

SUFISM

The Mysticism Developed by Muslims

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INTRODUCTION

Mysticism, as part of any religion, believes that the man is capable of reaching or uniting with “the Absolute Being”, “the Real Being”, “the metaphysical world” using the capacities that have been given to him. There is no difference between a Buddhist, a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim in the mental state of trance, ecstasy or communion with God.¹ There is no doubt that the great religions differ from each other in fundamental respects. But they are not nearly so far from one another as they may seem.² It has become a platitude to observe that mysticism is the same whatever the religion professed by an individual mystic: a constant and unvarying phenomenon of the universal yearning of the human spirit for personal communion with God. Much effort and erudition have however also been expended to show how one religion has been influenced by another.³

DEFINITION

“Sufism” (*tasawwuf*) can be described as a specific kind of mysticism developed by Muslims. There are more than 2,000 definitions of the term “Sufism”.^{4,5} Approaches to the phenomenon of “Sufism” are manifold. To analyze the mystical experience itself is next to impossible, since words can never plumb the depths of this experience. Even the finest psychological analysis is limited: words remain on the shore, as the Sufis would say.⁶

The term “Sufism” can only be applied to a sort of mysticism developed by Muslims. Even the name is Arabic. Dismissing the fanciful derivations offered by some adherents, both ancient and modern, who were seeking a more dignified etymology, there is no doubt that the word comes from the Arabic *sūf* (wool) and refers to the woolen garments (equivalent to the monk’s hair shirt) worn by

early Muslim ascetics (*zuhhād*) to symbolize their lack of concern for worldly things. “Sufi” is also considered by some to be derived from a word meaning “pure”.⁷

HISTORY

Sufism traces its origins back to the Prophet of Islam and takes inspiration from the divine word as revealed through him in the Koran. From the earliest period of Sufism, the Koran and the life of the Prophet and his sayings (*hadiths*) have played an important role. While, in its earliest period, the Koran and the *hadiths* served asceticism, in later years Sufis managed to derive their principles from these sources.

The earliest Sufis were, in fact, ascetics and quietists rather than mystics. After the conquests of the neighboring lands and expansion of the Islamic state, Muslims encountered other cultures. This made the Muslims interpret the cultural heritage of Islam howat different it was from in the past. The asceticism in their life turned into Sufism: each creating his own way of seeking God’s consent, began to seek fellows or a master according to his own theory. This period went hand in hand with the practice of Sufism. In addition, this period was a very productive time when famous Sufi masters, themselves holy men, taught the nascent doctrine of Sufism to their disciples, either individually or in groups. The Persian Sufi theorist Huciviri (Hudjwiri (d.465/1072) enumerates several schools of mysticism that transmitted the teaching of the masters.⁸

However, the real master-disciple (sheikh-*mürīd*) relationship was still in embryonic form. The period of the “Great Sufi Orders (*tariqats*)” is also known as the pe-

Editorial Note: *When I, along with Dr Avtar Singh Dhaliwal, met Dr Kucuk, we are impressed by her knowledge about Sufism. I, therefore, requested her to write a brief and comprehensive article on Sufism. After reading some compatibility of Sufism with that of Nanakian Philosophy the readers will realize that Guru Nanak must have gone to Konya, Turkey during his travels in Middle East to meet the religious leaders of the center of famous Sufi, Mavlana (Maulana) Jallalal-ud-Din Rumi since he had not left any Sufi center which has not been visited by him. However, during our research (see Research Report on pages 7-23) we could not find any trace of his visit in Konya or in Istanbul. I am impressed by the statement of Dr Kucuk that Sufis use God’s universal name as “Hu” (He) rather than any specific name. I may add here that Guru Nanak says that no specific name can be assigned to God since God is Eternal and Ineffable. This article of Dr Kucuk opens up further discussion to explore how the Sufism is understood according to Nanakian Philosophy.*

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riod of real “Sufism” (the sixth/twelfth century). The word *tariqat* literally means ‘way, path’.⁹ This period corresponds to the years of the Mongol invasions and later, the Crusades. Seeking silence and peace of mind, people took refuge in convents. From the ancient times, convents had been isolated oases for the abandonment of worldly life, but the time had come for them to be linked up in a wide-spread brotherhood of mystics acknowledging a common master and using a common discipline and ritual. Certain temperaments, methods, and differences of thought were other reasons for formation of the orders.¹⁰ The mysticism of this period, wherein the *tariqats* (Sufi orders) had been born, could also be called “organized popular mysticism”.¹¹

During this stage, Sufi doctrine was becoming formalized: the way was mapped out, systems of *maqāmāt* (stages) and *halāt* (mystic states) were worked out, through which the seeker must pass in order to attain ultimate, God.¹² Personal effort was inevitable under the control of a *mūrīd* (guide). After a while, one might receive gifts of visions from the Almighty. To attain these gifts, it was necessary to follow a path (*tariqat*). Only a few might achieve both *ma’rifā* (gnosis) and *wilāya* (sainthood) without following a path. Each order is distinguished by its particular rituals far more than by its doctrine.¹³ Each founder laid down certain rules concerning relationships between followers and the rituals of his order; wrote manuals, litanies and praises which the followers could read during ceremonies; and prescribed certain religious exercises. Once a person has been initiated into an order, he or she remains attached not only to the present sheikh, but the founder and his successors, hence ensuring the continuity of spiritual bondage and allegiance.¹⁴

With the beginning of the *tariqat* period, it became customary to build *tekkes* and *khankahs* for the *murīdān* (adherents of a sheikh) or dervishes.¹⁵ The first masters did not claim leadership for themselves. However, admiring their way of life, people spontaneously gathered around them. The most important Sufi orders in the Ottoman Empire were the Qādiriyya, Mawlawiyya, the Naqshbandiyya, the Dīlwatiyya (or Dīlwetiyye in Turkish), the Khālwatiyya, the Bayrāmiyya, the Rifā’iyya and the Bektāshiyya.

TEACHING

Sufism teaches people that all nations pray one God in their own language. Its message of peace with and for all, has endeared it to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.¹⁶ Sufism describes ‘the perfect man’ as “praised in all religions”.¹⁷ Also, during the *dhikr*¹⁸ ceremonies, Sufis use God’s universal name, “*Hū*” (He), rather than his other specific names.¹⁹ In a divine tradition/saying²⁰: “I am as my servant thinks that I am.”²¹ This universal view, common to all forms of mysticism, can play an important role

in the dialogue between world religions.

For instance, according to the world-wide known Sufi Mawlānā Djalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d.672/1273), to whom the Mawlawiyya is ascribed, religions are like ways to the top of a mountain. Once one reaches to the top, understands that although they were seemed to be different, they all lead to the same end. So, essentially, there is no difference between them, for the ones who managed to reach the Absolute, the Real. To him, “religions are like ladders to the sky. Everyone has his/her own ladder. And as everyone minds his/her own ladder, is unaware of others’ ladders. But, in fact, they all go towards the same infinite.”²² To him, there is no difference between the Prophet Mūsā and Pharaoh for those who reached to “white”, using all colours,²³ as they are far from all religions, being from the “Gods’ order”. His words in Persian are: *Millet-i ashq ez heme dīnhā djudā est/ Ashqānra millet ü medhheb-i Khudā est.*²⁴ His understanding of Sufism is based on “love of God”, and not on ascetic discipline. This was the best way to attain God, as many Sufis agreed, but at the same time was something gifted by God, not can be reached through some practices.

Mawlānā had many followers from different religions. And when he died, they all held his funeral in accordance with their own religions. It is not surprising that reforming Ottoman sultans used the Mawlawī order against the *ulemā*, who supported the treatment of the Muslim community as a privileged community against the *dhimmīs*²⁵ (the Jews and Christians between whom and the Muslims there is, according to Muslim law, a certain legal relation).²⁶

In fact, the Koran needs no commentary regarding tolerance and understanding others. Many verses in the Koran clearly state the existence of different religions is a law of God. The Koran states: “For each We have appointed a law and path; and if God had wished He would have made you one people. But He has made you as you are that He may put you to the test in what He has given you. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God you will all be brought back and He will then tell you about those things wherein you differed.”²⁷ The Koran always describes itself and the prophet Muhammad as “confirming” previous divine religions,²⁸ not abolishing them. Being a Muslim requires belief in all the earlier books and prophets. Nothing comparable to this rule can be found in other religions.²⁹

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- 5 Ibid., p.7.
- 6 Schimmel, A. (1975), *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, The University of North Caroline Press, Chapel Hill, p. 7.
- 7 For different meanings of the term see al-Qushairī, A. A. (1424/2003), *Al-Risala*, ed. Abd al-Halīm Mahmūd, Beirut: Dār al-Khayr, pp.426-432; Zarruk, pp.279-283.
- 8 Hucviri, A. (1982), *Keşfu'l-Mahcub*, ed. and tr. S. Uludağ, İstanbul: Dergah, pp. 284-394.
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- 11 Bruinessen, M. van (1992), *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structure of Kurdistan*, London: Zed Books, p.213.
- 12 Cf. Etwell-Sutton, L. (1983), “Sufism and Pseudo Sufism”, in D. Mac Eoin-A. al-Shahi (eds.), *Islam in the Modern World*, London: Croom Helm, p.51. See also Trimingham, J. S. (1971), *Sufi Orders in Islam*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, pp.24, 166.
- 13 Arbery, pp. 85, 89.
- 14 Cf. Al-Shahi, A. (1983), “Sufism in Modern Sudan”, in *Islam in the Modern World*, eds D. Mac Eoin-A. al-Shahi, London: Croom Helm, p.59; Trimingham, pp.1-30, 158 ff.
- 15 The dervishes occupied a position in the Muslim world analogous to that of the regular clergy in the Latin and Orthodox communities. See Davey, R. (1907), *The Sultan and His Subjects*, London: Chatto & Windus, p. 59.
- 16 Ahmad, A.S. (1999), *Islam Today. A Short Introduction to the Muslim World*, London: Tauris, p.49.
- 17 See Hucviri, A. (1982), *Keşfu'l-Mahcub*, ed. and tr. S. Uludağ, İstanbul: Dergah, p.194.
- 18 Mentioning the name of Allah.
- 19 According to Islam, Allah has ninety-nine names which contain a special quality.
- 20 That is, a saying/*hadīth* attributed to God although it was told by the Prophet.
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- 24 Idem, v.II, p.526 (couplet no. 1771).
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- 26 Chehata, C., “Ahl al-Dhimmā”, *EI* (new ed.), II, 231. See also Gibb and Bowen (1957), v.I, part II, pp.195-6.
- 27 *al-Qor'an al-Karīm*, Maida (V), 48.
- 28 See, for instance, *al-Qor'an al-Karīm*, Baqara (II), 91,97; Alu Imran (III), 3,50; An'am (VI), 92; etc.
- 29 Cfr Lings, M. (1975), *What is Sufism*, London: Allen & Unwin, p.23

ANNOUNCEMENT FOR STUDENTS DOING RESEARCH ON SIKHISM

Most of the literature on Sikhism in Punjabi, English and other languages is superficial, superfluous, contradictory and outright repudiation of Nanakian Philosophy (*Gurmat*) enshrined in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS), the only authentic source of Nanakian Philosophy. Such misinterpretations are found in books, professional and non-professional journals and all the translations of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib in Punjabi, English and other languages. The irony is that repeated lies about Sikhism under the cloak of academic research published by Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press and encyclopedias are taken as truth by the gullible Sikhs.

My recent analysis of the works of W. H. McLeod, Pashaura Singh, Harjot Oberoi and Doris Jakobsh has revealed that the McLeodian School is creating its own version of Sikhism like the Udasais and Nirmalas created their Brahmanical version of Sikhism. After a great deal of introspection and pondering over this problem with learned Sikhs we are announcing free help and guidance to students who are engaged in research on Sikhism. We urge Sikh students studying for undergraduate degrees to take courses on Sikhism. We will help them with their term papers and theses. As a start we urge scholars to consult www.sikhspectrum.com and www.globalsikhstudies.net for information on Sikhism based on Aad Guru Granth Sahib.

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