formulation is perhaps the most daring in the Christian tradition: the eye with which you see God and the eye with which God sees you are, at this depth, the same eye. That is not pantheism – it is the logic of love taken to its limit.

The Sufi sources go to the same limit with equal courage. The words attributed to Al-Hallaj "I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I" cost him his life, which tells you something about how threatening this kind of union can appear to those who guard the boundaries of religion from the outside. Ibn Arabi's more philosophical version – that his knowledge of God and God's knowledge of him converge in a single act of knowing – says the same thing with greater precision.

What John of the Cross adds, gently but importantly, is that the soul living in this love "neither tires others nor grows tired." Union, in other words, is not an escape from life but an entirely different quality of presence within it – which is exactly what Stage 5 is about.

For Sufis, the technical term for union is *fana* – annihilation – and here you encounter what is arguably the most difficulty for interfaith comparison in the entire sequence. *Fana* means the extinction of the ego-self in God, and in its most radical expressions, as in Al-Hallaj, it sounds indistinguishable from a claim to identity with God. Christian theology has consistently resisted this language, insisting on an indestructible distinction between Creator and creature even at the heights of mystical union – the soul is *with* God, *in* God, transformed *by* God, but never simply *identical* to God.

The more sober Sufi school, associated with Junayd, is actually closer to the Christian position: Junayd argued that *fana* is always accompanied by *baqa* – subsistence, the return of the self – and that the two cannot be separated. On this reading, the self is not destroyed but purified and returned, which maps quite naturally onto the Christian account of deification or *theosis*. The sharpest difference, then, may be less between the traditions than between the more radical and the more sober mystics within each of them.

Ibn Arabi

STAGE 4

Theme	Christian sources	Sufi sources
Mutual knowing	"The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love."– *Meister Eckhart*	"His knowledge of me is my knowledge of Him; in that knowing there is neither He nor I, but a single knowing." — *Ibn Arabi, Fusus al-Hikam, Chapter on Adam*
Identity transformed in God	“My me is God, nor do I recognise any other self except my God.” – *Catherine of Genoa*	"I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I; we are two souls inhabiting one body. When you see me, you see Him; when you see Him, you see us both." — *attributed to Al-Hallaj, Diwan; may be from later biographical sources*
Love as the deepest union	“The soul that walks in love neither tires others nor grows tired.” – John of the Cross	“The garden of love is green without limit and yields many fruits other than sorrow or joy.” – *Rumi*

Stage 5 – Compassionate Return

Here is where the journey does something unexpected: it brings you back. Having been changed – quieted, widened, stripped of the need to perform or protect – you find yourself more present to other people, not less.

This is the compassionate return, and it is what distinguishes genuine mystical transformation from mere spiritual self-improvement. The contemplative doesn't disappear into an inner world; they re-enter the outer one with a different quality of attention. Eckhart puts it plainly: love is the eye through which we see God – and because that same love is now directed outward, it begins to see God in everyone and everything it meets.

Ibn Arabi's great verse about the heart that has become "a pasture for gazelles and a monastery for Christian monks, a temple for idols and the Kaaba of the pilgrim" is one of the most beautiful descriptions of this widened capacity in any literature. He is not saying that all religions are the same, or that distinctions don't matter. He is saying that a heart truly formed by divine love becomes large enough to recognise the sacred wherever it genuinely appears, without needing to own or control it. You might recognise this quality in people you have met – a certain unhurried generosity, a freedom from the need to be right, a warmth that doesn't have an agenda. That, both traditions suggest, is what the whole journey is for.

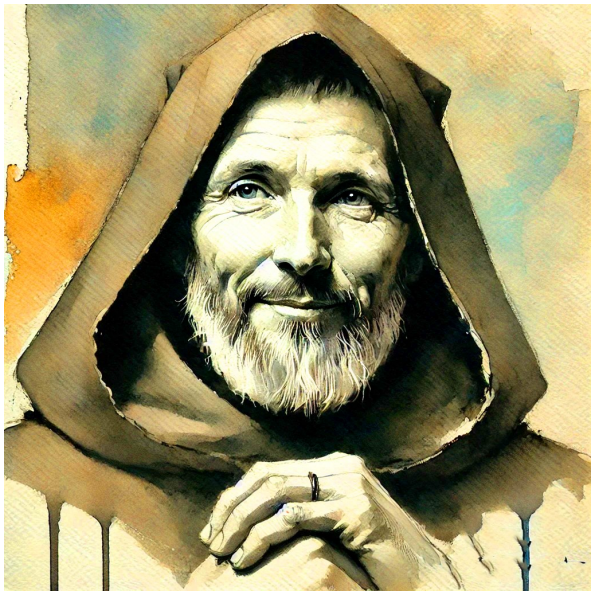
For Sufis, the compassionate return is inseparable from *baqa* – the subsistence that follows *fana* – and it is here that Junayd's insistence on sobriety proves its worth. The person who has passed through annihilation and returned is not simply back where they started: they move through the world as an instrument of divine mercy, which in Arabic is *rahma*, a word sharing its root with *rahim*, the womb – a mercy that is generative, sheltering, and unconditional.

An interfaith difference does arise, however, around the social and institutional expressions of this return. In the Christian tradition, the transformed person is might be reintegrated into the community life of the Church, serving within recognisable structures of ministry, charity, and sacramental life. In the Sufi tradition, the *shaykh* who has completed the path becomes a living centre of spiritual transmission – people travel to sit in his or her presence, not primarily to receive teaching in the conventional sense, but because the quality of their being is itself transformative.

Again, you might find the Christian parallel not so much in any institutional role as in Christ himself: the Gospels repeatedly show people changed simply by being in his presence, before a word is spoken or a miracle performed. Whether that parallel holds, or whether it makes the two traditions look more similar than they actually are, is something you will want to judge for yourself.

STAGE 5

Theme	Christian sources	Sufi sources
The universal heart	"Love is the eye with which we see God." – Meister Eckhart	"My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a monastery for Christian monks, a temple for idols and the Kaaba of the pilgrim." – Ibn Arabi, *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*



Meister Eckhart

What happens in stage 5?

Isaac of Nineveh and Rumi on the heart that has learned to love everything

A particularly striking parallel appears between Isaac of Nineveh and Rumi on what the final stage of the journey looks like. Both suggest that when the spiritual path has truly done its work, the heart becomes universally compassionate.

Isaac of Nineveh writes: "What is a merciful heart? It is the burning of the heart unto the whole creation – for human beings, for birds, for animals, for demons, and for every created thing." – *Ascetical Homilies* (7th century)

He goes on to explain that such a person cannot bear to see suffering anywhere in creation and finds themselves praying even for enemies and for animals.

Rumi expresses the same insight in a different voice:

"Through love all that is bitter will be sweet, through love all that is copper will be gold." – *Mathnawi*

Elsewhere Rumi describes love as dissolving the boundaries between self and other, opening the heart toward all beings.

The resemblance between the two writers is remarkable. Both suggest that the final fruit of the spiritual path is not private enlightenment but an enlarged capacity for compassion – a heart that begins to feel with and for everything that exists.

Seen in this light, Stage 5 – the compassionate return – is where the whole journey finally shows its climax. The inward work of awakening, purification, transformation, and union begins to express itself outwardly as mercy, patience, and generosity.

Isaac's vision of the merciful heart also sits beautifully alongside the famous verse from Ibn Arabi about the heart becoming "a pasture for gazelles and a monastery for Christian monks." In all three voices, the deepest sign that someone has drawn close to God is not withdrawal from the world but an almost unbearable tenderness toward it.

Isaac of Nineveh *(7th century), also known as Isaac the Syrian, was a monk and briefly a bishop in the Church of the East. His Ascetical Homilies became one of the most beloved texts of Eastern Christian spirituality, renowned for their depth on humility, repentance, and universal compassion.*

Rumi *(1207–1273) was a Persian Sufi poet, jurist, and spiritual teacher whose works are among the most celebrated in world literature. His great mystical poem, the Mathnawi, explores the transforming power of divine love and the soul's journey toward union with God.*