

Sufism (Part 1 of 2)

(English)

الصوفية (1)

(إنجليزي)

Abdurrahman Murad

عبد الرحمن مراد

<http://www.islamreligion.com>

Introduction

Whether it's from a documentary on TV or a beautifully designed website, the majority have heard something about 'Sufis' and 'Sufism'; programs on TV have aired, talk show hosts have made mention of them and politicians are taking a keen interest in this group... one has only to type the word 'Sufi' on any search engine to be overwhelmed with the videos and pictures that are available. In cyberspace one can view images and videos of Sufi mystics and elders dancing in rhythmic forms to the background of vibrant melodies.

Disturbing images of mystic Sufi elders jabbing their heads with knives or submitting themselves to various means of torture are all too common as well.

One interested in Islam may get a wrong idea about Islam and Muslims, for to the occident 'Sufis' and 'Sufism' is just a synonym of Islam and Muslim.

The question that arises, are they really Muslims, and are they practicing Islam? Before jumping the gun, I have to make mention that there are many sites, articles and books that have been written and put together, but most talk about Sufism in an emotional manner, which will lead one to think that they are impartial. In this humble endeavor, I attempt to write about 'Sufism' in an informative manner, far from any biases.

Though only a tiny minority, Sufis can be found in many countries, Muslim and non-Muslim. But contrary to the belief that Sufism is one 'group', Sufism is divided into 'orders'; each differs from the other in terms of belief and practice.

Some groups are larger than others, and others have gone to rest with the passage of time. Among the surviving groups today, there is the Tijaani order, the Naqshabandi order, the Qadiri order and the Shadhili order.

Origin of Sufism

In its earliest form, Sufi teachings stressed that an individual should give more emphasis to the spiritual aspects of Islam, a result of many losing sight of this lofty goal of Islam.

After a period of time, however, infamous Sufi elders introduced practices foreign to Islam which were welcomed by its followers. Practices introduced included dancing, playing music, and even consuming hashish.

The Scholar Ibn al-Jawzi, wrote in his book ‘Talbis Iblis’ about the origin of the name used by this group, saying: ‘They are called by this name in relation to the first person who dedicated his life to worship around the Ka’bah, whose name was Sufah.’

According to this, those who wanted to emulate him called themselves ‘Sufis’.

Ibn al-Jawzi also mentions another reason, he said: ‘they would wear woolen clothes.’ Wool in Arabic is called ‘soof’ and woolen clothes were the sign of an ascetic during those times, since wool was the cheapest form of clothing and was very rough on the skin; in short it was a symbol of asceticism.

In any case, the word Sufi was not present at the time of Prophet Muhammad and his companions instead first appeared at about 200 Hijrah (200 years after the migration of the Prophet from Makkah to Madinah).

The well known scholar, Ibn Taymiyyah, mentions that the first appearance of Sufism was in Basrah, Iraq, where some people went to extremes in worship and in avoiding the worldly life, such as not seen in other lands.¹

So what is Sufism?

Sufism is a series of concepts and practices that range from poverty, seclusion, deception, depriving the soul, singing and dancing; and is based on a mix of many different religions and philosophies such as Greek philosophies, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, as well as Islam.

It is often referred to by Sufis themselves or by Orientalists as “Islamic mysticism”, in order to give the impression that Islam is either wholly or partly a dogmatic religion with a set of meaningless rituals. The very nature of Sufism (or *Tasawwuf*) opposes what a Muslim is to believe in, this will be explained further when I make mention of Sufi beliefs in general.

¹ *Al-Fataawaa* (11/6)

Traits of a Muslim

A Muslim always refers back to the Quran and narrations of Prophet Muhammad, may the blessing and mercy of God be upon him, called the Sunnah, in matters of religion. God tells us in the Quran:

“It is not for a believing man or a believing woman, when God and His Messenger have decided a matter; they should [thereafter] have any choice about their affair. And whoever disobeys God and His Messenger has certainly strayed into clear error.” (Quran 33:36)

Prophet Muhammad stressed the importance of following the Quran and Sunnah and the danger of introducing any innovations into Islam. It is known that the Prophet said: “Whoever does a deed which is not in accordance to my commands (i.e. the Islamic Law), it shall be rejected.” (*Saheeh Muslim*)

Ibn Mas’ood (a companion of the prophet), may God be pleased with him, said:

“The Messenger of God, may the blessing and mercy of God be upon him, made a straight line on the ground with his hand, then he said, “This is the straight path of God.” Then he made a (short) line on each side of the straight line; then he said, “These (short) lines, each one has a devil inviting people to it.” Then he recited the verse (of the Quran): “And this is My path straight. So follow it, and do not follow (other) ways, lest they lead you away from My path.” (Quran 6:153)

(Saheeh: Reported by Ahmad and an-Nasaa’e.)

A Muslim therefore is required to obey God and His Messenger. This is the highest authority in Islam.

One is not to blindly follow religious leaders; rather, we as humans are required to use the faculties given to us by God, to think and reason.

Sufism, on the other hand, is a binding order that strips one of free thought and personal discretion and puts him at the mercy of the Sheikh of the order... as it has been said by some Sufi elders, ‘one must be with their Sheikh as a dead person is while being washed’, i.e. one should not argue,

or oppose the opinion of the Sheikh and must display total obedience and submission to him.

True Muslims are content with the name “Muslim” given to them by Almighty God, as He says:

“He has chosen you (to conform to His religion) and has imposed no difficulty upon you in religion, the religion of your father Abraham. He named you ‘Muslims’ both before (in the preceding Divine Scriptures) and in this Book.” (Quran 22.78)

Sufis may insist that they are Muslims, but at the same time some insist on identifying themselves as Sufis rather than Muslims.

Islamic Beliefs at a Glance: Belief in God

In short a Muslim believes in the Uniqueness of God. He has no partner; no one is like unto Him. God, Almighty, says:

“There is nothing like unto Him¹ and He is the all-Hearing and the all-Seeing.” (Quran 42:11)

God is separate from His creation and not a part of it. He is the Creator, and all else is His creation.

Sufis hold a number of beliefs in relation to God, Almighty; of these beliefs are the following:

- a) ***Al-Hulool***: This belief denotes that God, Almighty, dwells in His creation.
- b) ***Al-It'tihaad***: This belief denotes that God, Almighty, and the creation are one, united presence.
- c) ***Wahdatul-Wujood***: This belief denotes that one should not differentiate between the Creator and the creation, for both the creation and the Creator are one entity.

Mansoor al-Hallaaj, a figure much revered by Sufis, said:

¹ There is no similarity whatsoever between the Creator and His creation in essence, in attributes or in deed

“I am He Whom I love,” he exclaimed, “He Whom I love is I; we are two souls co-inhabiting one body. If you see me you see Him and if you see Him you see me.”¹

Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, another revered figure in Sufism, was infamous for his statements: “What is under my dress is none but God,” “The slave is the Lord and the Lord is a slave.”²

These above beliefs strongly contradict the Muslim belief in the Oneness of God, for Islam is a strict monotheism. These cardinal Sufi doctrines are not far from some of the Christian beliefs or the Hindu belief of reincarnation. S. R. Sharda in his book, ‘Sufi Thought’ said: “Sufi literature of the post-Timur period shows a significant change in thought content. It is pantheistic. After the fall of Muslim orthodoxy from power at the centre of India for about a century, due to the invasion of Timur, Sufism became free from the control of the Muslim orthodoxy and consorted with Hindu saints, who influenced them to an amazing extent. The Sufi adopted Monism and wifely devotion from the Vaishnava Vedantic school and Bhakti and Yogic practices from the Vaishnava Vedantic school. By that time, the popularity of the Vedantic pantheism among the Sufis had reached its zenith.”

Belief in the Prophet of God

A Muslim believes that Prophet Muhammad was the Final Prophet and Messenger of God. He was not divine, nor is he to be worshipped; but he is to be obeyed and one cannot worship God except in a manner that has been sanctioned by Prophet Muhammad, may the blessing and mercy of God be upon him.

Sufi orders hold a wide variety of beliefs in relation to Prophet Muhammad, may the blessing and mercy of God be upon him. Of them are those who believe that he was ignorant of the knowledge the Sufi Elders possess.

Al-Bustami, a Sufi Sheikh said: “We have entered a sea of knowledge at the shore of which the Prophets and Messengers stood.”

¹ *At-Tawaaseen* by Al-Hallaj

² *Al-Fatoohaatul-Makkiyyah & Al-Fatoohaat*

Other Sufis ascribe some type of divinity to the Prophet, may the blessing and mercy of God be upon him, saying that all of creation was created from the 'light' of Prophet Muhammad.

Some even believe that he was the first of creation and that he is resting upon the throne of God, which is the belief of Ibn Arabi and other Sufis who came after him.

Belief in Heaven and Hell

In short, Muslims believe that both Hell and Heaven are existent now, and are two actual abodes. Hell is where a sinful person will be punished and Heaven is where a pious person will be rewarded.

Sufis in general believe that one should not ask God to grant them Paradise; they even claim that the *Wali* (guardian) should not seek it, for it is a sign of one's lack of intellect. To them 'Paradise' holds an immaterial meaning, which is to receive the knowledge of the unseen from God and to fall in love with Him.

As for Hell, a Sufi believes that one should not try to escape from it. According to them, a true Sufi is not to be fearful of the Fire. Some even believe that if a Sufi elder were to spit on the Fire, it would be put out, as Abu Yazid al-Bustami claimed.