Organic Religion

The contemporary view of religion is often that it is rather separate from the people who ascribe to it. Religion is most often viewed as a belief system that individuals accept or reject. To say that the common view of religion during the Medieval Period was different is a serious exercise in understatement. Beyond the more obvious differences of how religions were practiced and the differences in their dogma versus their modern counterparts, medieval Muslims seemed to view religion as an aspect of being and not a belief system.

This is a fundamentally different approach to religion. As a belief system anyone can ascribe to any religion and a person can change their avowed faith as often as it suits their fancy. As an aspect of being medieval individuals are seen as being meant to belong to a certain religion from the Muslim view. Once religion is taken as an endemic part of someone’s being a notion of hybridity is created, which can result in ‘good’ and ‘bad ’ hybrids as well as hybrids that are meant to be bizarre or monstrous. For instance in ‘The Arabian Nights’ an old man is rescued by a demon. This is not entirely strange in and of itself regarding the rest of the book, however it is a kind she-demon who is, “…one of the demons who believe in God.” (Mahdi, 28) Demons by definition are malevolent creatures
who do not follow the precepts of the Muslim God. The story was being told with the intent of being bizarre and strange. Until the emergence of this devout demon the story had been rather pedestrian and within the realm of reason.

Beyond being strange, the story was meant also to be stranger than the tale of another man who had encountered a demon. In order to make the story with a demon more strange, the she-demon was made a God-fearing hybrid. The religious aspect of a demon’s nature is recognized and twisted to intentionally create a strange monster that should not exist. The hybrid is a demon however, and exists with a religious nature already intact. This same type of recognition of indigenous religious natures in humans is seen elsewhere. Such a construction is seen in Queen Lab later. Badr’s newfound friend warns him against Queen Lab telling him that she is a powerful sorceress, yet she, “…swore by her Magian faith that she would not harm you or enchant you.” (Mahdi, 417)

The strange and evil Queen Lab, whom Badr’s friend Abu invokes God’s fury against, is an adherent of an ancient Persian religion. She is described as an incredibly beautiful rich and a powerful sovereign yet her selfish use of the power granted her by a god other than the Muslim one makes her despicably evil. Badr’s friend and rescuer, Abu, also uses magic and is one of the most powerful magicians in the world by his own admission. Abu is however a good, virtuous person who is incidentally a practitioner of the Muslim faith. The evil of Lab is most manifested by her religion, especially when she is held up against Abu. Religion crops up as a defining characteristic of Lab in a rather superfluous way. When Abu speaks of why the Queen will not harm Badr, it would be unnecessary to specifically state that she swore by her own ‘Maigan’ faith. She could
have just been said to have sworn or sworn by her faith or god. Neither of these options are used and instead the author has Abu explicitly state that the Queen is not a Muslim. This forces a comparison between Abu and Lab and frames in bright intellectual neon the religious differences between the two while the difference in their dispositions is being highlighted.

This same line of thought is even more pronounced in the seduction of a virtuous Muslim Sheikh by a Christian in the “The Conference of Birds”. Just as the episode begins the Sheikh espies her, “… a Christian girl who knew the secrets of her faith’s theology.” (Attar, 417) This line is oddly suggestive. Its more direct meaning is that she is not just a non-practicing Catholic, but obviously a devout one, making her not just a Christian but a *Christian*. Its more indirect connotation however is that her seduction is not entirely accomplished by means mundane. The line does not state she was well-versed in the Bible or that she held her faith’s traditions devoutly, but that she knew more esoteric ‘secrets’ of Christianity. Most Medieval religions fell into the basic paradigm of mystery religions. Such religions had a basic outside understanding that the common laity would have, which would allow them enough knowledge in order to worship correctly. The inner circle of clergy and enlightened others would possess knowledge of special hidden ‘secrets’ of their religion, often granting them supernatural powers. Here that subtle implication is in force. Within the reader’s first glance at her, the beautiful woman is already suggested to be using powers of her alien faith to her own end, in the distinctive style of Queen Lab.

Much like the religion of Queen Lab, the Christian religion is shown not only to be wrong but that the Christian girl is also in the wrong because she is Christian. When
the Sheikh falls for the Christian he laments that he has, “Become a Christian and renounced the world.” (Attar, 58) The phrasing again speaks volumes. The Sheikh has not forsaken only his faith, his power, his position, his riches, but the world itself. By altering his person and becoming a Christian the Sheikh has renounced everything right and true. Even though he is the same person physically he now is somehow degraded and destroyed by his conversion. The Sheikh, when chastised by his followers says that, “’No man repents past folly more…’” Even though he regrets his conversion the fact that he is a Christian cannot in any way allow for him to be recognized as a good person. (Attar, 63) This is a conversion of the most substantial kind. The Sheikh is not just a Sheikh who happens to be a Muslim, the Muslim faith is an integral part of his identity. He was not a Sheikh, but a Sheikh/Muslim hybrid.

When he alters himself and becomes a Sheikh/Christian hybrid he has indeed ‘forsaken the entire world’ since nothing can be the same for him, since he is no longer the same person. The religion an individual belongs to is not viewed here as just a manifestation of who a person is, but a crucial factor shaping the actual person’s being. Much the same way people are transformed into animals and magically altered in both ‘The Conference of the Birds’ and ‘The Arabian Nights’ a person who undergoes religious conversion becomes a startling hybrid of themselves and some religion other than the one they should ascribe to, their being oddly changed. In fact when the Sheikh converts back the text suggests that he had indeed been freed from a transformation just as strong as a physical one. The Sheikh, “…cast aside his Christian clothes, … freed from the strange faith’s spell.” (Attar, 72) The sheikh sheds his Christian skin, the clothes and trappings of the faith and reemerges, freed from the spell of Christian transformation and
his incarceration in the form of a Christian to his true self once again. Later in ‘The Conference of Birds’ an even more dramatic religious transformation takes place.

Once the group of thirty birds reaches their goal and finds the all-powerful Simorgh it is revealed that somehow during their journey they have become the Simorgh. This is the ultimate expression of religion as a quality of actual being. The Simorgh tells them that even though they though they were the ones moving through valleys, they were actually the Simorgh and the Simorgh was moving through itself. (Attar, 220) It is revealed to the birds and the reader that there is in actuality nothing other than religion. In fact, all existence is said to be a hybrid of God and physical miscellany. The birds were never birds to begin with, but the Simorgh. Through their devout religious pilgrimage they were awakened to the fact and were able to arrive at this revelation only through religion and can now ascend into a new form.

In the Medieval Muslim world religion was not just an element of hybridity, but an actual expression of true being and the belief that all things were just hybrids of God. Religion was not an expression of personal views, but personal existence was the expression of the powers responsible for religion. From this it follows that the defining aspect of every being is religion and all other things are secondary since religion is the only way to understand the powers that are responsible for an individual’s existence. From this perspective, nothing can help being a religious hybrid, which is a conclusion the literature is rife with. In all places and ways religion and physical being are inextricably tied together in a compound which creates existence, making any change of religion from what it should be a startling and incredible transformation.