

Languages of Experience:

The Theory and Practice of a General Semantics Sufi

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Abstract:

In his massive study of Western teachers in Eastern traditions, Rawlinson (1997) cites the modern Sufi-Buddhist teacher Samuel L. Lewis (d. 1971) as "one of the first exponents of experiential comparative religion." Initiated as a Sufi *shaikh* by Indian-Pakistani Sufis and as a *zen-shi* by Korean Zen Buddhists, Lewis followed both paths for his entire adult life. Although the few studies of Lewis and his written work consider them either under the rubric of New Religious Movement (Webb 1995) or "hybrid Sufism" (Hermansen 2000), Lewis considered himself fully "within" the traditions in which he studied. He did, however, under the influence of the general semantics movement, de-construct the languages of the traditions in a consistent, phenomenological way. This paper examines Lewis' published and unpublished writings with regard to the hermeneutic lens he constructed, and which he attempted to enact in his relationship to both the theory and practice of Sufism.

In his massive study of Western teachers in Eastern traditions, Andrew Rawlinson (1997) cites the Sufi-Buddhist teacher Samuel L. Lewis (d. 1971) as:

...one of the first exponents of what I call experiential comparative religion. Not only was he recognized as a teacher by *sheikhs* in a number of Sufi orders (including the Chishti, the Naqshbandi and the Shadhili), he also practised Zen with Japanese and Korean *roshis* (and received Dharma Transmission from one of them), and later was a sort of disciple of Papa Ramdas, a well-known Hindu teacher (22).

Just before the end of his life, when he had approximately 100 Sufi disciples, Lewis organized his work under the name *Islamia Ruhaniat Society*, a title given him by a Pir in present day Bangladesh, Maulana Abdul Ghafour, who appointed Lewis a representative of Chishti Sufism in the West in 1956. Besides this, Lewis is known for his creation of the Dances of Universal Peace movement, which currently has branches around the world.

Although the few studies of Lewis and his work consider them either under the rubric of New Religious Movement (Webb 1995), “non-Islamic Sufism” (Godlas 2004) or “hybrid Sufism” (Hermansen 1996), Lewis considered himself fully “within” the traditions in which he studied. He did, however, de-construct and reconstruct the definitions of the tradition and its language in a linguistically consistent, phenomenologically-based way. This paper examines Lewis’ published and unpublished writings with regard to the hermeneutic lens he constructed, and which he

attempted to enact in his relationship to both the theory and practice of Sufism. It uses historical and comparative methods to examine these writings and suggests that Lewis' hermeneutic compares favorably to various post-modern research strategies. The author was the principal archivist of Lewis's private papers between 1977-1989 and published the primary collection of his autobiographical writings (1986).

Lewis' Sufism stems originally from his discipleship with the Indian Sufi Inayat Khan, who has been categorized as teaching a form of "drunken Sufism" (Chittick 1995). Before considering Lewis himself, it is worth spending some time here reconsidering Khan's early teaching, which is what Lewis experienced.

Khan originally saw his Sufism as expressing the essence of Islam and well within interpretations of Islamic law (*shariah*) then prevalent among Sufis and Ismailis in India. Papers recently discovered in the archives of the organization that he later started (the Sufi Movement International) show that Khan originally founded a group in London in 1920 called the Anjuman Islam, which came under scrutiny by Scotland Yard. In a letter in its defense, Khan writes:

The Anjuman Islam has, for its sole aim, the promotion of a better understanding between Christians and Moslims (sic). Lectures have been given on subjects solely concerned with the Ethical teaching

of the Prophet Mohammed, and so propaganda of the slightest political bias has never been undertaken (copy of a letter dated 18 September 1920 to Scotland Yard).

With regard to a charge leveled that “the Society accepts no revealed book except the book of nature,” Khan replies:

[T]he only statement in which a book is mentioned is the following: “There is one holy book, the sacred manuscript of nature, the only scripture that can enlighten the reader.” I suppose that it is to this that you refer, (but if you understand by that that the Society “accepts no revealed book except the book of nature” you have read from it a meaning that it is not intended to convey.) The Koran from beginning to end points to nature as the testimony of truth it contains. The seers to whom the truth has been revealed have read it in the book of nature. So far from not accepting the Koran, we are ready to recognize scriptures that others disregard.

As to the Sufi literature, there has never been any book which a Sufi is bound to follow, and all Sufis, among them the shining ones such as Attar, Shams Tabriz, Rumi, Saadi and Hafiz have expressed their free thought with a complete liberty of language. A Muslim who is advanced enough to admire their works and accept them as Islam should surely be able to bear with us (letter to Scotland Yard, 18 September 1920).

In addition, both Lewis and another of Inayat Khan’s early students, R. A. Jodjana (1981) relate that Khan originally taught Sufism in the way he experienced it in India, but later found that most Westerners were not prepared to accept it. Papers from Khan himself in the archives of Samuel Lewis show that the former taught his early mureeds using Islamic Nimaz and traditional Sufi

practices. Lewis comments in an excerpt from an unpublished book:

In [Inayat Khan's] early days, the teachings were based on two interconnected methods. One has to do with *zikr* (remembrance) and involves a long series of disciplines and practices called *ryazat*, all of them having for their purpose the remembrance of God at all times, in all places, under all circumstances....

The other method dealt with self-effacement, called *fana*. This has three distinct grades or stages: *fana-fi-sheikh*, *fana-fi-rassul*, *fana fi-lillah*. In *fana fi-sheikh*, one practices self-effacement by holding the ideal of the living teacher before him and practicing whatever has been imparted to him. It can go on indefinitely. At the same time, the experiences of Sufism carry one through what are called states (of consciousness) and stages (of evolution) or "stations."

Fana fi-rassul means effacement in the human ideal. To most or all Sufis, this is Mohammed, but even "Mohammed" takes on various meanings, until one reaches the interpretations offered by Ibn al-Arabi and Al-Jili (in his "The Perfect Man.") And *fana fi-lillah* means effacement in the universal, or beyond name-and-form, or the direct experience of God (Lewis, 1986, pp. 20-21).

Raden Jodjana, one of Inayat Khan's early mureeds in London, also describes her training in *fana* as a non-verbal instruction, and distinct from the organization that later grew up around Khan:

Inayat Khan never created the Sufi Order in London. He accepted the offer of the group of people who made the proposal. He was then told by the board of the circle to give lectures and lessons, as they wished to know more about the still unknown secrets of Hindu Yoga. They wanted him to teach by word and explain clearly what it

was all about.... Later in Ladbroke Road I was often astonished and sometimes shocked, how people reacted when Inayat began his first teaching by word. This made him come to the conclusion that Western people could never be pupils or adepts as they always knew better!

...

As (sic) Inayat Khan asked me not to join the Sufi Order, but desired to lead me according to the wish of his Guru in the path of the Sufi way of life, where no explanations were given, no questions were allowed. Discussion, according to Inayat Khan, was postponement of application (1981, pp. 171-172, 174).

Just before he died at the age of 43, Inayat Khan himself expressed great discomfort with the way that his organization developed in a chapter of his autobiography entitled "Organization" (1979, pp. 234-240). In it, he tells of his many problems in working in the West, where some sort of organization seemed necessary yet contrary to his natural temperament:

For me who was born with a tendency to be away from all worldly activities and who grew every day more apart from worldly things, to have an organization to make, to control, and to carry out has been a great trial and any disturbance in carrying it out made my position very difficult, and my spirit disturbed. If it had not been for the Cause, which is worth every sacrifice in life, I would not for one moment have troubled about the organization (p. 235).

Developing in tandem with his experience of Sufi practice, Lewis's Zen transmission stemmed from the Japanese Rinzai Zen master Nyogen Senzaki, a student along with D.T. Suzuki of Soyen Shaku (Senzaki 1978). According to Senzaki, Soyen Shaku asked

Suzuki to make Zen famous and asked him to keep Zen's inner transmission alive (Lewis 1986). Lewis adopted his teacher's critical attitude concerning the sincerity of many Zen monks and of Zen's institutional system itself. He later used the term "Zen-ism" to refer to the propagation of Zen philosophy detached from Zen practice.

Lewis was exposed to Alfred Korzybski's general semantics movement in the early 1930's through the work of Cassius Keyser, who proposed a "rigorous" application of general semantics principles to problem-solving. Korzybski's general semantics looks critically at the way people use words, often without actually considering what they mean. It recommends analyzing specific words, particularly those charged with emotional content in order to promote better understanding between people. Because words change meanings, general semanticists propose to "index" various words to distinguish their different usages as well as the way they change over time (for instance, the word "fascism" in Chase, 1938).

One feature of Korzybski's theory is that human beings are uniquely capable of "time-binding," that is, building upon the conscious realizations of previous generations:

Here the reactions of humans are not split verbally and elementalistically into separate 'body', 'mind', 'emotions', 'intellect',

'intuitions', etc., but are treated from an organism-as-a-whole-in-an-environment (external and *internal*) point of view (1948, p. xx).

In the introduction to the third edition of his book *Science and Sanity*, Korzybski notes that his work actually developed “entirely independently of ‘semantics,’ ‘significs,’ ‘semiotic,’ ‘semasiology’” (1948, p. xxxiii), but that:

“...from a time-binding point of view and in consideration of the efforts of others, I introduced the term ‘General Semantics’ for the *modus operandi* of the first non-aristolelian system.... A theory of evaluation appeared to follow naturally in an evolutionary sense from 1) ‘meaning’ to 2) ‘significance’ to 3) *evaluation*. *General Semantics* turned out to be an empirical natural science of non-elementalistic evaluation, which takes into account the living individual, not divorcing him from his reactions altogether, nor from his neuro-linguistic and neuro-semantic environments, but allocating him a *plenum* of some values, no matter what (1948, p. xxii).

For Korzybski, an “elementalistic” term was one in which a person’s emotional/somatic reaction to it (called a “semantic reaction”) did not account for the way that the term could be applied equally to other abstract statements like it. As such “multi-ordinal” terms, Korzybski included ones like ‘yes,’ ‘no,’ ‘true,’ ‘false,’ ‘fact,’ ‘reality,’ ‘cause,’ ‘effect,’ ‘love,’ ‘hate,’ and ‘doubt’ (among others, 1948, p. 14).

In the case of both Zen and Sufism, Lewis uses general semantics principles to radically deconstruct various received

definitions of the tradition along phenomenological lines, that is, based on the mystical experiences that the practices of the tradition promote in relation to the way that the traditions evolve over time in particular communities. Lewis added to these concepts his opinion that certain cultures have evolved words to stand for concepts that are not present in other cultures, but that relate to agreed realities, in what today would be called an inter-subjective way (see Reason and Rowan, 1981). He writes:

Indian languages have no terms for “electricity” and “magnetic” and “turbine.” Indians do not object to adopting our terms for these. English has no equivalent for Vijnana and Ananda and Prajna and Samadhi, and so we grasp any words—appropriate or inappropriate—and become confused. The end is likely as not psychedelism or trance-mediumship, which have no relation to these things (1986, p. 96).

At the same time, Lewis criticized the leadership of the International Society of General Semantics for what he perceived as the failure of the movement to actually solve problems due to its Western bias. He writes the following to S.I. Hayakawa and Society headquarters:

“Instead of being permitted to introduce a Keyserian interpretation of G.S.(General Semantics), I was attacked personally by a group of presumably devotees of G.S. And why was I attacked? Because of efforts on my part to reconcile our mutual differences, and forget the personality and work for a cause....

In closing I list some of the problems I have tried to present with G.S. [General Semantics] solutions: the Mendel-Lysenko dispute [genetics], Silent Spring [environmental pollution], Viet Nam [international conflict], What is 'Zen?' [spiritual], collaboration with Dr. Chandrasekar, and the solution of problems by 'Integration'" (Johnson 2005, p. 320).

He writes in a letter to Oliver Reiser in 1969:

"The refusal of the dialecticians of all camps (by whatever name they are known) to consider Indian systems of logistics helps leave unsolved problems which are just as much problems of obscurantist minds as of objective validity."

"As the present logistics are failing to solve problems, it is time to examine at least superficially the Nyaya and Dignaga non-Aristotlelian logics. The Nyaya logic has for its virtue the compulsory need of referents demanded also by A.K [Alfred Korzybski] but not by many of his disciples; and in this seems more in line with a presumably 'scientific' logic.

"Dignaga goes further in assuming or proving that facts are independent of the personality of the observer—and it was just this by which Einstein was able to resolve the dilemma of the Michelson-Morley experiments (Johnson 2005, p. 459-460).

In his writing for various Buddhist journals, Lewis deconstructed traditional definitions of *buddha*, *dharma* and *sangha* to express what he felt to be their experiential emphasis. For Lewis, these and other Zen terms and rules (*vinaya*) did not express fixed states or categories, but were functional and process-oriented, and needed to be indexed as such (in a general semantics

sense). In a 1959 article for *The Western Buddhist*, entitled “How to be a Buddhist? How to be a Buddha!” he writes:

Naturally, there have grown up interpretations of the Eightfold Path quite diverse from the experience of enlightenment, and even showing verbal contradictions. The word *samma*, which appears in each of the elements of the Eightfold Path, really means “highest” (correlated to our “summit”) or “universal,” not “right.” True Buddhism does not propose any “right” way of life as against any “wrong” way or ways, but a superlative, universal, supreme Way; an all-embracing *anatta* view, terminating in *samma-samadhi* consciousness of totality.

In the Pali literature, it would appear that one of the first missions of Buddha Sakya Muni was to elevate humanity to perfection so that all who joined his brotherhood became *Arhats*, that is, perfect, enlightened beings. Yet this universal point of view seems to have become lost, and while Buddhism spread both as a religion and philosophy, it did not always carry with it this experience of *samadhi*, or *satori*—as it is now called. This led to a break between those who had the experience and those who did not. It was something like a break between those who could write cookbooks and those who could cook. Humanity cannot live off cookbooks: it must have food (1986, p. 127).

In a similar way, Lewis considers various Islamic terms from their Arabic roots to emphasize their functional meaning, that is, in general semantics terms, from an “organism-as-a-whole-in-an-environment (external and internal) point of view.” To a friend in Pakistan, he writes:

You may understand now why I do not call myself a Muslim, but an “inshallahist.” While originally a Muslim meant one who surrendered to God, it later came to mean mostly those who accepted *Shariah* and later those who followed openly or blindly an *Ijma*, the source of which is not only unclear, but often has nothing whatever to do with revelation.

The translation of *Rahman* and *Rahim* into other languages has resulted in the use of terms quite unrelated to each other, whereas it is obvious that the root *Rahm* is common to these two words and they must have some related function. I call them “the Compassionator” and “the Compassionating” without holding too fast to these words (1986, pp. 315-316).

For Lewis, the possible definitions and categories relating to institutional Islam(s) did not construct the meaning of Sufism(s), but vice versa. Turning then-prevalent academic definitions of Sufism on their head, he questioned whether *tasawwuf* (the inner path, from which the word Sufism derives) was not in fact the original *islam* (defined as the living and ongoing act and experience of surrender to the divine). In this sense, he acknowledged the functional use of certain formal prayers, rituals and practices, and while visiting a Shadhili khankah in Cairo in 1960, writes the following:

I find surprisingly great agreement. Orthodoxy is needed for the beginners. It is best to be trained in some form of ceremony, law and custom, but that is introduction only. The men explained “spiritual liberty” exactly the same as my first Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan did, and they had the same attitude toward religion and religions. The educated ones were far from dogmatic and were all universal. There

was agreement that Mohammed was the *Seal of the Prophets*, which meant recognition of all prophets and their teachings (1986, p. 191).

Lewis later explains his understanding of Muhammad as the “Seal of the Prophets” in a way that shows the influence of Korzybski’s idea of “time-binding”:

Buddha was a perfect man who showed the way to Nirvana, and in the Southern Buddhism, this teaching is kept. But it is a limited Nirvana, not the true, if you have to become a monk to reach it. This assumes that the layman cannot reach perfection. But the layman has received perfection, and so the later Buddhists said that creation and Nirvana were identical. Only this means that the common man could attain to perfection. But what common man has attained to perfection? One cannot call Rama common, because he was a king; Krishna also had a special place in society, and Jesus and Buddha became monks. There was only one ordinary man who represented both Adam and perfection. So with Mohammed the revelation was sealed, which does not take away from any scripture or teaching (1986, pp. 220-221).

Lewis remained in Cairo for about six months, studying Quran at Al-Azhar and Sufism with the Shadhili and Rufai. Another part of his two-year journey to Egypt, India and Pakistan in 1960-62 involved his work and avocation: organic agriculture. During this trip, as well as his earlier one to Japan, Burma, East Pakistan and India in 1956, he contacted the ministries of agriculture in these countries and attempted to persuade them not to involve themselves with Western agricultural methods based on

chemical fertilizers and non-renewable seed sources. Towards the end of his time in Egypt, he applied a horticultural viewpoint, as well as a non-aristotelian, general semantics philosophy, to a picture of “multiple Islams:”

Religions are like trees and when we try to describe them in seed-form, we are projecting and differentiating and not describing. Islam, even more than the Catholic Church, includes all sorts of phases and institutions. To regard them as “wrong” is like regarding the oak as a “wrong” rose-bush or “wrong” pine tree. There is no “right” or “wrong” about so-called accretions. They are there, they are part of life. We can study and even come to understand them, but to give them moral or personal judgments is totally nonsensical. It prevents communication and lack of real communication prevents understanding and peace (1986, p. 215).

On the same basis, he was extremely critical of the policies of the US government in the Mideast as well as those of certain non-profit relief groups, which did little besides raise money in order to raise more money:

What has been called “diplomacy” is nothing but a fancy game for an imaginary thing called “honor,” the nature of which is not quite clear. On the other hand, to me at least, hunger is quite clear. Although I primarily started out [this trip] with the mission of the exchange of international information in horticulture, the contemporary populace/ food ration issue and the failure of crops in certain lands makes my position logically exceedingly strong (1986, p. 225).

After witnessing an anti-American riot near the US Embassy in Cairo in 1961, Lewis criticizes the “hypothetical, metaphysical pabulum that passes for Near East culture in many of our institutions” and says that “in the midst of an Arabian culture, authors prefer to consult European ‘authorities’ for their (mis)information than interview Arabs”(1986, p. 227).

After traveling to Pakistan on the same trip, Lewis began an epic poem based simultaneously on *nimaz* [the ritual prayers of Islam] and the dispute over Kashmir. Describing his visit, he criticizes the frequent use of high terms of honor for Muhammad, which are not acted upon in practice (a typical result of a semantic reaction to an elementalistic fiction, in general semantics terms):

People [in Pakistan] are unhappy, uncertain and do not have enough food. I have been sent here as a servant of Mohammed Abdullah, and he wants me to follow him as a servant. People call him “Messenger” or “Prophet” and go contrary to his words in Hadith where he says he does not want a lot of titles like the Christians gave Jesus. If one says that Mohammed has all power, is the greatest of the great and then is concerned with Pakistan acquiring Kashmir, he is a liar. People here are concerned with Kashmir, and Mohammed is concerned with Islam. People use the word “Islam” and they know nothing of its meaning—submission; they only know insistence and insistence is the enemy of submission (1986, pp. 264-265).

Reflecting on his trip later, he continued his exploration of the words *rahman* and *rahim*, and then applied them to the way he attempted to live his life:

I call Mohammed the example of *Rahman* and Isa (Jesus) the example of *Rahim*. It comes out in their prayers that Mohammed begins with praise toward God and the concern is with Allah, while Isa is concerned with mankind and says: "Give us this day our daily bread and forgive our debts."

Or in the practical life I am called upon to bring man to a greater spiritual realization following Mohammed; and also trying to increase the world's food supplies, following Isa. There is no contradiction, but this takes *Rahman* and *Rahim* out of the realm of the abstract into the concrete and practical. Therefore any problems or questions which have no relation to *Fatiha* or the Lord's Prayer are outside my duties in life (1986, p. 316).

One of the main ways that Lewis applied his general semantics approach to Sufism was in writing dedicated to bring together his background in the world of the scientist with the world of the mystic. In 1944, he reconsiders the Sufi term *`ishk* the following way:

According to the teachings of *tasawwuf*... all things in creation and manifestation, even all things in existence, are held together by *Ishk*. *Ishk* has been called Divine Love. It is difficult to express it by such a limited phrase. We know that sunlight contains electricity, magnetism and numerous other forces or aspects of cosmic force. Gravitation, light, attraction, adhesion and cohesion are all aspects of this *Ishk* in the physical world. But even these aspects extend far into

the unseen, and it cannot be said that Iskh is limited or qualified by its mental aspects and characteristics.

Scientific chemists, bound by materialism, do not explain the simplest things. Why is water a solvent? Why is it that distilled water seems to lack life while rain water is so living and vital? Scientific biologists, bound by materialism, do not explain the processes of evolution. Metaphytes and metazoa obtain qualities and functions which cannot be calculated beforehand by any knowledge of the constituents....

The New Testament teaches that there are three mysteries on earth—the mysteries of water and breath and blood. Behind these three mysteries, behind all mysteries, behind all activity and behind all life is this Iskh or Love or Agape or Karuna, which holds all things and persons together, which creates the beauty and harmony of the cosmos (1981, pp. 18-19).

In the cases of both Zen and Sufism, Lewis consistently emphasizes function over form and experiential knowing over categorical knowledge in constructing a hermeneutic lens rooted in a relentlessly non-dualistic epistemology. One could see this as a process-oriented general semantics transformed by the influence of the Sufi philosophy of *tawhid*. With regard to sacred texts, his method lies well within the Islamic hermeneutical tradition of *ta'wil*, which itself can be compared with various post modern, inter-subjective research strategies, such as action research, which sees all learning as “experiments-in-practice” (for instance, see Torbert 1981, p. 145, and Douglas-Klotz, 2005).

This *tawhid* hermeneutic constructed a field of unified meaning/being, which allowed Lewis to see himself fully *within* both the Zen and Sufi traditions in theory, as well as able to move freely between them in practice. The fact that he was recognized as a *murshid* by Pakistani Chishti Sufis and a zen teacher by Korean Zen Buddhists demonstrates that over a period of learning constituting fifty years, he convincingly accomplished this paradoxical feat. The sophistication of this approach has been generally misunderstood by most previous scholarly attempts to categorize Lewis and his work in a simple fashion, or to fit him into a taxonomy that uses shifting, unindexed definitions of what constitutes “Islam.”

One could see Lewis as a “one-off,” in regards to his simultaneous, lifelong engagement with both Zen and Sufism. In another dimension, however, Lewis’ hermeneutic could prove helpful for future researchers in the field of mysticism seeking to overcome the objectivist–constructivist dialectic in order to communicate within and develop the study of comparative religious experience. Rawlinson sees this possibility clearly:

Whether or not we accept these claims [of Lewis], I for one am persuaded that if anyone is going to make pronouncements that have any value at all about the various traditions, it has to be along the lines that Sam adopted: namely, what I call experiential comparative religion. It is one of the arguments of this book that the West has

fundamentally changed *all* the Eastern traditions by the mere fact of bringing them together and asking questions that none of them has asked before. Murshid Sam was surely one of the pioneers in this movement—one that may yet transform Western culture (p. 403).

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