Sufi Islam

Most religious people are not content with a mere intellectual belief in God. They long to have an **experience** of God and ultimately they aspire to oneness with God.

Non-Christian mystics would appear to be satisfied with **passivity** to the world around them in their all-consuming search for the One. Like a grain of salt in an ocean of salty water, non-Christian mystics expect to dissolve in "the ground of being". Individualism is considered a great evil and must be eliminated – not in human solidarity (a communist view) but in unity with the divine.

So Islamic mystics (Sufis) strive to be constantly aware of God's presence. They stress contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism and the cultivation of the soul over social interaction. This is in contrast to Orthodox Islam that depends on reason (*'Aql*). Sufism depends on emotion and imagination in the divine-human relationship.

Sufism is unrelated to the Sunni/Shia split, the four Schools of Law, social class, gender, family connections and even geography – all of which are an attraction to post-Soviet Central Asians and to many in the Muslim World.

Sufis claim that unity with God can be obtained in this world and along the path that leads to oneness there are wonderful stages (*maqamet*) of knowledge, vision and ecstasy (*bast*).

Some Definitions of Sufism

In his book, **Studies in Islamic Mysticism** (Cambridge 1951) R. A. Nicholson collected 78 different definitions given in Arabic, Persian and Turkish sources. Here are just four:

- "Sufism is abstinence from food, silence before God and escape from men's company."
  This lays the stress on asceticism.
- "Sufism is not to possess anything and not to be possessed by anything."
  Here we have the stress on poverty.
- "Sufism is to wear wool in purity and to leave the world behind one's self."
- "Sufism is neither poverty nor asceticism, but is a concept that embraces both with something else besides. Without this added quality, a man cannot be a Sufi though he may be a poor man (*fakir*) or an ascetic (*zahid*)."

The origin of the word 'Sufi'

An Indian mystic is often called a *fakir* (a poor man). A Persian mystic uses the term 'dervish' (beggar). The most probable derivation of this word is from the Arabic word for wool – '*suf*'.
It referred to the coarse woollen garments worn by ascetics imitating Christian monks and hermits.

There are other suggestions:

- It comes from '*safar*' (purity)
- It comes from '*sophia*' (wisdom)
- It comes from '*sopha*' (a row) – a reference to rows of prayer first set up in the mosque in Medina

But there is overwhelming support for the derivation from '*suf*' (wool).

The Rise of Sufism and some early pioneers

Before the rise of Sufism, Muslims were satisfied with two paths towards the knowledge of God:

- dogma
- religious duty

Perhaps even today, most Muslims are content to follow this dual path. To Sufis, the theologian's concept of an abstract and unknowable God who can only be defined by what he is not, was totally inadequate. They began to search for a warm, intimate relationship with a personal God who wants to dwell in the hearts of men. There are Quranic texts that hint at this: suras 2:182 and 2:109 and others.

But historically Sufism grew as a reaction against:

- The rigid legalism of the orthodox religious leadership in the 8th century A.D.
- The luxury and over-indulgence of these rulers

By 750 A.D. Muslims in general and Arabs in particular were reaping a harvest of success and prosperity from having an empire that extended from Spain to the borders of China. The rulers in Damascus and then Baghdad became fabulously wealthy. The prophet Muhammad had stated that all Muslims were equal. But in fact the Arabs were a colonising race. All non-Muslims had to pay the poll tax (*jizyah*) like Christians, Zoroastrians and Jews. The Abbasid revolt began in Central Asia (747 A.D.) and it was largely with Persian and Central Asian troops. The Abbasid Caliph (Khalif) overthrew the Umayyad Caliphate and brought the Caliphate back to being a direct descent from Muhammad's family at the Battle of the river Zab in Iraq in 750 A.D.

This bloody civil war between the Ummayads and the Abbasids made a mockery of the Muslim claims of moral superiority over Christians. The first Abbasid Caliph was nicknamed “blood shedder” for there were rebellions all over the Empire – Spain, North Africa, even in Medina. There were battles between the Sunni and Shia and between the Adnan and Qahtani Arabs – still happening with cross-border fighting between Saudis and Yemenis. Once the Abbasids were established, there were 50 years of a Golden Age in Baghdad (775-833 A.D.) where Baghdad was by far the richest city in the world.

The reaction to all this wasn't so much a collective cry for revival, but rather an individual response in many parts of the Muslim World of those seeking a nobler and holier way and this gave rise to Sufism. There were two elements in the response of individuals:

1. An exaggerated awareness of man's sin
2. Terror at the thought of divine judgment

The early Sufis devalued the ritual observances of orthodox Muslims. One early Sufi was reported to have said, “A measure of sincere reverence is better than a thousand measures of set prayers and fasting”.

Some Pioneers – the Ascetics

Hassan of Basra (died 728 A.D.)

Hassan was an early ascetic. He exhorted his followers against attachment to this evil world and encouraged them to follow in the path of poverty and abstinence.

Ibraheim ibn Adham (died 777 A.D.)

Ibraheim was a prince in the city of Balkh captured by Arab armies in 625 A.D. As he walked, in front of him were 40 men with 40 maces and scimitars of gold! Balkh is a few miles west of Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan. Ibraheim had all man’s heart could desire. While hunting one day he heard a voice, “Awake! Were you created just for this?” He bid farewell to his realm and put on the woollen garb praying, “O God, uplift me from the shame of disobedience to the glory of surrender to you.” Ibraheim gave us an interesting definition of freedom: “Freedom is to forsake the world before one departs from it”.

Shaqiq from Balkh (died 810 A.D.)

He stressed the idea of total reliance (*tawakkul*) on God, “9/10 of devotion consists of flight from mankind and the remaining 1/10 is silence”.

Ibn Ayad was a converted bandit who on one occasion declared, “To abstain for man’s sake from doing anything is hypocrisy, while to do anything for man's sake is idolatry”.

Abu Yazid al-Bistami (died 874 A.D.)

He taught that union with God is achieved through the annihilation of self. This is done by rigorous mortification of the flesh. He was the first “intoxicated” Sufi, who felt, in his ecstatic state, that God had come into his soul and body and replaced his self/ego. This caused him to exclaim, “Glory to me! How great is my majesty!”

A great Sufi, Al-Hallaj, was crucified in Baghdad in 922 A.D. for blaspheming with a similar statement. Al-Hallaj's great model was the example of Jesus who, in his view, was a holy man in whom God became incarnate during his life.

Rabi'a Al-Adawiya (died 801 A.D.)

Like the Buddhists, the Sufis counted among their number great female saints. Rabi'a introduced the concvept of **love for God** as a major theme in Sufism and rather than just asceticism. This love theme is the main expression of Sufism in poetry. The relationship between God the Divine Lover and man searching for His love are recurring themes.

Rabi'a was from Basra and her tomb is in Jerusalem. It is a renowned Sufi pilgrimage centre. She was remarkable for her tender and ardent feelings towards God. Before her conversion to Sufism she had been a popular musician singing love songs to her own accompaniment. Her love was redirected from self and the world to God. Her love was "purified" and was raised heavenward. So she can say, "O God, if I worship you in fear of hell, burn me in hell. If I worship you in the hope of heaven, keep me out of heaven. But if I worship you for your own sake, do not withhold your everlasting beauty from me".

Someone asked her, "O Rabi'a do you hate the devil?" She replied, "My love of God leaves me no time to hate the devil!" Then she added, "I saw the Prophet in a dream and he asked, 'O Rabi'a do you love me?' I answered, 'O Apostle of God, who does not love you? But the love of God has so absorbed me that neither love nor hate for any other remains in my heart.' "

This is great stuff, but the Gospel teaches us that loving God cannot be separated from loving our neighbour. (Mk. 12:33) Nevertheless we must give Rabi'a her due view for realising that man's chief end is to love God and enjoy Him forever.

Influences on the Sufis

In a brief survey such as this, we can't weigh the evidence. So I submit it to you for your judgment.

- **From Christians** the Sufis borrowed a lot of their litanies, their vows of silence and their distinctive control of breathing. Muslims often say there is nothing of monasticism in Islam. But in fact, something approaching the monastic ideal took root in Islamic Sufism. Even celibacy was a favoured institution among the Sufis. For example: a Sufi sheikh wrote, "If God desires good for his servant, He will not let him be occupied by family and children".

- **From Neo-Platonism** the Sufis adopted their ideas of emanation of the gnosis – the special knowledge of spiritual mysteries. Some Gnostics were heretical Christians, but the Middle East was rife with "mystery religions" getting their philosophical basis from an upgraded Platonism. Sufism with its emphasis on ecstasy is, in some ways, a syncretism between Islam and deep-rooted previous religious experience that began to permeate both Christianity and Islam.

- **From India/Buddhism/Hinduism**: Much of Central Asia was Buddhist before the coming of Islam. From this source the Sufis adopted the rosary, the concept of nirvana and *fana'a* (extinction) that is really the dissolution of our personality in God, the ground of our existence. Certainly Ibraheim ibn Adham found in Buddha his model for a life of renunciation. When the experience of extinction is reached, the Sufi will have lost all consciousness of soul or self. Sufis use the term '*nafs*' (the lower soul/the self) in much the same way as Christians use the word 'sarx'/flesh. So to a Sufi, his worst enemy is his '*nafs*'. He must do everything he can to overcome it and root it out of his life.

For example: A Sufi fell into the Tigris River. He couldn't swim. A companion called to him, "Shall I ask someone to save you?" "No" came the reply. "Do you wish to be drowned?" "No! God's will be done. What have I to do with wishing?"

Another Sufi, known as the "Master of Sufis" – Al-Abu al-Qasm ibn Muhammad (died 910 A.D.) said, "Sufism is this: God should make you die to yourself and make you live to Him."

We would agree with this, but we would seriously question the Sufi method of obtaining this state.

Stages in the Sufi Path – *'Tariqah'*

The Sufi traveller must go through each of these seven stages:

1. repentance
2. abstinence – doing without things occasionally
3. renunciation – giving up doubtful things
4. poverty – voluntary poverty encourages dependence on God
5. patience
6. trust in God
7. satisfaction

A Sufi is guided along the path through the various stages

- fear of God
- hope
- calm contemplation
- certainty

The 'Stages' can be mastered. The 'States' can come on an individual Sufi from above by God's grace.

A Sufi needs to pass through all the Stages and have experienced all States and at this point he is raised to a higher level of consciousness (gnosis) where the seeker has become **the knower**. Now he realises that the knower, the known and knowledge itself are all one. Someone has likened this three-fold unity to the Christian understanding of the Trinity in an attempt to find parallels between Sufism and Christianity.

Later developments

With the passage of time Sufism moved further and further away from Orthodox Islam in the direction of pantheism – God is the totality of existence – the world/universe is a massive phenomenon that reveals God's self.

Theosophy is any mystical system of religious philosophy that claims a direct intuitive insight into God's nature. The greatest of all Sufi theosophical thinkers in Arabic was Ibn al-'Arabi (died 1240). He was born in Spain, travelled to Tunis and Mecca and finally settled in Damascus. He was known as the "al-Shaykh al-Akbar". He wrote about 500 books. He promoted ideas such as "the unity of being" (*wahdat al-wujud*) as well as knowledge, emanationist metaphysics, the theory of microcosmic return through mystical love and the notion of the perfect person (*al-insan al-kamil*).

It really is pantheistic. It deifies Muhammad. It makes all religions equal. It idolizes women and interprets the Quran in a dangerous manner that horrifies Orthodox leaders. He was accused of heresy and many of his books are still banned in Egypt. Here is just one of Ibn Al-Arabi's sayings, "His being – that is God – is ours. Our being is His. We need Him to exist. He needs us for His self-expression". This is very close to what Al Hallaj said that led to his execution in Baghdad.

Sigmund Freud said that God is no more than a projection of man's thought. Man invents a cosmic father figure and then projects him on to the cosmic screen, thus compensating for a desperate need to lean on a being greater than himself or his circumstances.

'No', says Al Hallaj! It is a man who is the projection. God Himself projects the image of His eternal love so He might see Himself as in a mirror and that image is man. Al Hallaj idolized Jesus as the supreme example of deified humanity.

The Holy Spirit descended and dwelt within him. So Al Hallaj tried to follow in the steps of Jesus. He had a great missionary spirit. He was a man of great spiritual valour. He claimed a religious authority greater than the Caliphs and all religious authorities, due to his possession of the divine presence. He was crucified in spectacular fashion with his remains cremated and scattered so that no tomb could be erected and serve as a centre for Sufi worshippers. As he died, he too prayed for his tormentors.

Al Hallaj said, “You have mingled your spirit with mine as water is mingled with wine. If aught should touch you, it touches me. I am he whom I desire and he whom I desire is I. We are two spirits dwelling in one body. If you see me, you see him. And in seeing him, you see us.”

There is no question as to the heretical nature of such speculation, but it bears witness to the longing of our hearts for “the perfect man” who assures us that we can be one with God the Father through the Lord Jesus who said, ***“I and the Father are One”***.

Another Sufi leader, Abu Sa’ad, discouraged his disciples from following the Sharia. He wouldn’t let them go on Hajj and forbade them from interrupting their *dhikr* if a call to prayer came. Ecstasy was more vital than formal worship. The true mosque is in a pure and holy heart. **There** let all people worship God, for there He dwells and never in a mosque of stone. Prayers in stone mosques are superfluous.

Finally – **Jalal ad-Din Rumi** (1207-1273) called "*Mawlana*" – our Lord or teacher

He was the greatest of the Persian Sufi poets. He was also a pantheist and a believer that all religions are one. Rumi was a Persian who lived in what is now Turkey. Then it was known as the land ‘of the Rum’ meaning ‘of the Romans’. Actually it had been the Byzantine Empire.

He was a great poet, who carried imagination beyond the bounds of time and space to what lies behind everything. In his poem ‘In union with the real’ he passes beyond the relativities of earthly existence. To Rumi, the man of God is beyond faith or infidelity. To the man of God, right and wrong are alike. For him the intellect was diabolical and the emotions were divine. Science and learning were of no value. He wrote, “My beloved fills the whole of existence. He appears in white and black. He appears in Christian and Jew. He appears in letters and points. One I seek, one I know, one I see, one I call; I am drunk with ‘the love cup’. The two worlds have vanished from my sight”.

Some of the Sufi orders (The *Tariqahs*)

The *Tariqahs* became the major way Sufis organised themselves in the 12th century. They enjoyed mass popularity by the 16th century. Then there was a slow decline until the late 20th century. *Tariqahs* are beginning to thrive again. Historically, Sufi orders facilitated inter-regional co-operation in education, in travel and in mission (*dawa*). They were the main organisations that resisted colonialisation.

1. The Qadiriyah – from Ad al-Qadir Jilani of Baghdad (died in 1166 A.D.)

This is a widespread order from North Africa to Indonesia. They stress the value of *dhikr* – praising Allah, mentioning his name, pleading for pardon. Each phrase is to be repeated 100 times followed by 500 recitations of, “There is no God but God”.

The Qadiriyah stress piety, humility, moderation and philanthropy. They appeal to all as they are, in the main, orthodox Muslims. A descendant of al-Jilani who is the keeper of his tomb in Baghdad governs the order. This tomb is a major pilgrimage centre for members of this order from all over the world.

The **Jilaliya** are a Qadiri branch in North Africa who **worship** al-Jilani as a supernatural being. They mix Sufism with a great deal of folk religion.

2. The Naqshbandiya

This order was founded in Central Asia in the 13th century in an attempt to rebuild Islam after the ravages of the Mongol invasions. They developed mainly as an urban order with close links with the orthodox Muslims. They recite their *dhikr* silently, ban music and dance – i.e. sama' – and prefer contemplation to ecstasy. Their “middle way” is just acceptable to the Islamists.

The great poet, Mir Dad (died 1785 A.D.) belonged to this order. The *Tariqahs* are often connected to trade and craft guilds.

3. The Mawlawiyah founded by Jalal ad-din Rumi

They are an order that emphasise discipline and dancing (*sama'*) with the head tilted back and the arm pointing towards heaven. They whirl non-stop for 45 minutes until they sink to the floor in ecstasy. (In the West they are known as the ‘whirling dervishes’.)

4. The Rifa'iya

This order was started in the marshlands of southern Iraq by al-Rifa'i (died in 1187 A.D.). They stress poverty, abstinence and mortification of the flesh. The members of the order move in a circle, hands on one another's shoulders and chant their *dhikr* loudly. They are sometimes called the 'howling dervishes'. They focus on dramatic ritual and bizarre feats such as sword swallowing, handling snakes, fire walking and piercing themselves with skewers. In India they are known as fakirs.

Psychologists define these experiences as self-hypnosis through ritual repetition of the *dhikr*.

The Decline of Sufism

The Sufi orders spread Islam more effectively than Muslim armies in India, South East Asia and sub-Saharan West Africa. This was partly because they "contextualised" Orthodox Islam into different cultures. Of course the result was a great deal of syncretism.

But as the Sufi orders grew in wealth and in political influence, their spirituality declined. This was as they began to focus on saint-worship, miracle working, superstition and the occult. The external religious practices of Orthodox Islam were neglected. Morals declined and learning was despised.

So Sufism degenerated from its peak of seeking gnosis and ecstasy into the occult. This led to the reformers of Islam in the 19th/20th centuries giving rise to Islamist movements and attempting to suppress Sufi movements.

The Weakness of Sufism

- It is escapist – seeking to run away from the confusions of the world and its complexities.
- It causes neglect of responsibilities to family, to neighbours and to society.
- There is an overdue concern with the subjective experience. Self-examination is good, but it should not become a full-time occupation!

Yet with all our criticism, we can't help but admire the pious other-worldliness of these men and women to whom God was more real than the world and His love more precious than any other attainment.

In the oil rich states today with their fabulous wealth, is there any discernible reaction against rigid formalism? Can we see any turning again to Sufism?

A Revival of Sufism?

In Central Asia there is government encouragement to revive the Naqshabandiya order. Apparently there is a revival of Sufi orders in Egypt. Is there a growing desire among Muslims to draw close to God?

In the UK there are several active Sufi groups seeking to train their disciples. One is called **'The Fourth Stage Process of Purification of Body, Mind and Spirit'**. In this group all rules of washing and praying etc. must be done first, then comes the *dhikr*. As always in Islam, grace may only be experienced when the law is fully obeyed.

A friend went to a large gathering of English-born Sufi Muslims. After the meeting there was a huge amount of food available. My friend mentioned to a young professional Suf, how hard it was to control his lower nature – i.e. his greed – in order to live a godly life. The man said he too was struggling to control his '*nafs*' (lower soul) and so he was probably going to overeat! So my friend quoted Paul, ***"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me".*** (Gal. 2:20)

This verse directly contradicts all that Orthodox Muslims believe. Immediately this young Sufi was interested in the 'crucified life' and a rewarding conversation resulted.

So our Sufi friends are deeply aware of their struggle with indwelling pride and selfishness. They long to be free, but in honest self-awareness some acknowledge they don't know the way forward.

In 1983 Phil Parshall wrote a book called **Bridges to Islam**. He pointed out that Sufism provides a great opening for the Gospel. His book is a great introduction to Sufism and is helpful in providing "bridges" over which the Gospel can go.