

WHAT IS SUFISM?

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Abstract. Most Western scholars define Sufism as the spirituality of Islam or the mystical version of Islam. It is thought to be the inward approach to Islam that emerged and flourished in the non-Arab parts of the Islamic world. Most scholars like William Stoddart think that Sufism is to Islam what Yoga is to Hinduism, Zen to Buddhism, and mysticism to Christianity.¹ In this essay, I will shed light on the major lines and elements in the philosophy of Sufism. I will try to give a concrete account of Sufism by introducing its major features within the relevant Islamic tradition and history.

I. Philosophy of Sufism

The word Sufi is believed to derive from the Greek word „Sophia” which means wisdom. It is an elite movement and has produced many significant figures in literature, art and, of course, theosophy. Most Central Asian, Iranian, Urdu and Kurdish poets and artists are either deeply influenced by Sufism or were themselves Sufis.

Sufism is the spiritual aspect of Islam. A Sufi’s ultimate goal is to become one with Truth, divine Being, oneness of Being, or God. For a Sufi, there is one absolute truth and that is God; God is everywhere and infinite and he gives reality to all existence. The Quran says, „To God belong the East and the West: whithersoever ye turn, there is the Presence of God. For God is All-Pervading, All-Knowing”² In this sense Sufism is very Spinozistic.

¹ William Stoddart, *Sufism– The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam* (Wellingborough: Thorsons Publishers Limited, 1976) 19.

² The Holy Qur’an, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Islamic Propagation Centre International, 1946) Sura Cow 155.

The translator chose „presence” for the Arabic word „wajeh” which literally means „face”. Hence, the face of God is everywhere, according to the verse quoted above.

The path to the absolute truth or God is a path that must lead to the innate truth because the innate truth is the absolute truth. To reach the innate truth, a Sufi would have to reach total awakening. Awakening or total consciousness is not only a vision of truth, but it also amounts to a being one with the Truth. Dhikr is an important practice in Sufism the purpose of which is awakening. Dhikr means to remember, or recollection, though as a Sufi term it means to remember Truth, since „the consciousness of the average man is as if imprisoned in a kind of dream or state of forgetfulness (ghafla)” (Stoddart 46). „Dhikr” in Sufi practice means to concentrate on the divine truth, and it is a notion very close to Plato’s idealist concept of „recollection”. Through dhikr a dervish reaches the light of spirit or the highest consciousness. Through repeating dhikr the dervish experiences „hal” which is a full ecstasy during which the dervish is temporarily transformed into the divine Being. That is when the dervish experiences the full awakening through which s/he becomes a part of the absolute Truth.

The word truth, or haqiqa – Haq, is a key word in the philosophy of Sufism, as I will show later. For a Sufi, there is one truth which the the only God, and there is one God Who is the only Truth. Sufism is simply a path to that goal, to become one with Truth or the unity of Being. At that point the Sufi becomes God, which is the sacred goal for a Sufi. However, this doctrine is seldom acknowledged even by those Sufis who believe in it literarily because it is considered to be a shurk, a sin, by most Muslims. In fact, „shurk be llah” is an Arabic expression which means „to share with God” or „to claim partnership with God”, which is considered to be the biggest sin by the Quran. However, Sufism has a different analysis of its doctrine of unification with God. For a Sufi, God is in you. A Sufi saying says, „He who knows himself knows his Lord”³. One of the passages in the Quran that Sufis often refer to is, „Behold, the Lord said to the angels: „I am about to create man from clay. „When I have fashioned him (In due proportion) and breathed into him of My spirit, Fall ye down in obeisance Unto him.”” (Surah 38 Verses 71-72). God breathed his own spirit into humankind. Thus, God does exist in humankind. Once you defeat the ego, what remains is your spirit, which is the very spirit of God. Hallaj says,

³ Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans, Nancy Pearson (Boulder & London: Shambhala, 1978)9.

„I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart. I said: Who art Thou? He answered: Thou” (Stoddart 83). The ultimate goal of Sufi practices is to become God. And since the only way to ‘become God’ is through total self-denial, then there is no „shirk” involved because after all no self would remain to ‘claim partnership with God’. The self, for a Sufi, is a surface underneath which is God’s breath. The Sufi’s challenge is to overcome the self in order to let God be, i.e. to become God.

That is why a Sufi believes that s/he cannot reach the being of God unless s/he travels the long path of Sufism which leads to pure spirituality. Once the ego is defeated, a Sufi obtains the vision. S/he does see God, rather s/he becomes God in the sense that s/he purifies her/his existence from all that is not God/Truth. That is why Hallaj says,

Between me and You, there is only me
Take away the me, so only You remain.

That which separates the Sufi from God is her/his ego. If the self is eliminated, then her/his spirit and God reunite because they are one substance in the first place. The soul is, for a Sufi, nothing but ‘God’s breath,’ so every human being essentially carries in herself/himself the divine entity. Sufism is simply the path to the divine entity. The most central belief for every Sufi, as for any other Muslim, is monotheism. However, a Sufi not only believes that there is one God, but also s/he believes that God is everywhere and that God is the only Reality. In this sense Sufism is Pantheistic. This is the main conflict between Sufism and Orthodox Islam. What represents the highest point in spirituality for a Sufi is believed to be the biggest sin by Orthodox Islam. Hallaj’s famous story is the most obvious case of this clash between the two sides. Hallaj once announced that he is God when he said, „I am the Truth” (Stoddart 41). „I am the Truth” is equivalent to saying, „I am God” specially according to the Sufi terminology because Truth/Haq is just another name of God. As a result, Hallaj was beheaded, or crucified according to some sources, in Baghdad on March 27, 922AC. Hallaj’s name has become a symbol for the Sufis, of the most important martyr for the truth, and has a significant presence in the Sufi literature.

William Stoddart states, „The Sufis teach that the relative has no reality other than in the absolute, the finite has no reality other than in the infinite.” (43). Hence, for Sufis, no worldly pleasure is worth perusing because it has no reality; it is relative and temporal. Similarly, no „beautiful” object is worth making sacrifices to, because the „beautiful” object only partly partakes of „beauty”. But what is absolutely real is „beauty” itself. Thus,

for a Sufi, only the absolute is real and everything else has a relative reality through participating in the absolute. This is obviously a Platonic element in Sufism, as Stoddart also explains.

„Shahada,” means to announce, ‘There is no god but God, Mohammad is the Messenger of God’. Shahada is „the declaration of Faith” (Stoddart 31). The first condition/ duty for any one who wishes to become a Muslim is to announce shahada. The Sufi’s pantheism is derived from the first part of shahada: ‘There is no god but God’.⁴ The only truth, according to Sufism, is God. In the Sufi philosophy all the duties take a pure spiritual form. For example, in Sufism Jihad is a war against the self rather than an actual war against an outsider (Stoddart 32).

Sufism briefly is composed of mystic teachings and methods of gaining what is considered by Sufis to be true knowledge. It is at the same time a ‘way of Love’ (Stoddart 48). It is a ‘Way of Knowledge’ that leads to the absolute truth. It is also a ‘way of Love’ that leads to total unification with God. However, separating knowledge and love or their ways, as Stoddart does, does not make sense unless it is done for the purpose of introduction. For a Sufi the ‘Way of Knowledge’ is the same as the „Way of Love” because the object of knowledge is Truth, and the object of Love is God. As it has been mentioned Truth and God are synonyms for Sufis. This union is well expressed in this Sufi saying, „Truth melteth like snow in the hands of him whose soul melteth not like snow in the hands of Truth.” (Stoddart 84). That is to say, if one’s passion for reaching the truth does not make one diminish, the truth will diminish before one’s insensitivity. The process of gaining knowledge and the passion for truth are not separated in Sufism.

There has always been a debate about whether Sufism is against religion. There is a famous Sufi argument about religion, „If the Muslim knew what the idol was/ He would know that there is religion in idol-worship/ if the polytheist were informed on religion/ How could he stray in his faith?/ He sees in the idol only the outward and created/ For that he is legally a heathen”⁵.

It seems that Ibn al-Arabi faced different kinds of accusations from Orthodox Muslims, so he says,

Now I am called the shepherd of the desert gazelles
Now a Christian Monk

⁴ Stoddart disagrees with the opinion that says Sufism is a pantheist doctrine. .

⁵ qtd. in Idries Shah, *Neglected Aspects of Sufi Study* (London: The Octagon Press, 1977) 16.

Now a Zoroastrian.
 The Beloved is Three, yet One:
 Just as the three are in reality one.⁶

Also he says, „My heart has opened unto every form: it is a pasture for gazelles, a cloister for Christian monks, a temple for idols, the Kaaba of the pilgrim, the tables of the Torah and the book of the Qur’an. I practice the religion of Love; in whatsoever directions its caravans advance, the religion of Love shall be my religion and my faith” (qtd. in Stoddart 82). Since the fifteenth century Sufism manifested itself in social movements based on orders (*tariqa* or *turuq*). There are many different orders, such as the Qadiriya, Suhrawardi, Mwlawi, Naqishbandiya in central Asia, India, Persia, Kurdistan, Anatolia, and the Caucasus. However, because of the controversy between Sufism and Orthodox Islam, Sufism „never became popular in the Arab world”⁷. In the next part, I will explain the role of Sufism in Islam and some of the major landmarks in the history of Sufism.

II. Sufism and Islam

Islam started to spread out from its very first stages through conquest. Mohammad started the process of spreading Islam when he and his followers invaded Mecca. The process of conquest took Islam to the East up to the Great Wall of China and to the West up to Spain. Islam was spread mainly via military conquests. Sufism helped to spread Islam in places that were not conquered by any army. Sufism is the more spiritually attractive version of Islam. It is persuasive not just in terms of religious experience, but also philosophically. Moreover, Sufism has always been embodied in a variety of forms of art such as music, poetry, dance, and painting. These spiritually and philosophically attractive features of Sufism made many elites embrace it and make more contributions to it. Eventually, through the artistic and philosophical contributions of these elites, Sufism crossed the borders of different cultures and empires. Also, vernacular poetry in some societies in North Africa and central Asia helped Sufism to become a part of their peoples’ cultural mosaic.⁸

⁶ qtd. in Idries Shah, *The Way of the Sufi* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968) 87

⁷ J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) 64, 43.

⁸ Nehemia Levtzion, and John O. Voll, eds., *Eighteenth-Century Renewal and Reform in Islam* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987)13.

Some scholars think the word „sufi” came from the Arabic word-„suf”, which means wool. Some Arab conquerors collected wealth and lived in luxury in the countries they conquered. It is believed that some individual Muslims reacted against the corruption of the Muslim conquerors, and chose a bohemian way of life as a way of rejecting and protesting against what the conquerors did. These individuals chose to wear simple and cheap coats made of wool -„suf” in order to show their indifference to worldly pleasures and material goods. Then they were called Sufis after their way of dressing.⁹ Ibn Khaldun believes that the early followers of Mohamed and Mohamed himself were devoted worshipers and practiced renunciation in their daily lives. He says that only with the Umayyads, in the eighth century/ the second century of Islam, did corruption spread among the Muslim elites. Those who kept the early generations’ way of worshiping were called Sufis, according to Ibn Khaldun.¹⁰ Indeed most of the Sufi figures and orders claim that the origin of their spirituality goes back to the first and second generations.

In A.D. 1165, Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn al- Arabi was born in Spain. Ibn al- Arabi had shown a great interest in Sufi ways since the early years of his education. As a young scholar he engaged in debates with the Sufi masters and philosophers of his time. For example, while still a young man, he met the well-known philosopher Averroes. He devoted himself to linguistic studies, astrology, spirituality, and meditation. Eventually, he wrote many books on the philosophy of Sufism, his Mecca revelations, and poetry. His poetry made a great name for him while he was still alive. Scholars, poets, intellectuals, and Sufis visited him from different parts of the Islamic world to hear him speak about different issues. Ibn al-Arabi’s poetry spread all around North Africa, and Near Asia carrying with itself features of Sufism, as the spiritual version of Islam.¹¹ In the following passage Levtzion and Voll mention the historical role that Ibn al-Arabi’s poetry has played in spreading Islam,

Since the thirteenth century, in the aftermath of the Mongol invasion and what appeared as the expiration of the universal Muslim state, the Sufi teaching of Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240) spread throughout the Muslim world. The timeless and apolitical universe of Ibn alArabi added to the inclination of Sufis to withdraw from politics. This was also the period of the successful expansion of Islam

⁹ John Alden Williams, *Islam* (New York: George Braziller, 1961) 137.

¹⁰ F. E. Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994) 311.

¹¹ Ibn al-Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom* /, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980)1-14.

in Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, and Ibn al-Arabi's mysticism was a basis for accommodation with other religions and for pluralistic synthesis. For Ibn al-Arabi differences between the external forms of religions were of little significance, as was the distinction between Islam and infidelity. The predominance of love over law and of the spirit over the letter encouraged antinomian tendencies within Sufism (Levtzion, and Voll 8-9).

Ibn al-Arabi established a version of Islam that is capable of spreading without military conquest. But this was only a historical consequence and probably was never Ibn al-Arabi's intention. In fact, some radical schools of Islamic Law reject Ibn al-Arabi's teachings vigorously. Ibn Taymiyyah, who is a very significant figure in the Hmbali school of Islamic Law, fought Ibn al-Arabi's teachings antagonistically. Ibn Taymiyyah's condemnation of Ibn al-Arabi's Sufism is a major motivation behind the fanatics' aggression against Sufis in modern times (Levtzion, and Voll 9). Ibn Taymiyyah is the Godfather of the Wahhabi movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Salafiah movement (Williams 206). According to Ibn Taymiyyah, any attempt to know God is wrong because God cannot be conceived by the human mind, rather He must be obeyed simply and completely (Williams 206).

It seems that we need to look more thoroughly into the thirteenth century to discover the nature of the historical atmosphere that led to the emergence of Sufism as a powerful approach in Islam. John Renard thinks that the establishing of Sufi institutions or *khanaga* for the first time in the thirteenth century and the founding the Sufi orders in the twelfth century played a major role in the process of the expansion of Sufism.¹²

Sufis used to travel constantly seeking mystical knowledge, meeting other Sufis and philosophers, and meditating as they traveled. Wandering is the best way to maximize contemplation and avoid anything in social life that limits contemplation. After all, „fostering any sort of desire is really a waste of time, since it will be but a hindrance to contemplation.”¹³ Probably, a major reason that made Sufis become wanderers is that they wanted to prevent themselves from becoming absorbed in family and worldly life in order to devote themselves completely to the divine Truth. Most of the great Sufis left their homes at the beginning of their Sufi journeys and died in places other than their home in a period of history when living and

¹² Muhammad ibn Ibrahim B. Ibn 'Abbad, Ibn 'Abbad of Ronda: Letters on the Sufi Path /, trans. John Renard (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) 31.

¹³ Sharafuddin Maneri, The Hundred Letters, trans. Paul S. J. Jackson (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) 14.

dying at home were considered to be very important both culturally and spiritually.

There used to be station buildings for the Sufis to rest at during their endless journeys. In the twelfth century these stations became constant living, teaching, worshipping, and meeting places for Sufis while they became larger in number and their teachings more in need of organization (Ibn ‘Abbad 32). John Renard says, „The institutionalization of Sufism may be said to have occurred „definitively” when groups that had existed more or less informally since the eighth century became large enough to require a space bigger than a home, and exclusive enough to require a space more private than a mosque” (Ibn ‘Abbad 31). However, the history of *khanqaqs* seems to go back to earlier periods in Near Asia. There were *khanqaqs* in Nishapur and Khurasan in the eleventh century. In each of the Asian *khanqaqs* a Sufi master and his disciples lived, worshiped, and studied theosophy.¹⁴ Even the early *khanqaqs* in Near Asia functioned not only as religious institutions, but also as social organizations. For example, they helped poor people who were in need. (Trimingham 156).

The Sufi orders, or *tariqas*, made Sufism popular among ordinary people for the first time. The first Sufi Order was established by ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī (1088-1166) and it is named after him *Qādiriyyah*.¹⁵ Then other orders like *Sahrawardia*, *Naqishbandia* and *Muhammadia* emerged. Some of these orders were involved in non-spiritual affairs such as forming distinct social ranks within the followers of a Sufi order. Consequently, these Sufi Orders are more involved in political issues as they gained more economic power and social recognition. Levtzion, and Voll write,

The reformed *turuq*, called „neo-Sufism” by Fazlur Rahman, maintained a positive attitude toward direct involvement in the affairs of this world, instead of a more mystical, otherworldly orientation. There was an evolution of an activist style of Sufism that sought to bring about changes in society through human efforts rather than waiting for eschatological intervention. This was the breeding ground for militant political movements which were more reformist than messianic (or mahdist) in their expression (10).¹⁶

¹⁴ J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972) 165.

¹⁵ *Qādiriyyah* or *Qadirism*, but even in the English sources the Arabic form, *Qadiriyyah* is used usually.

¹⁶ For the historical emergence of *tariqa* (or *turuq*) also see, John Obert Voll, *Islam, Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994) 12.

These new compromises that were made between the spiritual roots of Sufism and outer ambitions happened in North Africa in a more obvious way. In near and central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, Sufism remained as a more spiritual approach to Islam although it inevitably played a political role for some peoples like the Kurds in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as I will explain later. John Renard says,

In the East Sufism grew up in a kind of sibling rivalry with the sciences of Tradition and Law, a rather conservative school of jurisprudence had been well established in the West for quite some time before Sufism became a force to be reckoned with there. Some of the most prominent Eastern Sufis were, to be sure, members of the most conservative of the law schools, the Hanbalite. But it may still not be a gross oversimplification to say that the institutions of orthodoxy in the West never had quite as much to fear from Sufism as they did in the East. I. Goldziher believes that Western Sufism tended to be less nihilistic than Eastern Sufism, because the former was more immediately linked with the jurists from the outset (Ibn 'Abbad 33).

In some parts of the world Sufism formed a political identity although this did not necessarily happen because of some elements within Sufism itself. In India and China, for example, Sufism played a major role in forming the political identity of the Muslims who live there as minorities (Levtzion, and Voll 11). In Kurdistan, however, Sufi identity played a significant political role in national attempts at emancipation not because Kurds are a Muslim minority in the region, but because two Sufi orders, Qadiriyya and Naqishbandia, are popular among Kurds; whereas, Sufism is not common among other peoples in the region, (Trimingham 64). Naqishbandia is one of the most spiritual orders, and was founded in India by Ahmad Sirhindi. It played a major role in forming the national identity of the Kurds in Turkey and Iraq in the nineteenth century (Levtzion, and Voll 10-11).

Trimingham mentions the contradiction between the political activity of the Sufi orders and the spiritual attributes of Sufism. But he thinks that the political activities of the Sufi orders happened because of „the way they bound men in allegiance to a leader, as well as the hold they exercised over men's emotions” (238). Also he writes „We find order-leaders aspiring to political power, revolting against established authority, and sometimes actually successful in founding a dynasty.” (239).

Sufi groups can be Sunni, Shiia, or none. Some scholars rightly treat Sufism as the third branch of Islam; Sunni and Shiia being the other two major branches. There are fundamental differences between these three sides in Islam. For all Muslims, Mohammed is the last prophet sent by God

to humanity. For Sunnis, ulama are those who establish the Islamic Law mainly by interpreting the Quran. In addition to the Quran, ulama depend on the hadiths and qiyas to establish Islamic Law– Sharia.

For Shiias Mohammed was the last prophet in „dairat an-nubuwwa” – „the cycle of prophecy,” (Trimingham 133). The cycle of prophecy was closed forever by the death of Mohammed, and the cycle of protégés „dairat al-wilaya” started (Trimingham 133-135). Ali is considered the first Wali. A Wali is also called an Imam, and has a considerable religious position among the Shiias. In Sufism, Wali has a different meaning. A Wali is a Sufi who reaches a higher stage of spirituality in which s/he directly communicates with God. All prophets, according to Sufism, engage in this kind of communication. Therefore, not only Mohammed, but also all the prophets have a very special position in Sufi teachings. Ibn al-Arabi says, „Wilaya is all-embracing. It is the major cycle (da’ira). . . . Every apostle (rasul) must be a prophet (nabi), and since every prophet must be a wali, every apostle must be a wali.” (qtd. in Trimingham 134). Ibn al-Arabi’s *The Bezels of Wisdom* is composed of 27 chapters. Each chapter is about the significance of a prophet in the system of universal knowledge.

Trimingham concludes, „both Sufism and Shiism were attempts to solve the perpetual Islamic dilemma of a once-for-all final revelation, but they each fully recognized the once-for-all nature of the final prophetic mode of divine communication (...) The mission of both Sufis and Shias was to preserve the spiritual sense of the divine revelation.” (135). It seems Shiism is less likely to accept significant reforms because in the end it finds itself responsible for the nature of the political power. The question of reform, after all, depends on the Imams in Shiism. Imams hold the authority in Shiism (Trimingham 137). Sufism in general does not claim to establish a theocracy. In fact, Sufism does not have any political agenda or political ambitions.

Voll argues that Sufism helped to develop, among Muslims, the feeling of belonging to one nation. Also, Voll argues, Sufism played a major role in expanding the Islamic world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represent an era of great tolerance and diversity within the Islamic world and Sufism was the major reason behind that.¹⁷ Because of Sufism, Islam spread so well in Africa, Anatolia, India and Indonesia (Williams_136). Louis Massignon states, „It is thanks

¹⁷ John Obert Voll, *Islam, Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994) 12-15.

to its mysticism that Islam is an international and universal religion” (qtd. in Williams 137).

The leap that made Sufism popular is probably the most significant thing to consider in relation to the question of Sufism and its political consequences. It seems that the *shekhs*, the spiritual leaders of Sufi orders, played a major role in changing Sufism into a means to political power (Trimingham 239). A *shekh* is a popular man who claims holiness and establishes a *khanaqah* or *takia* for social and spiritual purposes. In some societies it is a title inherited from ancestors. *Shekhs* played a major role in turning Sufism from an individualistic path into a social movement, with leaders and followers. Toward the sixteenth century, this form became common in some societies in North Africa (Voll 48). The charismatic personality of the *shekhs* had become the key to obtaining social power and political attention. Many *shekhs*, in Kurdistan for example, deceived large numbers of illiterate farmers by claiming supernatural communication with the divine power. And in different kinds of troubles, people came to ask the *shekh* to save them from harm. Usually a *shekh* is surrounded by a group of his men whose main task is to emphasize the charismatic atmosphere in the *shekh*'s *khanaqah*. The *Shekh*'s men prevent, or at least strictly organize, direct communication with the *shekh*, and they organize the *khanaqah*'s agenda because the *shekh* is claimed to be too busy with worshiping to take care of any material or technical issue in the *khanaqah*. A *khanaqah* is supposed to feed and give refuge to wanderers or anyone who happens to come to the *khanaqah*. Thus, most *khanaqahs* function as a social and political body with certain agendas for gaining more and more power through winning influence over large masses of people. Voll mentions this phenomenon in North African societies; he writes,

In North Africa in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Sufism had become effectively organized as popular associations as the veneration of holy men provided a focus for the mobilization of large numbers of people. There was less emphasis on the need for a disciple to follow a long and arduous path and more on the personal attachment to an individual holy man. The great shaykhs and their organizations became an important factor in North African society (48).

Voll also thinks that Sufism in the Eastern Mediterranean stayed more elitist (48). As we noticed earlier, it seems in North Africa Sufism took a less inward path than that of Asia. Probably, this can explain why it is not impossible for a former Sufi, in the Egyptian sense of Sufism, to become the establisher of a political movement such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

Hasan alBanna, the godfather of the Muslim Brotherhood, says, „despite my preoccupation with Sufism and worship, I believed that duty to country is an inescapable obligation—a holy war.”¹⁸

In fact, even in Asia, in many cases Sufism, through being popularized by some of the *shekhs*, has lost its significance as a high spiritual experience of individuals. Rather it has become, like any other popular movement, an instrumental activity with political and social ambitions. Like the popularized version of any philosophy, the popularized version of Sufism lost much of its depth. But that is not to say that Sufis in near and central Asia engaged in politics in order to establish a theocracy. That is the big difference between Sufism in North Africa and Sufism in Asia, including Near Asia.

Moreover, the popularized version of Sufism has never become the only version of Sufism. Some elements in the Sufism that was introduced by the classic masters, such as Hasan al-Basri, Rabi'a al Adawiya, Hallaj, Ibn al-Arabi, Jelaluddin Rumi, and Omar Khayyam allowed Sufism to keep a pure individual style of life and art focusing only on spirituality. In the next part of this paper, I will mention major elements of the original versions of Sufism.

III. The Tragic and Passion in Sufism

There is a deep tragic element in early Sufi works. This tragic element also characterizes most of the later works to the extent that most tragic pieces of art in Eastern Islam are called Sufi works even if they lack the Sufi features. Khayyam, who was also a great mathematician and astrologer, writes,

„Since the lot of humankind in this bitter land
Is nothing but suffering and sadness
Happy the heart of whoever quickly leaves the world -
Tranquil the person who did not come at all”¹⁹.

Rabi'a al Adawiya (died in 801 A.D.) was well known for her devotion to the divine love. Rabi'a al Adawiya says, „Oh my Lord, the stars are shining and the eyes of men are closed, and kings have shut their doors, and every lover is alone with his beloved, and here am I alone with Thee”

¹⁸ qtd. in John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 54.

¹⁹ qtd. in Idries Shah, *Neglected Aspects of Sufi Study* (London: The Octagon Press, 1977) 7.

(Williams 143). She was a flute player from a family in Basra. She refused to marry because she believed she had no time for a husband and that she gave all her love only to God (Williams 141-143). She believed that God should be worshiped on the basis of love rather than fear. This is the kind of rebelliousness that Sufis always showed against ordinary religious duties. According to Sufis „...she was going to Mecca (....) In the middle of the desert, she saw that the Ka'ba had come out to welcome her. Rabi'a said, „I need the lord of the house. What am I to do with the house? Its power means nothing to me...”²⁰

Hallaj (executed in 922) is probably to this day the most rebellious figure in the history of Islam. His story and philosophy influenced and inspired many Sufis, poets, philosophers and artists over the centuries. He constantly had a polemical approach to spirituality. Often he shows the superficiality of ordinary beliefs, and, hence, he introduces more comprehensive and theosophical views. For example, he introduced a totally new interpretation of the character of Iblis.

Iblis, Satan, or the Devil, is the most hated character in the Islamic faith. It is believed that Iblis is the enemy of humankind and the condemned angel who rejected the command of God (Sura 38 Verses 71-75). In a chapter titled „Hallaj: Iblis as Tragic Lover”, Michael Sells analyses one of Hallaj's interpretations of the story of Iblis. As the Quranic story goes, God curses Iblis because he dared to refuse to obey God's will. God commands all the angels to bow for Adam, and they all obey, except Iblis who refuses to bow to anyone other than God. Iblis's refusal to bow for Adam, according to the Quranic story, is meant to be an affirmation of the greatness of God because Iblis believes that to bow or pray to anyone other than God is to disrespect God's greatness. However, God condemns Iblis because of his disobedience. As Michael A. Sells explains, Hallaj focuses on the Quranic story of Iblis to question many ordinary beliefs about Iblis (269-272). Did Iblis have any other choices? Did he become a victim of his sincerity towards God? The mere attempt at reinterpreting the story of Iblis is the most rebellious project possible for two main reasons. First, Iblis, according to a very fundamental belief is Satan/ or the Devil. Hence, an attempt to revise this belief is the most negative project one can possibly think of in an Islamic context. Secondly, the story itself is about rebelliousness. Hallaj's interest

²⁰ Michael A. Sells, ed., *Sufi, Quran, Miraj, Poetic and Theological Writings Sufi, Quran, Miraj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996) 157.

shows that Hallaj identifies with Iblis to some degree. Iblis is the archetype in Hallaj's writings.

Indeed, Hallaj's faith is very similar to Iblis's faith as they both willingly accept their tragic destiny because of God and for the sake of God. Hallaj pushed his love of God to its absolute ends which is unification but also devastation. Iblis affirms the most intense loyalty to and admiration of God, but that edge overlaps with *shirk*. For Iblis, to obey God is more important even than what God himself asks for. This means that one must not obey God if the command is not fully in favor of God. This brings us back to the question of whether God must be obeyed, as Ibn Taymiyyah argues, or loved, as Rabia believes. Does God have to be feared or loved? Must there be laws and instructions to impose certain deeds on us? Are mechanical deeds that lack true will and love, valued less than willful deeds that are done out of love for God? This is the fundamental difference between Sufism and Orthodox Islam or spiritual Islam and Islamic Laws.

Hallaj overcomes every distance between himself and God even if that distance is Hallaj himself. Hallaj pushed the passionate side of this dilemma to its blazing limits through his writings and his life. In order to unify with God, Hallaj would embrace a total annihilation. He says,

Between me and You, there is only me

Take away the me, so only You remain" (quoted and cited above).

He also says, „I am You, without doubt. So Your praise is mine, Your Unity is mine; Your defiance is mine.²¹

This tragic passion in Sufism is rooted in a nostalgic fantasy of the pre-creation state of Being in which there is no departure from the glorious state of absolute truth and the soul is not separated from God. Sufism in this sense is a Dionysian activity that embraces annihilation as the inevitable end of every true spiritual experience.

In Sufism the suffering of self-denial, love for God, and the pain of a unique awareness of the world meet. Sufi music mirrors these tragic elements. Sufi poetry embodies the meaninglessness of social life. Sufis are anarchists, antisocial, ascetics. The Sufi model has become an archetype for any truth seeker or scholar in the societies where Sufism was spread. The tragic elements of Sufis can be found in the character of the modern intellectual in those societies. Even atheist writers in the modern literature

²¹ qtd. in Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 115

of the Eastern societies of the Islamic world embody the tragic Sufi element in their lives and works.

The tragic element exceeded the thought of the Sufis. Their stories are associated historically with the most tragic in the history of Islam. The Sufis have been the historical antipode of political Islam. Historically Sufis are the earliest and the most persecuted victims of Orthodox Islam. The story of Hallaj's execution has become the symbol of fighting the different forms absolutism. Since the closing of the gate of *Ichtihad*, Sufism has been targeted even more aggressively by orthodox Islam. In modern history, Wahabism and other fascist movements of populist Islamism targeted Sufi groups and individuals in the most violent ways.

Fatima Mernissi, a progressive Arab writer, in her book **Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World**, links the popular antagonism towards the West in the Arab World with the history of suppression within the Arab and Islamic world. She argues that the Democratic West reminds the conservative Arab societies of the historical wound associated with brutal suppression over centuries. She believes Sufis and philosophers, both of whom were influenced by Indian and Zarathustrian thought, represent two major groups who, historically, have struggled against the established power of Orthodox Islam.²² Fatima Mernissi writes,

Side by side with the Sufis, who philosophized about the need to reject the idea of blind submission, another movement arose whose members were devoted to assassinating the imams who displeased them. Throughout its history Islam has been marked by two trends: an intellectual trend that speculated on the philosophical foundations of the world and humanity, and another trend that turned political challenge violent by resort to force. The first tradition was that of the *falasifa*, the Hellenized philosophers, and of the Sufis, who drew from Persian and Indian culture; the second was the Kharijite tradition of political subversion.²³

²²There are many things in common between Sufism and Buddhism, but that is not exactly the topic of my essay. However, the reader might recognise some of those overlaps. For example, the Sufi approach to the problem of self and detachment is very similar to that of Mahayana Buddhism. For instance, a Sufi poem reads, „When you lose yourself in God, you proclaim the divine Unity. Lose the sense of „being lost” – that is complete detachment!” (Maneri 14).

²³ Fatima Mernissi, *Fear of the Modern World* (Reading, MA: Perseus Publishing, 1992) 21.

Conclusion

The significant characteristics of Sufism can be summed up in a few points. First, Sufism is a philosophy. It provides the Sufis with a system of thought that offers its own understanding of truth, knowledge, perception, life, being, time, infinity, the finite, universal, particular, the human subject, and so on. The paradigm in Sufism is that there is one absolute Truth and everything else exists through it. Sufism sees itself basically as a path that leads to unification with the absolute truth. Unification is the final stage of Sufism. Before unification, a Sufi's major method is contemplation. The goal of contemplation, and all other Sufi practices for that matter, is to improve mystic knowledge. Sensory perception is the source of relative knowledge. As for absolute knowledge, the Sufi has to use the eyes of his/her mind or heart (as wisdom and love are one and the same). In order for the Sufi to be able to see with the eyes of the mind, s/he must devote him/herself to contemplation. Social life, worldly engagements, property, family, politics, desires, and all other kinds of attachments go against the Sufi path of contemplation because they would all lead the human subject towards the relative and away from Truth. Therefore, asceticism is essential to the Sufi path. Sufism has its metaphysics and its theory of knowledge or epistemology. Moreover, it is the kind of philosophy that focuses on eliminating the gap between thought and life. In other words, Sufism is a philosophy that cannot work without its philosophical life style. Because this is only an introductory essay on Sufism, I could not expand on the philosophical schools within Sufism. Sufism as a broad term includes mystic elements, but it cannot be reduced only to mysticism. For example, Sahrawardi's philosophy is not mystic by any means.

Second, Sufism includes many different branches that were developed under different cultural and historical circumstances. In origin, Sufism is an individualistic phenomena which appeared mostly in non-Arab parts of the Islamic world such as some ancient cities in Persia, India, Anatolia, and central Asia. Most Sufis claim that the main figures in the first two generations of Islam practiced Islam as a pure form of spirituality. Sufism does not consider Sharia (Islamic Law) as an important feature of religion. Sufism has many things in common with mystic Christianity, kabbalah, Buddhism, Zarathustrianism, and Hinduism. However, some scholars believe that the elements of the above beliefs and religions influenced Islam from the very moment of its emergence. In any case, Sufism is the most relaxed branch of Islam when it comes to other beliefs and religions. By the thirteenth

century popular Sufism started to emerge in Asia. Popular Sufism is the institutionalized form of Sufism. In popular Sufism, instead of contemplation, other practices are common, such as Dhiikr. In popular Sufism, the individual shekh is the medium between the dervishes and God. A Dervish can reach ecstasy and other mystic experiences through practicing the disciplines of his or her order as taught by the shekh. Each Sufi order differs according to the founder through whom the order is passed down to other shekhs. Popular Sufism played different social and political roles depending on the region. In general, Sufism in the East stayed more spiritual than Sufism in the West. There is Sunni Sufism, Shiia Sufism, and Sufism that is neither Sunni nor Shiia. In general Sufism should be categorized as the third branch of Islam.

Third, a Sufi refers to God as „Beloved” or „Friend”. Unlike other branches of Islam, the Sufis’ worship of God is due to love rather than fearful obedience. An essential element of the tragic accompanies this passion. A sense of the absurdity of life apart of from Truth is a major source of the tragic dimension in the Sufi worldview. The tragic and passion are two main characteristics of Sufi literature. The tragic dimension is so profound that in some cultures every melancholic work of art is associated with Sufism. The tragic and the passion in Sufism are reflected in a huge artistic heritage. Sufi poetry and Sufi music, which are essentially melancholic, have become the dominant forms of art in many societies. The other style of Sufi art is ecstatic art, which is also present in some common types of Sufi poetry and music. The ecstatic type corresponds to the awakening or the enlightenment that basically captures the Sufis’ imagination. Rumi uniquely expresses the above elements in a single text when he says,

I have lived on the lip
of insanity, wanting to know reasons,
knocking on a door, it opens
I have been knocking from inside!

Real value comes with madness,
matzub below, scientist above
whoever finds love
beneath hurt and grief
disappears into emptiness
with a thousand new disguises

Dance, when you're broken open
 Dance, if you're torn the bandage off
 Dance in the middle of the fighting
 Dance in your blood
 Dance, when you're perfectly free.²⁴

In the first part Rumi expresses the passion for knowledge that leads him almost to madness because of the constant inevitable despair. Eventually, he discovers that he was wasting his time because the true knowledge he was looking for was inside him. The second part manifests the connection between passion and pain, wisdom and madness, perception and uncertainty. He expresses the tragic state of human existence that is governed by conflicts and shaped by meaningless ends. In the last part Rumi lifts the discourse to the ecstatic level in which the tragic sense returns the passion. It is the guilty pleasure of the truth seeker who finds in the depths of melancholy a total loss of all the burdens of meaning. It is an expression of the passion that finds its only possible pleasure in its own destruction.

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²⁴ *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1995) 281.

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