

Sufism: The Mystical Side of Islam

And they say: "None shall enter Paradise unless He be a Jew or a Christian. Those are their desires." Say: "Produce your proof if ye are truthful." Sura 2:111

William VanDoodewaard, *Sufism: The Mystical Side of Islam*, unpublished article, The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada: 1996

During the eighth and ninth centuries A.D., a new emphasis began to develop within the religion of Islam. This emphasis was a reaction against the prevailing impersonal and formal nature of Islam. For many Muslims the shari‘a, while seen as necessary, failed to satisfy their deepest spiritual longings and desires. The search for deeper meaning began with a pietistic asceticism, which in turn led to the development of the popular mystical side of Islam - known as tasawwuf or Sufism.

The controversial nature of the subject of Sufism becomes evident when one realizes that this short introduction already reveals a viewpoint which the Sufi would strongly disagree with. For, if the Sufi spiritual quest is to be viewed as legitimate, even within Islam itself, it must be rooted in the Quran and the sunna of Muhammad. Andrew Rippin, in his work *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, states that “Sufis.. in their search for legitimation of their spiritual quest [must show] whether Islam as a religion contained within it a spiritual-ascetic tendency from the very beginning.”¹

In defense of Sufi legitimacy, some Muslims argue that it was simply a response to the growing materialism in the Islamic world.² However, this argument skirts the basic reason for Sufism, as during early Islamic times under Muhammad’s leadership, wealth was enjoyed and served as a great motivation for the military expansion of Islam. Muslims, at the time, followed a legal system allowing unbridled materialism, though they were fully observant of the present religious doctrine. The formal and legal nature of the Islamic system never addressed the issue of materialism, and as a result was seen as inadequate by those who became Sufis in their search for deeper spirituality. Consequentially, Islam was to all appearances a religion of a decidedly unspiritual nature.

To admit this would be devastating to the religion of Islam. Yet, if Islam is to be defended as a spiritually adequate, Sufi doctrine and practice must be proven to be inherently Islamic in nature, as “to suggest that Islamic mysticism is, in fact, a borrowing from outside raises the spectre of denial of the intrinsically spiritual nature of Islam and thence the spiritual nature of Muslims themselves.”³

Thus we are left with several controversial, yet critically important questions. First, was Sufism present from the very beginnings of Islam, in the life of Muhammad and the Quran? Secondly, has Sufism borrowed from the outside -

Reference Notes:

¹Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 118.

²[see Appendix A](#) - Sufism: An Interview with Imam Mohamad M. Algalaleni.

³Rippin, 118..

⁴Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966), 131..

⁵Rahman, 131..

⁶Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1972), 11-12..

⁷Nasr, 12..

⁸Tara Charan Rastogi, *Islamic Mysticism - Sufism* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., 1982), 1..

⁹Titus Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufism* (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1990), 15..

¹⁰Rippin, 119..

from other religions? And finally, how does the evidence for the answers to these questions reflect on the nature of Islam itself?

Sufism has influenced many Muslims, and is, especially in the West, portrayed and regarded as a valuable and legitimate part of the Islamic faith. Fazlur Rahman, in his work *Islam*, says that “considerable ink has been spent by modern scholarship on the ‘origins’ of Sufism in Islam, as to how far it is ‘genuinely’ Islamic and how far a product, in the face of Islam, of outside influences, particularly Christian and Gnostic.”⁴ Rahman seems to hint that some of this ink has been wasted, as he concludes that “outside influences must have played an accessory role and these no one may deny, but they must have supervened upon an initial native tendency.” However, aside from a vague reference to the ideas of trust in and love of Allah as being a result of “developments within the intellectual and spiritual life of the community,”⁵ Rahman fails to clarify or give any support to his claim that the essential and central basis of Sufism is Islamic.

Another Muslim scholar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in his work *Sufi Essays*, expresses his disdain of “[scholars of Islam in the West] following the older practice of explaining Sufism away as some kind of alien influence within Islam,” and rejoices with the fact that “many are now willing to accept the Islamic origin of Sufism and the unbreakable link connecting Sufism to Islam.”⁶ While these are responses to the questions initially posed, they seem to be more concerned with the maintenance of the outward appearance of Islamic unity, than with critical academic research and appraisal.

Not only do these statements seem one-sided from a scholarly standpoint, but they also run counter to what Nasr terms “indigenous puritanical movements of a rationalist and anti-mystical kind”⁷ found within Islam. As one author succinctly states, the fact remains that within Islam, Sufism is often “frowned upon by Muslim orthodoxy, yet quite amazingly fawned upon and romantically fondled by Muslim masses.”⁸

In response to critics, Sufis argue that tasawwuf has been present from the very beginnings of Islam, and profess to find evidence for their claims in the sunna and the Quran. On this basis they state that tasawwuf “is the esoteric or inward (batin) aspect of Islam.”⁹

According to Sufi doctrine a number of verses in the Quran provide clear support for their mysticism. Perhaps the most often quoted as a proof is Surah 24:35, “*Allah is the Light of Heaven and Earth! His light may be compared to a niche in which there is a lamp; the lamp is in a glass; the glass is just as if it were a glittering star kindled from a blessed olive tree, {which is} neither Eastern nor Western, whose oil will almost glow though the fire has never touched it. Light upon light, Allah guides anyone He wishes to His light.*”¹⁰ Another verse, often chanted in Sufi gatherings, and which the Sufis claim sums up the whole of Sufism is Surah 2:156, “*Verily we are for Allah, and verily unto*

¹¹In Arabic “*Inna li’Llahi wa-inna ilayhi raji ‘un.*” Martin Lings, *What Is Sufism?* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1975), 28..

¹²Lings, 32..

¹³Haqiqa refers to the ‘inner Truth’ or ‘inner Reality’ that Sufis believe is at the heart of Islamic revelation. William Stoddart, *Sufism - The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1986), 41..

¹⁴Eisegesis, or the practice of interpreting meaning into a passage, bears a striking resemblance to Sufi methods of Quranic interpretation. Orthodox Muslims opposed to Sufism argue that Sufi interpretations are indeed eisegesis - in other words the Sufis are ascribing an ‘inner’ meaning which the verses themselves do not contain. See also note 17 for further comment on Sufi self-legitimatization..

¹⁵Rippin, 119..

¹⁶Rippin, 120..

¹⁷Fazlur Rahman in his work *Islam* states, “the Sufis, in order to justify their stand, formulated (ie. verbally invented) statements, sometimes

Him we are returning."¹¹ A third often used verse is Surah 50:6, "*We (Allah) are nearer to him (man) than his jugular vein.*"¹² The Sufis believe that Muhammad has said that every verse of the Quran has 'an outside and an inside' - a belief clearly in line with their quest for the haqiqa.¹³ However, the very method of Quranic interpretation used by the Sufis in order to support their claims, can arguably be seen as a reliance on eisegesis rather than exegesis.¹⁴

Many of the traditions about the life of Muhammad which are often referred to by Sufis are not found in the major hadith collections (Bukhari, Muslim, Kulayni, Ibn Babuya), having been rejected by the collectors as unsound.¹⁵ However, within Sufi spheres the traditions are maintained - and viewed by Sufis as giving full legitimacy to the Sufi way of Islam. Yet, as Andrew Rippin suggests, "[this] simply indicates that they [Sufis] have, like all other Muslims, always gone back to the prime sources of Islam for inspiration as well as justification of their position."¹⁶ The ulama regarding the shari'a as the organizing principle in the life of the Islamic community, as the revealed way - guaranteed by Allah; have and continue to largely oppose Sufism.¹⁷ As one scholar has stated, "[opponents] have never been wanting; [Sufis'] beliefs have been refuted, their practices condemned, their dervishes ridiculed and occasionally executed, and their shaikhs castigated."¹⁸ Thus the question remains whether the Quran and sunna were used for justification or inspiration, an area requiring extensive research which does not yet seem to have been undertaken.

As there is clearly no consensus on Sufi legitimacy as derived from the Quran and hadith, and as an adequate answer will require much more detailed study, it is presently impossible "for modern historians to take 'objective' facts from this type of material."¹⁹ By the same token, Muslims cannot objectively argue Sufi origins from the Quran and hadith. Thus we are brought to the question of whether Sufism has borrowed from the outside - from other religions.

Titus Burckhardt, an Islamic scholar highly commended by Seyyed Hossein Nasr for his "truly authentic expositions of Sufism emanating from genuine teachings,"²⁰ objects, arguing in line with Sufi doctrine that "there is no adequate reason for doubting the historical authenticity of the spiritual 'descent' of the Sufi masters... in an unbroken chain back to the Prophet himself."²¹ While Burckhardt chides orientalist for "being anxious to bring everything down to the historical level... and attributing the origins of Sufism to Persian, Hindu, Neoplatonic, or Christian sources,"²² the alternative he proposes is, as previously shown, simply inadequate from an objective and academic perspective.

In comparison to Nasr and Burckhardt, some Islamic scholars, such as Fazlur Rahman, take a more discriminate approach, admitting that popular Sufi preachers "exerted a powerful influence on the masses by enlarging Quranic stories with the aid of materials borrowed from all kinds of sources, Christian,

quite fanciful and historically completely fictitious, which they attributed to the Prophet." Rahman, 134..

¹⁸J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971), 246..

¹⁹Rippin, 120..

²⁰Nasr, 15..

²¹Burckhardt, 16..

²²Burckhardt, 16..

²³Rahman, 132..

²⁴Rahman, 133..

²⁵Rahman, 140. Other authors also agree with Rahman's position on this point. A.J. Arberry argues that Abu Hamid al-Ghazali brought about Sufism's reconciliation and assimilation with orthodox Sunni theology and religious law, through a number of writings consolidated in the *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, which was written between 1099 and 1102 A.D. A.J. Arberry, *Sufism - An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1950), 74. .

²⁶Rahman, 148..

²⁷Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240 A.D.) was one of the great Sufi

Jewish, Gnostic, and even Bhuddist and Zoroastrian.”²³ Rahman even goes so far as to state that “a number of [foreign] ideas were introduced into Sufism and thence into popular Islam.”²⁴ However, rather than rejecting Sufism as essentially un-Islamic, he argues that Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111) was the great reformer of Sufism, “purifying it of un-Islamic elements and putting it at the service of orthodox religion.”²⁵ Rahman recognizes that Ibn al-‘Arabi’s (d.1240) later and influential formulation of Sufi epistemology was absolutely unorthodox in its monism and pantheism, but seems to attempt to negate this by giving an immense list of Sufi and other Muslim thinkers who rejected portions of, or all of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s epistemology.²⁶ ²⁷ Rahman concludes his chapter on Sufi doctrine with the declaration that,

“[the synthesis of Sufism and orthodoxy] provides us with a shining example of the fundamentally catholic genius of Islam - a panorama of continued tensions and challenges and of equally persistent efforts to resolve these tensions and meet these challenges in a process of modification, adaptation and absorption.”²⁸

While Rahman’s literary skills are clearly evident, his critical appraisal of Sufism essentially ends at al-Ghazali, subsequently revealing the tendency to act as an apologist by avoiding any further mention of un-Islamic elements in Sufism, focusing instead on the ‘catholic genius of Islam’.

A thorough and critical examination of historical and present day Sufism, quickly reveals the influence of numerous religious ideas foreign to Islam. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who so vehemently argues against the idea that Sufism is based on religious practice and doctrine inherently alien to Islam, does admit that in his opinion, Zoroastrianism “had more intimate contact with Islam than did Manichaeism.”²⁹ Nasr states that in Persia “Zoroastrianism provided first of all a vocabulary for Sufi poets like Hafiz who often speak of the ‘fire-temple’, the Zoroastrian priest, etc., as symbols of the Sufi center (khaniqah or zawiyah), the spiritual master and so on.”³⁰ Nasr also states that “Zoroastrian angeology and cosmology were also resuscitated by Shibab al-Din Suhrawardi, the founder of the [Sufi] school of Illumination or Ishraq, who made these symbols transparent in the light of Islamic gnosis.”³¹ Though these assertions have a solid scholarly basis, they fly in the face of Nasr’s earlier attempts to declare Sufism a legitimate and original development of Islam. Nasr appears to realize the quandary he has placed himself in, attempting to resolve the dilemma with the declaration that “this manner of speaking, however, does not at all imply an historical influence of Zoroastrianism upon Sufism.”³² Most scholars would be perplexed by this rather illogical conclusion, especially when it is considered that Zoroastrianism as a religion predated Islam by over 1000 years.

The further one delves into Sufism from an academic perspective, the more clear it becomes that both the origins and content of Sufism clearly show the inclusion of religious ideas and influences contrary and contradictory to orthodox Islam.

masters of all time and is referred to as ‘The Greatest Shaikh’ (al-Shaykh al-Akbar). Muslim opinion has always been split about Ibn al-‘Arabi: for some he is a great heretic; for others, a great saint. Ian Richard Netton, A Popular Dictionary of Islam (London: Curzon Press, 1992), 110..

²⁸Rahman, 149..

²⁹Nasr, 137..

³⁰Nasr, 138..

³¹Nasr, 138..

³²Nasr, 138..

³³Elliot Miller, “Sufis - The Mystical Muslims,” Forward (Spring/Summer 1986), 17-23..

³⁴Martin Lings, What is Sufism? (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1975), 99..

³⁵Dara Shikoh (also spelled Shukuh) was a Sufi of the Qadiriyyah order and a devout Muslim - according to Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Shukuh believed the Upanishads to be the ‘Hidden Books’ to which the Quran refers (Ivi. 77-80) and wrote that “they contain the essence of unity and they are secrets which have to be kept hidden.” Nasr states that “it is enough to read Shukuh’s translation of any of the Upanishads to

The scholar Elliot Miller states that “[being] based on experience rather than doctrine, Sufism has always been more open to outside influence than other forms of Islam... in addition to early influences from Christianity, one can find elements of Zoroastrianism, Neoplatonism, Hinduism, and other diverse traditions.”³³

Martin Lings, himself a practicing Sufi, in his work *What is Sufism?*, states that “Prince Dara Shikoh (d.1619), the Sufi son of the Mogul Emperor Shah Jahan, was able to affirm that Sufism and Advaita Vedantism [Hinduism] are essentially the same, with a surface difference of terminology.”³⁴ Prince Dara Shikoh was also responsible for the translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *Yoga Vasishtha*, and the *Upanishads* into Persian.³⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr acknowledges that “many Sufis in India called Hinduism the religion of Adam,” and, “[the] orthodox Naqshbandi saint Mirza Mazhar Jan Janan considered the Vedas as divinely inspired.”³⁶

While Sufi teachings have been influenced by various religions, their practices also bear close similarities to those of Hinduism and other mystical religions of the East. The Sufi orders are led by shaikhs, who play the same role as Hindu gurus. Some of the shaikhs were described as having “pronounced psychic powers.”³⁷ The master-disciple relationship was seen as an essential facet of Sufism by the reformer al-Ghazali who stated,

the murid [disciple] must of necessity have recourse to a shaikh [master] to guide him aright. For the way of faith is obscure, but the Devil’s ways are many and patent, and he who has no shaikh to guide him will be led by the Devil into his ways. Wherefore the murid must cling to his shaikh as a blind man on the edge of a river clings to his leader, confiding himself to him entirely, opposing him in no matter whatsoever, and binding himself to follow him absolutely. Let him know that the advantage he gains from the error of his shaikh, if he should err, is greater than the advantage of his own rightness, if he should be right.³⁸

Most Sufi orders still consider the five pillars of Islam to be essential, and practice them piously. However, under the leadership of the shaikh they go far beyond this, aiming “to break the conditioned patterns of behaviour which inhibit the desired spiritual awakening.”³⁹

The mystical quest is pursued through a number of mental and physical exercises. These include whirling dances “intended above all to plunge the dancer into a state of concentration upon Allah.”⁴⁰ Martin Lings states that “the body stands for the Axis of the Universe which is none other than the Tree of Life. The dance is thus a rite of centralization, a foretaste of the lost Centre...”⁴¹ A Moroccan Sufi order reduces the dance to a rigorous “rhythmic up and down movement of the body,” combined with “a rhythmic rise and fall of the breast as the lungs are filled and emptied.”⁴² As a result the Sufi may “see visions, hear

realize that he was not only translating words into Persian but also ideas into the framework of Sufism.” However, as usual Nasr follows up with a statement denying that this is “an attempt to syncretize,” once again revealing a blatant disregard for the evidence presented, not to mention a complete lack of logical thought. Nasr, 141..

³⁶Nasr, 139..

³⁷Miller, 19..

³⁸Miller, 19..

³⁹Miller, 20..

⁴⁰Lings, 85..

⁴¹The members of one popular order (the Mawlawiyya) begun by Jalal ad-Din Rumi (d. 1273) are the origin of the Western term ‘whirling dervishes’. Lings, 84..

⁴²Lings, 85..

⁴³Miller, 21..

⁴⁴Miller, 21..

⁴⁵Stoddart, 66..

⁴⁶Stoddart, 67..

⁴⁷Netton, 214..

⁴⁸John Alden Williams, ed., *Islam* (New York: George Brazillier, 1962), 155-156..

the voices of angels and prophets, and gain from them guidance... it is a condition of joy and longing, and when the condition seizes the seeker he falls into ecstasy.”⁴³ Breathing exercises are also combined with meditation in order to induce altered states of consciousness.⁴⁴

Central to all of these practices are ritual “invocations of the Divine Name,” also known as dhikr, which can be done either silently or in a chant.⁴⁵ Here similarities with Hindu mantras are unmistakable. One author declares, “the Sufi doctrine of the dhikr coincides with that taught by the nineteenth-century Hindu saint Rama-krishna, who succinctly summed it up in the phrase: ‘God and His Name are one.’”⁴⁶

The Rifa‘iyya, a major Sufi order which spawned numerous sub-groups and associated branches, was named after Ahmad b. ‘Ali al-Rifa‘i (d. 1182). The practices of this order reveal the extremes to which some Sufi rituals went as the Rifa‘i dervishes “became famous for their extreme practices like eating live snakes and performing various feats with fire.”⁴⁷ This preoccupation with snakes and fire is clearly paralleled in the practices and rituals of Hinduism.

In response to Sufi rituals, John Alden Williams states that “the observer may encounter things which seem to belong in a case book of abnormal psychology; or witness what looks remarkably like demonic possession.”⁴⁸ Elliot Miller says, “the natural (and, from the Christian perspective, God-given) mental barriers to psychic intrusion are broken down, and a link is established to the spirit world.”⁴⁹

The evidence of Sufi borrowings from other religions such as Hinduism and Zoroastrianism is certain. The similarities in teachings and ritual are overwhelming. It is no surprise then that the goals of Sufism reflect the pantheism and monism of Hinduism and other Eastern religions.

Idries Shah, a famed twentieth-century Sufi thinker, states that Sufi practice in the mystic quest culminates when “by divine illumination man sees the world to be illusion.”⁵⁰ Numerous other Sufi saints also clearly reflect monistic and pantheistic beliefs in their sayings:

Mansur al-Hallaj (d.922): “I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart. I said: Who art Thou? He answered: Thou.”

Abu Maydan (d. 1197): “Everything outside of God is unreal, everything taken individually or collectively, when you truly know it... Whatever does not have root in his Being, can in no wise be real.”

Muhammad al-Harraq (d. 1845): “Seekest thou Laila [Divine Reality], when she is manifest within thee? Thou deemest her to be other, but she is not other than thou.”⁵¹

⁴⁹Miller, 21..

⁵⁰Idries Shah, Reflections - Fables in the Sufi Tradition (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), 1.; Miller, 20..

⁵¹Stoddart, 83-84..

⁵²Nasr, 149..

⁵³Stoddart, 74..

⁵⁴Nasr, 147..

⁵⁵Nasr, 147.

Jalal al-Din Rumi (d.1273): "Though the many ways [diverse religions] are various, the goal is one. Do you not see there are many roads to the Kaaba?"⁵²

In some Sufi orders the goal of the mystical quest is "personified as a woman, usually named Laila which means 'night'... this is the holiest and most secret inwardness of Allah... in this symbolism Laila and haqiqa (Divine Reality) are one."⁵³ This, and the above statements appear to be distinctly contrary to Muslim orthodoxy in their blatant echoes of Eastern mystic religions. Yet, for Sufis this is not a problem. As Ibn 'Arabi stated,

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christians, and a temple for idols and the pilgrims Ka'ba and the tables of the Torah, and the book of the Koran. I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and faith..⁵⁴

Another Sufi saint, Mahmud Shabistari, in his work *Gulshan-i Raz* (The Mystic Rose Garden) concurs, declaring, "...what is mosque, what is synagogue, what is fire temple? ... 'I' and 'You' are the Hades veil between them.. When this veil is lifted up from before you, there remains not the bond of sects and creeds."⁵⁵

Thus, not only has Sufism been influenced by other religions, but its mystic quest for spirituality has led it to embrace all sorts of religion, as abundantly shown in the writings of the great Sufi saints. To try to deny this as a scholar is incomprehensible. Yet, those scholars who are sympathetic towards Islam, as previously shown, have a marked tendency to minimize or altogether ignore these facts.

How then, in conclusion, does the evidence presented, reflect not only on the nature of Sufism, but on the very nature of Islam itself?

Sufism is clearly a reaction or response to what was lacking in early Islam. The argument for Muslim materialism lends support to the concept of a spiritual void in Islam - keenly felt by many Muslims as their civilization began to expand and come into contact with other religions. There was a hunger for more spirituality, along with the realization that despite all of the shari'a Islam did not effectively deal with the problems of materialism.

The very strength of Islam, in its reliance on a simple creed and the five pillars of practice, proved to be the very weakness of Islam. While the Islamic system had allowed for rapid expansion, and the five practices were a uniting force, it soon became evident that one could accept this framework and step right through it into whatever they pleased. In the early days this meant earthly success, as Islam spread rapidly through the desire for wealth and gain. Yet, just as those caught up in materialism had accepted and stepped through the framework of the shari'a, all the while continuing in their materialistic lives, so also the Sufis in reaction to the materialism of the Islamic civilization, stepped

through the framework of legality into a world of mysticism. However, in their reaction, the Sufis created a more serious problem for Islam, as due to their religiosity, they introduced new teachings, reinterpreting the Quran and sunna.

Another area of weakness in Islam, which helped lead to the problem of Sufism, is found in the teachings of Muhammad. Here the vagueness of character caused by the doctrine of the indescribability of Allah allowed for the influence and development of pantheistic and monistic ideas, in essence creating a contradictory belief system. The orthodox ulama developed their theology in line with what they viewed as their 'Judeo-Christian' roots, while the Sufis were largely influenced by Eastern mystics. Consequently, the influences of Hinduism, and other forms of mystical religions on the development of Sufism, can be seen, in part, as a result of the doctrine of the indescribability of Allah.

Sufism does contribute a lacking spirituality to the religion of Islam. Growing out of the weakness of the Islamic system of belief and practice, it, however, added a dimension which has diversified and further weakened the structure of Islamic belief and practice.

Reflecting on the evidence presented, and conclusions given, we see that to assume Sufism, with its radical concepts, is a legitimate part of Islam introduces definite problems for anyone who then attempts to try to defend Islam as a logically coherent set of beliefs. For Sufism not only points to a lack of spirituality in Islam, but also contradicts orthodox Muslim teachings - in the process clearly opening the door to all the world's religions.

Appendix A

Sufism: An Interview with Imam Mohamad M. Algalaleni

Imam Mohamad M. Algalaleni, is the leader of the London Mosque, and has lived in Canada for five years. A Syrian by birth, the Imam studied the Quran, Islamic theology, and law, for twelve years in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Imam Mohamad M. Algalaleni's grandfather was a Sufi leader. These questions were put to him as part of the initial research towards this paper in Islamic studies at The University of Western Ontario. The purpose of the interview was to gain an understanding of the present day view of Sunni Muslim clerics towards Sufism, as well as to attempt to discern the influences of Sufism upon North American Muslims. The interview took place on March 19, 1996.

1. Was Sufism present from the very beginnings of Islam, in the life of Muhammad and in the Quran?

In regards to the history of Sufism, the Holy Quran and the sunna of the Prophet don't actually mention this word. However, the main idea behind Sufism was in the Holy Quran and the sunna. In other words, Allah urged the Muslims to purify themselves from diseases and from evil in general, and this is the main

purpose, in my opinion, behind Sufism. But, this title, this word [Sufism or tasawwuf], isn't found at all in the Quran or the sunna. This title actually came into being some 200 years later.

2. One author of a book on Sufism states that Sufism is presently “frowned upon by Muslim orthodoxy.” Other scholars, such as Fazlur Rahman, argue that Sufism contained many un-Islamic influences, but that these were corrected by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, who purified Sufism and made it a legitimate part of Islam. Which do you feel is correct, and why?

I think the reason behind Sufism was the materialism which the Muslim society faced at the time, as the Muslim society had become more and more widespread and wealthy. Materialism infected the hearts of many Muslims, and then those [Sufi] scholars came forward with the call to “go back to your God, purify yourself, go back to the reality of Islam.” They told the people not to be influenced by materialism, that they had to be closer to Allah, that they had to practice their religion, and remember the approaching hereafter. This is the reason why Sufism was established at the time - because of the civilization which took place in the Western society at that time.

3. An important and influential Sufi living after al-Ghazali was Ibn al-‘Arabi. al-‘Arabi stated “When you know yourself, your ‘I’ness vanishes and you know that you and Allah are one and the same.” This clearly states the belief that everything that exists is one, having the same essence and reality. Is this contrary to orthodox Islam? How have Muslim scholars responded to al-‘Arabi’s teachings?

Actually, all the scholars, or at least the majority of them did not accept what Ibn Arabi brought to the Islamic thinking or belief. Because, as you know, Islam is based on the ‘oneness’ or tawhid, a Muslim should worship Allah alone, and Allah Almighty is not, or we as human beings are not part of Allah. Thus Ibn Arabi’s concepts created divisions or differentiation between scholars and himself. Up to today, many scholars have written books against Arabi’s ideas, even though some of his students try to defend Ibn Arabi by saying he didn’t mean what people understood him to teach - that mankind and God are one unit. Yet the majority of Muslims rejected Arabi’s teaching because it is the opposite of tawhid, of oneness; believing in Allah. Nonetheless, I feel that this kind of high feeling [in Ibn Arabi] was because he was very sensitive towards God and as a result said this teaching - actually this teaching was mistaken; but maybe he didn’t mean it in this way. There are people who didn’t go deeply into his philosophy and blamed him... but this is actually a long story. In conclusion, I would say that we don’t agree with this statement anyway.

4. Do Sufis have their own separate set of hadith or traditions, supporting their beliefs? Do they interpret parts of the Quran differently than other Muslims?

Sufism considers the two main sources, the Quran and the sunna. However, on occasion they explained some of the sayings of the Quran and the sunna in different ways. That is, some but not all of these. The verses which relate to the purpose of Sufism - purifying the soul - they [Sufis] talk about these verses deeply, and maybe sometimes they added some meaning which other scholars don’t agree with. But all of them, the Sufis, agreed on one thing - that there were two sources for authority, the Quran and the sunna.

5. In the regions of India and Pakistan, Sufism seems to have had a particularly strong impact. Yet, many Sufis in these areas seem to be influenced by Hinduism. One author, Martin Lings, who is a practicing Sufi, quite boldly states that “Prince Dara Shikoh (or Shukuh), the Sufi son of the

Mogul Emperor Shah Jahan, was able to affirm that Sufism and Advaita Vendantism (Hinduism) are essentially the same, with a surface difference in terminology.” Another Muslim scholar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr states that the “orthodox Naqshbandi saint Mirza Mazhar Jan Janan considered the Hindu Vedas as divinely inspired.” According to orthodox Islam, are these types of statements correct? Why is it that Sufism seems so prone to the influences of other religions such as Hinduism, which are in many ways contrary to the Islamic standards of monotheism?

Actually, I think - this is a personal opinion - for those who are in India, Muslims, Hindus who claim that Hinduism and Sufism are the same or equal; it is in my opinion wrong, absolutely wrong. Environments affect the people who live in them - this is a usual issue as you know. Perhaps Muslims in India became closer to Sufism because of their environment. This may be because Bhuddism and Hinduism take care of these issues - spiritual issues.. but in a different way.

I have an idea about the Naqshbandi because we have those in my country - in Syria, and in Turkey. They are Muslims, and they don't believe in Hinduism at all, they practice Islam. Maybe the author who wrote this statement noticed the appearance of both groups but didn't go deeply by studying these circumstances for Muslims and non-Muslims in India. But they are different, even though some authority stated this statement.

6. What does Sufism offer as an aspect of Islam, especially in comparison to the Islamic sharia? Is it a search for a more spiritual dimension in response to the traditional legal nature of Islam?

Sufism gives special attention for the spiritual issues, because they believe that when a Muslim has good faith and good spiritual life then he will be a good Muslim. He will practice Islam perfectly, and he will follow the sharia - the Islamic law at the same time. So they insisted on this point of rituals... Yes, I agree with you. As I mentioned at the beginning the reason behind that is materialism which established shortly before Sufism, then this movement we consider it as a reaction in our Islamic history. Even now some Muslims are following Sufism, for the same reasons. As you know as well, the whole world is running to materialism.

7. To what extent are Sufi ideas and practices influential among Muslims in Canada and the United States? Are there Sufi orders present here in North America?

Actually, the Sufism movement in Canada and North America is very weak in my opinion, because Sufism depends on shaikhs [guru-type leaders], special scholars who lead their students, teaching them and watching them, and we don't have those scholars to lead this movement. This is largely because no shaikhs will come from the Middle East because of the materialism in North America - they cannot live here. However, maybe some people, probably very few, had involvement with Sufism before, when they were still in their countries, and they still have it inside their hearts. And perhaps they practice it partially, but they cannot practice it completely because there is no Sufism without shaikhs, without religious leaders, at all.

8. Where, in the world today, is Sufism the most prevalent?

I don't know the exact proportions, but India, Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, and some in Syria. But the first four are the main countries where Sufism takes place.

A Christian Response to Sufism

According to numerous scholars, Sufism continues to play an important role in Islam. Jack Rippin, in his work *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, states,

Recent anthropological studies especially have shown that, throughout the Muslim world, Sufi brotherhoods remain a vital part of the religious environment. The desire for an emotional aspect to religious life, in combination with the appeal of images which glorify Muhammad and, indeed, the divine, has a substantial place in Islam and this is frequently provided by the Sufi tradition. Grouped around a spiritual leader and following certain practices designed to stimulate the experience of God, Sufi brotherhoods flourish throughout the Muslim world, even if they are not always condoned by governments or establishment religious forces.¹

The last sentence may explain, why, as Imam Mohamad M. Algalaleni stated, Sufism is most prevalent in India, Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt and Syria - countries with a less fundamentalist approach than Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, the important point to note, is that Sufism remains both prevalent and discouraged in the Islamic world, despite official legitimacy. The reasons for it being discouraged are undoubtedly linked to those proposed in my paper; however, the very opposition to Sufism only intensifies the dilemma Islam finds itself in. As a result those defending Islam are left skirting the issues - clearly evidenced in both the paper and interview.

Sufism does exist in the Western world today - and on a large scale. Elliot Miller states,

...for the past forty years the direct and indirect influence of the East has prepared the ground in the West for the seed of the Sufi message. Idries Shah, the "Grand Sheikh of the Sufis" .. has devoted his life to demonstrating the applicability of Sufi ideas and practices to today's life in the West... In 1916 the Sufi Order of the West was founded in London by another important Indian Sufi, Hazrat Inayat Khan. His Chishti Order master sent him to the West specifically to spread the Sufi message. Khan died in 1927, but his son, Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, has succeeded in establishing 88 centers in America, and 166 worldwide. Pir Vilayat, who turns 70 this year, is a frequent, highly respected speaker on the New Age circuit. ...the Sufi order does not insist that its members identify with the Islamic faith. It has rightly been described as "one of the most thoroughgoing syncretistic movements in history..."²

Perhaps it is no surprise that orthodox Muslims argue that Sufism really only

Reference Notes:

¹Rippin, 145.

²Miller, 21.

³Miller, 22.

⁴John 14:6, The Holy Bible - New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 1214..

⁶Miller, 22.

exists in the Middle East, as North American Sufism is a blatant modern day example of the religious philosophy of Ibn Arabi, Rumi, al-Hallaj, and Shabistari among many other Sufi saints. Again the problem arises. Again we return to the impossibility of attempting to reconcile pantheism with monotheism.

From a Christian perspective, these problems in Islam are no surprise. They arise because, "as a theistic religion.. Islam is incapable of delivering a vital spiritual experience."³ Islam is empty because, as Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."⁴ Thus true peace and happiness - real spirituality - can only be entered through the grace of Jesus Christ.

"Those who deny that grace and seek instead to win entrance into God's presence through good works will find themselves haunted by a spiritual void and a lack of assurance concerning their personal salvation. Theism in conflict with God's revelation [the Bible] is doomed to spiritual impotence. Bereft from beginning to end (by rejection of the gospel) of any participation in the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Islamic tradition was left with only one recourse for filling the spiritual void: common occult mysticism"⁵ - or as it is more commonly known: Sufism.

Appendix C

A Partial List Of Sufi Orders:

This information is taken from Ian Richard Netton, *A Popular Dictionary of Islam* (London: Curzon Press, 1992), 11-267. The orders and founders I have listed present strong support for the nature of Sufism as I have presented it in my paper - in stark contrast to the writings of many present day Islamic scholars.

Ahmadiyya - [also Badawiyya] the name of a major Sufi order, established initially in Egypt. The order is immensely popular in present day Egypt. It is named after the famous Egyptian Sufi saint al-Badawi (1200-1276) to whom many miracles are ascribed; his tomb in Tanta receives many pilgrims and his birthday is celebrated every year with ceremonies and processions. These rituals include the performing of the dhikr on rooftops and the circumcision of many infants and young boys.

Burhaniyya - [also Dasuqiyya / Shadhiliyya] a popular Sufi order in Egypt, and especially in Cairo. It derives its names from its founder Burhan al-Din Ibrahim b. Abi'l-Majd 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Dasuqi (1246-1288).

Chistiyya - major Sufi order founded in India by Mu'in al-Din Hasan Chisti (1142-1236). The order in India was influenced early on by the writings of **Shibab al-Din Abu Hafs al-Suhrawardi**, and, like **Ibn al-'Arabi**, adhered to the doctrine of 'Unity (or Oneness) of Being.' It places strong emphasis on dhikr recitation, and other mystical and ascetical practices. Presently it is divided into a number of major branches.

Mawlawiyya - [also Mevleviyya] Whirling dervishes. These are an important Sufi order, originating in Turkey, whose name derives from the title borne by their inspirer, the Persian mystical poet **Rumi** of Mawlana (Arabic for 'Our Master'; the Turkish form is Mevlana). The whirling dance is performed with music during their dhikr. Like all other Sufi orders in Turkey, the Mawlawiyya was banned in 1925 by Ataturk, as part of his program for the secularization of Turkey. However the order continues to exist in Turkey and elsewhere.

Naqshabandiyya - a major Sufi order which became popular in Central Asia, Kurdistan, and the Indian subcontinent but much less so in the Arab world. Presently also found in Syria. The order derives its name from Baha al-Din al-Naqshbandi (d. 1389) who is not, however, considered the founder. It emphasizes a mental dhikr and adherence to a rule of eleven principles.

Ni'matullahiyya - a major Sufi Shi'ite order named after Shah Ni'matullah Wali (1330-1431). Gained popularity in Iran and India. Presently divided into a number of branches, one of which flourishes in London, England.

Qadariyya - the order often cited as the first in the history of Sufism. Named after 'Abd al-Qadir al Jilani (1077-1166) a noted Hanbali preacher and ascetic, who spent the main portion of his life in Baghdad, where his tomb, much visited over the centuries, is located. Never the most popular order, it however did spread widely across the Near and Middle East, and also established in parts of India.

Rifa'iyya - a major Sufi order named after Ahmad b. 'Ali al-Rifai (1106-1182) who spent most of his life in the marsh area of Southern Iraq where he attracted many disciples who became famous for their extreme practices like eating live snakes and various feats with fire. Ibn Battuta, a famed traveler of the Islamic world in the 1300's, wrote with horrified fascination about these practices. The early Rifa'iyya was extremely widespread, found in Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Asia Minor, and even in the Maldives. It has spawned a very large number of sub-groups and associated branches under a variety of names.

Shadhiliyya - a major Sufi order named after Abu 'l-Hasan 'Ali al-Shadhili (1196-1258). Achieved popularity in North Africa, Arabia and Syria. Gave rise to numerous offshoots and sub-groups.

Suhrawardiyya - a major Sufi order whose origins go back to 'Abd al-Qahir Abu Najib al-Suhrawardi and **Shibab al-Din Abu Hafs 'Umar al Suhrawardi**. The order originated in Iran and spread to India where it gained more prominence and split into a number of branches.

Tijaniyya - a major order named after its founder Ahmad al-Tijani (1737-1815) who announced he had seen a vision of prophet Muhammad who bade him to begin his Sufi work. The ownership of wealth was accepted by this order, and it stressed thanksgiving to Allah. Presently popular in North Africa, Western Sudan, Senegal and elsewhere in West Africa.



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