Sufism: Seeking God

Summary: *Sufism refers to the inner dimension of Islam which aims to attain mystical knowledge and love of God through meditative practices, or dhikr, ethical cultivation, and purification of the heart and self. Though Sufism began with individuals, Sufi communities, or* tariqahs*, were formed around them providing a template for spiritual guidance. Poetry, art, liturgies, biographical and philosophical works, and other forms of Sufi literature were also produced. Today, Muslims practice Sufism in a variety of modes and mediums.*

Sufism, or *tasawwuf*, is not a separate sect of Islam, but rather a stream of interpretation emphasizing the interior path of mystical love, knowledge, and devotion to God. Though the Prophet Muhammad and his companions can be considered the first Sufis, Sufism formally began in the 8th century as a homage to Muhammad's simple lifestyle and spiritual life during a time in which some Muslims considered the community as straying from this ideal. Many attribute the origins of the name "Sufi" to the coarse wool garment (*suf*) worn by these early ascetics, symbolizing renunciation of material luxuries. Others suggest the term derives from the Arabic word for purity (*safa*). This early movement would soon develop a variety of orientations, doctrines, ritual practices, literature, and formal communities.

Though orientations within Sufism are many, the essential goals are emptying the ego of selfish traits and desires such as greed, lust, and vanity, and adorning it with selfless qualities like generosity, love, and humility, in order to attain mystical unity with the divine. This journey, or the Sufi path, is formalized in what are known as stations (*maqamat*) and states (*ahwal*). Like landmarks on a journey, the stations outline the psychological and ethical qualities needed to advance on the path to reach the destination. They usually begin with the station of repentance—followed by renunciation, humility, patience, gratitude, beneficence, contentment, joy, and others—until finally reaching the stage of complete emptying of selfish traits (*fana*), and instead embodying the morality of God (*baqa*). At this point, the traveller reaches their destination—mystical union with the divine—in which they become engulfed in gnosis and divine love. Along the journey, they may also experience temporary psychological states such as constriction, expansion, yearning, and ecstasy. Like unexpected happenstances on a journey, these are seen as spontaneous gifts from God. The resulting transformation after traversing the Sufi path is referred to as sainthood (*wilayah*) and the individual becomes known as a "friend of God," or saint (*wali*).

The journey must also be undertaken solely for God's sake and not for worldly or other-worldly benefits. Rabi'ah of Basra, the famous 8th century Iraqi Sufi woman, said:

> *"O God, if I worship You out of fear of Hell,*
> *then burn me in Hell;*
> *If I worship You in hope of Paradise,*
> *then exclude me from Paradise;*
> *But if I worship You for Yourself alone,*
> *then deny me not your Eternal Beauty."*

As certain friends of God became more widely known, communities of students and disciples began to coalesce around these figures, leading to the establishment of formal Sufi orders, known as *tariqahs*, which take their founder's orientation as a guide for spiritual development. Hundreds of Sufi orders have existed. Some of the most prominent today are the Shadhili, Naqshbandi, Qadiri, Chishti, Mevlevi, and Tijani, all of which are named after their founders. Sufi orders also established centers for meeting and communal living, known as *zawiyas* in Arabic, or *khanqahs* in Persian, throughout the Muslim world. In some cases, these also acted as hostels for traveling Muslim traders or wandering Sufis. In other cases, they housed the tombs of its founders and subsequent masters and disciples, leading to popular practices of saint veneration and pilgrimage.

Sufi ritual practices take their basis in Qur'anic verses which exhort to remembering God such that they do so *"standing, sitting, and lying down" (Qur'an 3:191)*; In other words, in a variety of modes and circumstances. These ritual practices are collectively referred to as *dhikr* ("remembrance") and include a variety of expressions such as repetition of God's names and other formulas (*tasbih*), silent meditation (*muraqabah*), contemplation (*tafakkur*), breathing practices (*pas anfus*), music and dancing, or ceremonies involving multiple practices (*sama*). The common denominator in all these practices is direct, personal experience of God. For example, the term "whirling dervish" refers to a member of the Mevlevi Order, followers of the 13th century Sufi saint Jalal al-Din Rumi, who perform a whirling ritual dance, a form of *sama*. This *sama* represents the essence of the Sufi journey: the tan-colored hat symbolizes the ego's tombstone, and the wide, white skirt is its shroud. The removal of the black cloak is shedding the ego's selfishness and becoming reborn to truth. While whirling, the right hand is open upwards towards the sky, symbolizing receiving of God's beneficence, while the left hand is pointed

downwards towards earth, symbolizing the transference of that beneficence to humanity. Whirling itself is symbolic of the heart's revolution around the divine, and embracing all of humanity with love.

Sufis have also produced a wide range of literature including commentaries on the Qur'an, biographical works of famous Sufis, manuals of conduct and ritual practices, artistic pieces, liturgies, belles-lettres, and works on Sufi philosophy, cosmology, and ethics. Perhaps the most well-known form of literature however is poetry. These poems are written in a wide range of languages, including Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and Malay. A common theme found in Sufi poetry is a critique of focusing solely on legalistic aspects of Islam without their inner meaning, as these lines from Rumi's *Masnavi* (trans. Mojaddedi) demonstrate:

> *"He fasts and prays like penitents,*
> *And worships and gives alms, but it's a waste—*
> *Of mystic states he's never had a taste.*
> *He does good deeds and acts of piety,*
> *But hasn't tasted true proximity;*
> *His deeds are empty acts, as though he's lied,*
> *A walnut with no kernel kept inside.*
> *Spiritual savour is what makes fruit grow;*
> *There must be kernels in the seeds you sow—*
> *Can kernel-less seeds still grow into trees?*
> *Soulless forms just exist in fantasies."*

Today, in the United States, Sufism is practiced in a variety of forms. Some American Muslims choose to follow traditional Sufi orders which have found their home in America, such as the Shadhiliyyah or Tijaniyyah, or new orders like the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. Others may belong to more universalist branches of Sufism, like the Inayati order, founded after the Indian Sufi musician, Inayat Khan. Many American Muslims pursue Sufism as a personal spiritual and ethical practice, and may not be formally affiliated with an order. America has also begun to see literary productions of an indigenous American Sufism due to Sufi poets like Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore, and Sufi music artists like Baraka Blue.

The attraction of Sufism has not only been limited to Muslim audiences. Rumi's poetry, often described as one of America's top selling poets, is one way in which the Sufi path has inspired and touched the hearts of many. In 2005, UNESCO declared the Mevlevi *sama* ceremony as part of human cultural heritage, designating it with protection status, and declared 2007 to be the international year of Rumi in commemoration of his 800th birthday. The diversity of Sufi thought, practice, and affiliation, and its varied expressions across mediums and places, shows the truly trans-national and trans-denominational attraction the Sufi path offers.