

Sufism

(part 1 of 2)

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 'Talbīs Iblīs' 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 a 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 an 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.

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 Him^[2] 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’ihaad*: 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: “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.”^[3]

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.”^[4]

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.

Sufi orders hold a wide variety of beliefs in relation to Prophet Muhammad. 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.”

Other Sufis ascribe some type of divinity to the Prophet 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.

Footnotes:

[1] *Al-Fataawaa* (11/6)

[2] There is no similarity whatsoever between the Creator and His creation in essence, in attributes or in deed.

[3] *At-Tawaaseen* by Al-Hallaj

[4] *Al-Fatoohaatul-Makkiyyah & Al-Fatoohaat*

(part 2 of 2)

Principles of Sufism

'Willful and total submission to the Sheikh', is probably the motto of Sufism. From a glance, it is clear that a special and complete bond is formed between the head of the Sufi order (the 'Sheikh') and the *Mureed* (follower); understanding the principles of Sufism lies in understanding its basic structure. So what is it all about?

Basically, the follower gives a pledge of allegiance, whereby he pledges to obey the Sheikh, and in turn the Sheikh promises to deliver the follower from every problem or calamity that may befall him. The Sheikh also offers the sincere follower lucrative fringe benefits. Once a follower agrees, he is blessed and assigned a set of *Dhikr* (chants). The follower is also to carry on with his life in a manner that is laid out by the Sufi order. If a conflict arises between his duties within the order and outside duties, the follower is to act upon the instructions of the Sheikh. In this manner the Sheikh's hold over the follower becomes absolute.

All in all, the follower is separated from the outside world and is exploited in many ways. As Muslims we believe that no human has a special power or ability to deliver us from the calamities of the grave or the Hereafter. Each of us will stand before God and will be judged individually.

God tells us:

**“And every soul earns not [blame] except against itself, and no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another.”
(Quran 7:164)**

We also believe that as Muslims we are not to submit and surrender ourselves to anyone but God, Almighty. Besides the Creator, all else is apt to make error. The Prophet, may the blessing and mercy of God be upon him, said:

“Every son of Adam makes mistakes and the best of them are those who repent.” (Tirmidhi)

The Sheikh

He is the ‘supreme authority’, the head of ‘job’ distribution within the Order and gives each of the followers their necessary *Dhikr*. It is to this individual whom the follower pledges full and total obedience; thereafter, the two universal laws of the Sheikh-follower bondage will come into effect:

- a. The follower must never argue with the Sheikh, nor ask him for a proof in relation to the actions he does.
- b. Whoever opposes the Sheikh, will have broken the ‘covenant’ and is thus debarred from all fringe benefits offered by the Sheikh, even if he stays a close friend to him.

As Muslims we believe that all acts of worship are ‘*Tawqeefiyah*’, i.e. not subject to opinion; thus must be substantiated with textual evidences that are both authentic and decisive. God, Almighty, tells us:

**“Say (to them), ‘produce your proof if you are truthful.’”
(Quran 2:111)**

We believe that there is no middle-man between God and His slaves. We are to call unto Him directly. God tells us:

“And your Lord says, ‘Call upon Me; I will respond to you.’ Indeed, those who disdain My worship will enter Hell [rendered] contemptible.” (Quran 40:60)

In Sufism, the Sheikh is thought to be ‘the inspired man to whose eyes the mysteries of the hidden are unveiled, for the Sheikhs see with the light of God and know what thoughts and confusions are in man’s hearts. Nothing can be concealed from them.’^[1] Ibn Arabi, claimed that he used to receive direct revelation from God, similar to the way that Prophet Muhammad did, and was quoted as saying: “Some works I wrote at the command of God sent to me in sleep, or through mystical revelations.” *M. Ibn Arabi, “The Bezels of Wisdom,” pp.3*

We believe that the knowledge of the unseen is restricted to God alone. Anyone who claims the knowledge of the unseen has indeed told a lie. God tells us:

“And who is more disbelieving than he who forges a lie against God, or says, ‘It has been revealed to me,’ when nothing has been revealed to him?”(Quran 6.93)

The Prophet said:

□ Do not forge lies against me, because he who does so enters the Fire.”
(Saheeh Muslim)

The Covenant

This is an interesting ceremony, which by far, is the most important principle of Sufism as it is common among all Sufi Orders. Here the Sheikh and the follower hold hands and close their eyes in solemn meditation. The follower willfully and wholeheartedly pledges to respect the Sheikh as his leader and guide to the path of God. He also pledges to adhere to the rites of the Order throughout his life and promises never to walk away, along with this the follower pledges complete and unconditional allegiance, obedience and loyalty to the Sheikh. After this the Sheikh recites:

“Verily, those who take the allegiance to you take it to Allah.” (Quran 48:10)

The follower is then given his specific *Dhikr*. The Sheikh asks the follower: “Have you accepted me as your Sheikh and spiritual guide before God, Almighty?” In reply, the follower is to say: “I have accepted,” and the Sheikh responds saying: “And we have accepted.” Both of them recite the Testimony of Faith and the ceremony is ended by the follower kissing the Sheikh’s hand.

This entire ceremony was unknown during the Prophet’s life and the best three generations that preceded him. The Prophet said:

“Whoever lives after me shall see many differences (i.e. religious innovations); so adhere to my *Sunnah* and the *Sunnah* of my Rightly Guided Caliphs.” *(Abu Dawood)*

The Prophet also said:

“Verily, the best of speech is the Book of God, and the best of guidance is the guidance of (Prophet) Muhammad and the evil of all religious matters are the innovations. Every innovation (in religion) is a bid’ah and every bid’ah is misguidance, and every misguidance will lead to the Fire.”
(Saheeh Muslim)

Imam Malik, may Allah grant him His Mercy, said: “He who introduces an innovation in the religion of Islam and deems it a good thing in effect claims by that Muhammad betrayed (the trust of conveying) the Divine Message.”

The Dhikr

It is also known as the ‘*Wird*’ and in Sufism it is the practice of repeating the name of God, and the repetition of a set number of invocations. These invocations may include beseeching the dead or seeking help from other than God for needs that only God Almighty can grant.

Ahmad at-Tijani, a Sufi Elder, claimed that the *wird* was withheld by Prophet Muhammad; he did not teach it to any of his Companions. At-Tijani claimed that the Prophet knew that a time would come when the *wird* would be made public but the person who would do that was not yet in existence. As a result, Sufis believe that there is an ongoing chain of transmission between Prophet Muhammad and their current Sheikh.

Dhikr is categorized by the Sufi elders into three categories:

- A. *Dhikr* of the commoners, in which they are to repeat ‘La ilaaha ill-Allah Muhammad-ur-Rasoolullah’ (i.e. there is no God worthy of being worshipped but Allah and Muhammad is the slave of God.)
- B. *Dhikr* of the high class, which is to repeat the name of God, ‘Allah’.
- C. *Dhikr* of the elite, which is to repeat the Divine pronoun ‘Hu’, (i.e. He).

At times, the *Dhikr* is chanted in melodic hymns with eyes closed, rich music may be played (to some this is essential); moreover, some will dance before the Sheikh while saying the *Dhikr*. Many a time the *Dhikr* includes open polytheism (the greatest sin in Islam). God tells us:

“And it has been revealed to you and to those before you: If you attribute partners to God, your deed shall surely be in vain and you shall certainly be among the losers.” (Quran 39:65)

Interpretation of the Quran

In Sufism, studying the exegesis of the Quran or pondering the meanings of its verses is discouraged, and at times, even forbidden. Sufis claim that every verse of the Quran has an outward meaning and an inward meaning. The inward meaning is understood solely by the Sufi elders. On account of this, Sufis have introduced concepts and words that are totally foreign to the teachings of Islam.

In the Quran God, Almighty encourages us to properly understand His words. God tells us:

“(This is) a Scripture that We have revealed unto you, full of blessing, that they may ponder its revelations, and that men of understanding may reflect.” (Quran 38:29)

The exegesis of the Quran is accomplished by studying the Quran along with the Sunnah; these two sources of Islamic law must be taken hand in hand as one integral unit. We are to understand and interpret the Quran and the Sunnah the way they were understood by the first generations.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the above, Sufism varies quite drastically from the true spirit of Islam. Sufism inculcates in the follower the will to stop using the basic faculties given to him by God, the Creator of the world and to submit himself to a form of slavery.

Islam, on the other hand, is very simple; there is no need for intermediaries or any saints between man and God, and one is only to submit and surrender themselves to God, Almighty.

Footnotes:

[1] Saif an-Nasr, *Seera of Hamidiyyeh*, 1956