

Sufism and Islam

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Article

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Oh Lord!

Make me laud thee, extol thee, and praise thee in all my states

So that I rejoice not over what thou givest me of this world nor sorrow over that of it which thou withholdest from me!

Empty my heart for thy love,

Occupy it with remembering thee,

Animate it with fear of thee and quaking before thee,

Strengthen it with beseeching thee,

Incline it to thy obedience,

Set it running in the path most beloved to thee,

And subdue it through desire for what is with thee,

All the days of my life!

Let my provision in this world be reverential fear of thee,

My journey be toward thy mercy

And my entrance be into thy good pleasure!¹

NOTE: In this first set of lectures we shall deal with the meaning of Sufism and its substance. In the next set of lectures we shall deal with the history and the form.

Introduction

"Sufism and Islam cannot be separated in the same way that higher consciousness or awakening cannot be separated from Islam. Islam is not an historical phenomenon that began 1,400 years ago. It is the timeless art of awakening by means of submission. Sufism is the heart of Islam. It is as ancient as the rise of human consciousness."²

Many scholars and jurists may join issue with the above statement. They perceive Sufism as an unacceptable distortion of Islamic beliefs and way of life. They find the rituals and practices as well as the beliefs of many Sufis repugnant to the teachings of Islam. They argue that Sufism has brought about confusion in the minds of its believers leading them away from the simplicity and purity of the glorious faith.

Many Orientalists, on the other hand, do not accept that Sufism has a direct link with Islam and reject the idea that it has evolved from the consciousness inspired by the Qur'an or the teachings of Muhammad. They affirm that its origin is firmly embedded in the mysticism of the Jew and Christian hermits and

monks of the time and that their traditions not only inspired but also dictated the evolution of Sufism.

The historical links between the three major monotheistic faiths makes it inevitable for a measure of similarity in the spiritual experience in each of them and this commonality of experience is seen by many enlightened scholars as an important factor which might be constructively employed for engendering a better understanding between the three communities.

"If Judaism, Christianity and Islam have no little in Common in spite of their deep dogmatic differences," remarks the Editor of 'the Mysticism of Islam ' by R. A. Nicholson 1966 edition, "the spiritual content of that common element can best be appreciated in Jewish, Christian and Islamic mysticism, which bears equal testimony to that ever-deepening experience of the soul when the spiritual worshipper, whether he be follower of Moses or Jesus or Muhammad, turn whole- heartedly to God."

The hostility from within Islam is always countered by the argument that mysticism is founded not only on Qur'an but also the sayings of the Prophet and the Imams from his progeny. While it is conceded that the rituals and the practices of certain Sufi sects may seem to be offensive to the purity of the spirit of Islam, Sufism par excellence is the science of gnosis which like many other sciences has its roots in Islamic culture.

"This science can be studied from two angles, one of them being sociological and the other scientific. From scientific point of view the adepts in gnosis (Irfaan) are called Gnostics ('Arifs). From social point of view they are known as Sufis.

Anyhow, the Gnostics and Sufis are not an organized separate sect, nor do they claim to have formed any such cult. They are scattered over all Muslim sects.

But from social point of view they form a separate group and a separate body, having its characteristic ideas and special manners of life. They wear a particular type of dress and grow their hair in a particular style. They live in hospices etc. Thus the Sufis have to a certain extent become a separate sect from religious as well as social point of view.

Anyhow there have always been and there are still, especially among the Shiahs, Gnostics who are not apparently distinct from others, yet they are closely associated with gnosis and spiritual journey."³

The author clearly has in mind many Shiah mujtahids and scholars both of the past and the present who have, as Shia leaders, made major contribution to irfaan. The most notable amongst the recent ones are Ayatullah Khomeini, Ayatullah Khu'i, Allamah Muhammad Hussain Tabaataba'i and the author himself, Allamah Murtadha Mutahhari. None of these or any other mujtahid has ever established or encouraged the establishment of a separate organization or promoted any of the recognized Sufi rituals. They have always welcomed, and also contributed to, the development of gnosis as a science.

Ayatullah Khumaini, in his lectures on the opening chapter of Qur'an deals at length with the

misunderstanding regarding Sufism and concludes: "We find certain scholars denying the validity of mysticism. This is regrettable."⁴

In these lectures we shall confine ourselves to the "scientific" aspects of Sufism and make only such cursory references to the "social" aspects as may be relevant.

Basis of Sufism

"The function of religion is to bestow order upon human life and to establish an "outward" harmony upon whose basis man can return inwardly to his Origin by means of the journey towards the "interior" direction.

This universal function is especially true of Islam, this last religion of humanity, which is a Direct injunction to establish order in human society and within the human soul and at the same time to make possible the interior life, to prepare the soul to return unto its Lord and enter the Paradise which is none other than the Divine Beatitude. God is at once the First (al-awwal) and the Last (al-akhir), the Outward (al-zahir) and the Inward (al-batin).

By the function of His outwardness He creates a world of separation and otherness and through His inwardness He brings men back to their Origin. Religion is the means whereby this journey is made possible, and it recapitulates in its structure the creation itself which issues from God and returns unto Him."⁵ The Qur'an states:

"Lo! We are Allah's and lo! To Him is our return."(2:156)

The practical aspect of gnosis describes man's relation with the world and with Allah and explains the duties of the seeker if he wishes to attain unity with Allah. This part of gnosis is called the spiritual journey (saya wa sulook). It explains that man must attain total comprehension of monotheism and that to attain this he has to travel through various stages. This journey can be undertaken only under the supervision of a spiritual guide who has passed through all the stages of the journey.

The monotheism which a Gnostic seeks is not the monotheism which a philosopher would understand it to be. To a philosopher, unity or oneness of Allah means that there is only one Essential Being to the exclusion of any other. A Gnostic maintains that oneness of Allah means that Allah is the only really existing being. The existence of everything else is illusory. The spiritual journey is a journey of the human being as the illusory being to the stage where he may not see anything but Allah. This journey can only be undertaken if one has purified one's heart and one's soul through constant spiritual effort.

It is easy to confuse Sufism with Asceticism (Zuhd). Asceticism is the renunciation of the world for the sake of spiritual upliftment and the attainment of the hereafter. Gnosis may involve a measure of asceticism but the objective is to undertake the spiritual journey.

To prove validity of spiritual journey and gaining proximity to Allah, various verses from Qur'an are cited.

From the Holy Qur'an:

"Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star. (This lamp is) kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would almost glow forth (of itself) though no fire touched it. Light upon light. Allah guideth unto His light whom He will. And Allah speaketh to mankind in allegories, for Allah is Knower of all things". (24:35)

(This lamp is found) in houses which Allah hath allowed to be exalted and that His name shall be remembered therein. Therein do offer praise to Him at morn and evening. (24:36)

Men whom neither merchandise nor sale beguileth from remembrance of Allah and constancy in prayer and paying to the poor their due; who fear a day when hearts and eyeballs will be overturned (24:37)

That Allah may reward them with the best of what they did, and increase reward for them of His bounty. Allah giveth blessings without stint to whom He will. (24:38)

The Holy Qur'an refers to the appetitive soul (nafsul-ammarah), the admonishing soul (nafsul-lawamah) and the contented soul (nafsul-mutmainnah) and says in Sura Fajr (The Dawn):

"But ah! Thou soul at peace! Return unto thy Lord, content in His good pleasure! Enter thou among my bondmen! Enter thou My Garden!" (89:27-30)

And again in Surah Shams (The Sun):

"And a soul and Him Who perfected it and inspired it (with conscience of) what is wrong for it and (what is) right for it, he is indeed successful who causes it to grow. And he indeed is a failure who stunteth it."(91:7-10)

The Qur'an repeatedly exhorts mankind to strive for Allah's pleasure and in Surah Ankabut (The Spider):

"As for those who strive in us, we surely guide them to our paths, and lo! Allah is with the good." (29:69)

Also from the Qur'an:

"He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward; and He is the Knower of all things."(57:3)

From the Qur'an:

"We verily created man and we know what his soul whispereth to him and we are nearer to him than his jugular vein." (50: 16)

In addition to the Qur'anic references the Gnostics also rely upon several sayings and sermons of the Prophet Muhammad and the Holy Imams.

- a. The Holy Prophet has said: *"He who has known his self has known Allah."*
- b. The following two quotations from the compilation of sermons and sayings of Imam 'Ali (published as Nahjul Balagah) are also relevant.

*"There is no doubt that Allah the Almighty has made His remembrance the polish of the hearts. By means of it the deaf begin to hear, the blind begin to see and the arrogant become submissive. In every age and period Allah the Almighty has created men in whose minds He puts His secrets and through whose intellect he talks to them."*⁶

*"A godly person enlivens his heart and annihilates his ego till what is coarse becomes soft. A bright light like lightening shines in front of him shows him the way and helps him in advancing towards Allah. Many doors push him forward till he reaches the gate of peace and safety and arrives at the destination where he has to stay. His feet are firm and his body contented, for he uses his heart and pleases his Lord."*⁷

Evolution of Sufism

"In addition to its law and the esoteric aspect contained in sufism and gnosis, Shi'ism contained from the beginning a type of Divine Wisdom, inherited from the Prophet and the Imams, which became the basis for the hikmah or sophia that later developed extensively in the Muslim world and incorporated into its structure suitable elements of the Greco–Alexandrian, the Indian, and the Persian intellectual heritages."

Seyyid Hossein Nasr in the preface to Tabatabai's work entitled "SHIA" p. 15 published by Ansariyan Publications of Qum, Iran.

The early leaders of Islam, especially the Shia Imams and their close followers, led a highly spiritual life and expressed spiritual ideas in the context of Islam through supplications, lectures and other writings. They were not, however, mystics or Sufis as those terms later came to be understood. During the first century of the Islamic era there did not exist any group known as Gnostics or Sufis. Those who led spiritual life did so out of unbounded piety. Having traversed through comprehension of the formal and philosophical aspects of the faith they sought to unveil the Truth through intellectual reasoning. They neither renounced the world nor assumed any formal identity. Their teachings often attracted adherents from the Sunni schools of thought with the result that it is not uncommon to-day to find sufi groups aligned with the Sunni school and yet acknowledging Shiah leaders as their spiritual masters. Notable among such groups is the Naqshbandi order.

Historians are in general agreement that the growth and spread of piety and spirituality amongst the early Muslims was the result of the tyranny of the rulers who had seized the helm of the empire after the death of Imam 'Ali in 40 Hijrah.

This they were able to do with such gross impunity because following the death of the Prophet, 'Ali had been denied succession. This is perhaps an over simplification to some extent as it implies that had the people accepted 'Ali as the rightful successor there would not have been such extensive rise of spirituality. The fact is that, as discussed earlier, gnosis is central to Islam. The Qur'an as well as the Prophet encouraged intellectual reasoning.

"Say (unto them, O Muhammad): I exhort you unto one thing only: That ye awake, for Allah's sake, and then reflect." (34:46)

"Lo! In the creation of the heavens and the earth and (in) the difference of night day and day are tokens (of His sovereignty) for men of understanding." (3: 190)

"Such as remember Allah, standing, sitting, and reclining, and consider the creation of the heavens and the earth, (and instinctively cry out): Our Lord! Thou created not this in vain! Glory be to Thee! Preserve us from the doom of Fire." (3: 191)

The Prophet said:

True worship does not lie in engaging oneself constantly in supererogatory prayers or in fasting copiously, but in contemplation of the creation (and seeking to know the Creator through His works).

Amongst the close companions of the Prophet there were those, like Abu Dharr Ghaffari, Miqdad, Salman the Persian and a few others, who became staunch followers of Imam 'Ali and spread his teachings of gnosis. If 'Ali had been allowed to succeed the Prophet it is very likely that gnosis would have grown as an integral part of Islamic faith without any mantle of additional rituals. Because this did not happen and the regime was often inimical and at time violently hostile to those who practised or preached spirituality, gnosis assumed a distinct and separate form.

Al-Kindi (died 10th century A.D.) reports the appearance of a small community of Muslims in Alexandria in the ninth century (=2nd century of Islamic calendar) who enjoined good and preached against evil. They were called Sufis. It is also said that Abu Hashim of Kufa in Iraq (died 767 A.D.) was the first man to be called by this name. He lived in the second century of Islamic calendar. He is reputed to have founded the first Sufi monastery (khaanqah) at Ramlah in Palestine for the exclusive use of a group of ascetics and worshippers. In Northern Africa the Sufi monasteries are known as tekkes.

Historians differ on the origin of the word "Sufi" though many believe that it is derived from suf, the coarse woollen garment worn by the Sufis.

With the formalization of Sufi orders, the Sufis tended to assign highly esoteric meanings to certain

Islamic terms of common usage. For example the term shariah which ordinarily means the jurisprudence, to a Sufi it means the inner side of the Islamic law which leads to the spiritual path (the tariqah) leading to Truth.

From the point of view of the Islamic jurists, the Islamic teachings are divided into three parts:

- (i) The articles of faith,
- (ii) The ethics and
- (iii) The rules of law.

As far as the articles of faith are concerned, the Sufis do not consider the mere intellectual belief to be enough. They hold that it is necessary to ponder over the truths of these articles to remove the veil between the believer and the truths. Similarly the Sufis do not consider the limited range of good morals to be enough. They believe in undertaking spiritual journey which has its own special characteristic. With regard to the rules of law, on the whole the Sufis accept them although in certain Sufi orders they have been altered or ignored.

As time passed many Sufi orders came into existence, each with its own tariqah, its own "guide" or "master" and its own form of expression of spirituality. In this development they were influenced not only by the Christian mystics but also by the Hindus, the Jews, the Persians with their heritage of spirituality as well as the Greek thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle and the Neo-Platonists introduced to the Arabs through Mamun Rashid's famous academy Bait al Hikmah, the House of Wisdom. Many orders, influenced no doubt by the Christian mystics, renounced the world believing such renunciation to be a great act of piety and began to live life of poverty.

They were subjected to criticisms by the jurists, both from the Sunni and the Shia schools. In some cases, the Sunni regimes persecuted, imprisoned and even executed some leading Sufis. The chasm between the theologians and the Sufi masters began to widen and with certain theologians the Sufis today are on the other side of the spiritual divide beyond the pale of Islam.

The Shia scholars and jurists, on the other hand, while not condoning the beliefs, practices and the rituals of the Sufis which they perceived to be anti-Islamic, have as we have seen, found a common ground in the Sufi spirituality.

It is not proposed in these lectures to deal with how a seeker undertakes the spiritual journey or the various stages or "worlds" through which he must pass. Suffice it to say that a seeker would first find a master or guide who would take him through the spiritual journey. Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri, himself a renowned Sufi master of the Shia faith notes in his recent book "The Elements of Sufism"[8](#)

The outer practices of the Sufis include varying amounts of prayers, invocations, recitations and supplications. We often find that not only the local ecology and physical environment had a lot to do with

the type of Sufi practices which predominated in a certain area, but also the culture, class and socio-economic conditions of the group which played the most prominent role in these practices. We find that some Sufi orders became almost exclusively for the well-off and the influential in the society. For example the Tijani Order in North Africa seems to have attracted those who were politically powerful while the Darqawi order has been predominantly followed by the poor.

A Few Gnostic Quotations

My God, were it not incumbent to accept Thy command, I would declare Thee far too exalted for me to remember Thee, for I remember Thee in my measure, not in Thy measure, and my scope can hardly reach the point where I may be a locus for calling Thee Holy! Among Thy greatest favours to us is the running of Thy remembrance across our tongues and Thy permission to us to supplicate Thee, declare Thee exalted, and call Thee holy!

My God, love-made hearts are enraptured by thee, disparate intellects are brought together by knowing Thee, hearts find no serenity except in remembering Thee, souls find no rest except in seeing Thee. Thou art glorified in every place, the worshipped at every time, the found at every moment, the called by every tongue, the magnified in every heart! I pray forgiveness from Thee for every pleasure but remembering Thee, every ease but intimacy with Thee, every happiness but nearness to Thee, every occupation but obeying Thee!

My God, Thou hast said—and Thy word is true—O you who have faith! Remember God with much remembrance and glorify Him at dawn and in the evening! Thou hast said—and Thy word is true—Remember me, and I will remember you. Thou hast commanded us to remember Thee, and promised us that Thou wilt remember us thereby, in order to ennoble, respect, and honour us.

Here we are, remembering Thee as Thou hast commanded us! So accomplish what Thou hast promised, O Rememberer of the rememberers! O most Merciful of the merciful![9](#)

Imam 'Ali has said:

"Allah! I do not worship you because I am afraid of Your Hell or because I hope for Your Paradise. I worship you because I have found you worthy of being worshipped."

Ibn Sina, the renowned scientist, mathematician, astronomer and mystic, known in the West as Avicenna (Died 1037 AD) says:

"The Gnostic seeks Allah alone. He is not concerned with anything else. In his eyes there is nothing more important and more valuable than gnosis. He worships Allah because worship is due to Him and because it is an appropriate and decent way of expressing man's relation to Him. The worship of the Gnostic is free from any element of fear or hope of reward."

Rabia Al-Adawiya (died 801 AD) a woman saint of Basra, was the greatest God-intoxicated mystic of the speculative period of Sufism. She was an ascetic in the real sense. She detached herself from the phenomenal world and desired nothing but God.

Once she was asked by a rich person what she would like of the earthly gifts. She replied:

"I am ashamed to ask of the thing of this world from Allah to whom this world belongs. How can I ask for it from those to whom it does not belong."

Rabia taught to love God for God's sake. In one of her supplications, she says:

"O my God! If I worship Thee on account of the fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship Thee with the hope of Paradise, exclude me from it, but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty."

When asked regarding her desire for the Paradise, Rabia replied:

"Is it not enough for me that I am given leave to worship Him? He is worthy of worship without motive."

In one of her poems she says:

O beloved of hearts, I have none like you,

So have pity this day on the sinner who comes to you.

O my Hope and my Rest and my Delight,

The heart can love none other than you.

Another great Sufi lady was Sayyida Nafisah, the great grand-daughter of the second Imam of the Shias. She was renowned for her piety, asceticism, night vigils and prayers. Many a learned sought her company to discuss spiritual matters. When she died in 824 AD, her husband, the son of the sixth Imam, wanted to take her body back to Medina to bury her there. However, the villagers begged that she be buried in the village where she had died. The village has today become a popular place of pilgrimage for supplicants both Sunni and Shias.

Mansur Al-Hallaj was a famous Sufi of the 10th Century. He was executed in 922 AD for having stated: "Ana'l Haqq" which means "I am the Truth".

Mawlana Jalal'ud-din Rumi was born in Balkh in the present day Afghanistan in 1207. He is a famous Sufi poet whose works have been translated in several languages. The following extract from his poem is most interesting.

Cross and Christians, from end to end,

I surveyed; He was not on the Cross.

I went to the idol-temple, to the ancient pagoda;

No trace was visible there.

I went to the mountains of Herat and Candahor. [10](#)

I looked, He was not in that hill and dale.

With set purpose I fared to the summit of Mount Qaf

In that place was only Anqa's inhabitation.

I bent the reins of search to the Ka'ba;

He was not in that resort of Old and Young.

I questioned Ibn Sina of His State;

He was not within Ibn Sina's range.

I fared towards the scene of two bow-lengths distance,

He was not in that exalted court

I gazed into my heart;

There I saw Him; He was nowhere else.

Contributed by Br. Maqbul Hussein Rahim, 100530.1344@compuserve.com [2]

[1.](#) The Psalms of Islam As-Sahifa As-Sajjadiyyah, translation by William C. Chittick of the supplications of Imaam Zain-ul-Aabideen published by Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland ISBN 0-946079-51-X, supplication 21, page 78. Available also on line at: <http://www.al-islam.org/sahifa-as-sajjadiyyah-imam-ali-zayn-al-abidin> [3]

[2.](#) The Elements of Sufism by Shaikh Fadhlalla Haeri, published by Element Books Ltd. ISBN 1-85230-159-7.

[3.](#) Science of Gnosis by Allama Murtadha Mutahhari originally published as an article, now as a book-let with other articles on Gnosis under the title "Light within Me". An Islamic Seminary publication from Pakistan. KISP 3-1-91.

[4.](#) Islam & Revolution, Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini, Mizan Press, ISBN 0-933782-04-7, pages 419 to 423.

[5.](#) Islamic Life and Thought by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, page 192. Published by George Allen & Unwin 1981. ISBN 0-04-297041-5.

[6.](#) Nahjul Balagah, Sermon 220.

[7.](#) Nahjul Balagah, Sermon 218.

[8.](#) page 44

[9.](#) Psalms of Islam, Supplication 81

[10.](#) Herat and Candahor are places in Afghanistan. Mt. Qaf is the mythical residence of Simrugh, who is identical with God in certain mystical literature. Ibn Sina is recognized as a great intellectual and the poet uses his name synonymously with human intellect. Distance of two bows length is referred to in the Qur'an as the distance at which the Prophet stood from

the Throne of Command on the Night of Ascension.

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