Insights into Sufism

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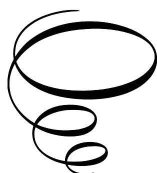
Voices from the Heart

Edited by

Ruth J. Nicholls and Peter G. Riddell

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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INTRODUCTION

RUTH NICHOLLS AND PETER G. RIDDELL

For the Wahhabi and Salafi of Saudi Arabia and those who follow similar literalist interpretations of Islam such as devotees of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Sufism is a heresy. It stands accused of innovations (*bid'a*),[1] that is, practices not approved of by the Prophet, as well as blasphemy (*shirk*), in that some of its teaching and practices appear to make associates of Allah. An ISIS spokesman described the goals of the organisation as follows in the ISIS magazine *Rumiyah*:

> "Our main focus … is to wage war against the manifestations of shirk and bid'ah, including Sufism… The Sufis believe that the dead have the power to bring about harm and benefit. Hence they direct various types of worship toward the dead … They also claim that the dead are intermediaries between them and Allah, just as human kings have intermediaries between themselves and their subjects."[2]

On the other hand, there are those who claim that Sufism has its origins in the life of the Prophet, for after all, he spent time in meditation and fasting.[3] Others claim that Sufism developed out of the company of those who were closest to the Prophet – the *ashab al-suffa* (the People of the bench) – and consequently had opportunities for more intimate insight and understanding of the teachings of the Qur'an as well as the life and sayings of the Prophet. That is, they not only had knowledge (*gnosis*) but also, through their close companionship (*suhbat*) with the Prophet, a deeper understanding. Adam Hani Walker comments as follows:

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[1] In this volume, foreign words are placed in italics.

[2] Rukmini Callimachi, "To the World, They Are Muslims. To ISIS, Sufis Are Heretics" *The New York Times*, Nov. 25, 2017: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/25/world/middleeast/sufi-muslims-isis-sinai.html, accessed 19/12/19.

[3] See for example Farzana Moon, *Prophet Muhammad: the First Sufi of Islam*, New York: Garnet Publishing (UK) Ltd, 2013.

> What is certainly clear is that the spirit of the People of the Bench, and their complete shunning of fitn [sedition], is to be found in the actions and words of all the great Sufis.[4]

Others consider that the origin of the word is from *saf* or pure, reflecting the goal of the Sufis to reach perfection. However, most would point to the origin of the word from *suf* or wool, reflecting the practice of Christian ascetics to wear wool.

Sufis themselves are often at pains to justify their Islamic roots and heritage, quoting from the Qur'an, the Hadith and the life (*sira*) and practices of the Prophet. Indeed, many of the famous Islamic scholars are well known Sufis. What is more, Sufi practice also reflects accepted Islamic rituals, though the particular expressions may differ from non-Sufi expectations. Indeed, this is reflected in the organisation of this book with its three sections. The first section introduces Sufism by focusing on its salient features. The second section outlines some of the local expressions of Sufism while the final section considers some practical issues relating to Sufism and its practices.

The initial chapter by Nazir Ali outlines the development and significant issues associated with Sufism. Indeed, each of the chapters within this book includes some aspect of the growth and development of Sufism. While having its origins in asceticism, which almost seamlessly moved to mysticism and ecstatic experiences, the latter at times for its own sake, Sufism finds its expression in a variety of forms. However, at its centre is the desire to know and even experience the Divine – the one who is said to be nearer than one's jugular vein. Understanding Allah is important not only for those adhering to *shari'a*-minded Islam but also for Sufis for whom it became a central but also divisive issue. So, it is fitting that in the second chapter, Walters briefly explores that particular aspect of Sufism. Another important aspect of Sufism is the role that the sheikh (*pir, murshid*) plays in relationship to the order of which he is a leader. Since Islam has no formal "priesthood" the role of authority and leadership have been issues of discussion and contention over the years. Aždajić's chapter seeks to understand the role of the Sufi sheikhs (*pirs*) through the lens of charismatic leadership as a means of identifying the significant role they have played.

Another very important aspect of Sufism relates to the Sufi interpretation of the Islamic doctrine of *jihad*, which is sometimes considered the sixth pillar of Islam. For some, *jihad* is interpreted as an internal fight against the

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[4] Adam Hani Walker, "As'hab us-Suffah: The great lovers of the Holy Prophet (saw)" https://www.alislam.org/library/articles/Ashab-us-Suffah-20080304MN.pdf, accessed 19/12/19.

nafs, one's lower nature. On the other hand, the original understanding is arguably that *jihad* is external fighting in the cause of Allah, as exhibited by the Prophet in his military campaigns and as practised in the military expansion of Islam, especially in the early years of its spread. McRoy's chapter, which considers Sufi involvement in *jihad*, presents a very different picture from the one that is typically portrayed of "peaceful" Sufis sitting in a circle meditating, reciting the names of Allah or singing his praise.

Almost in contrast, Injeeli's chapter takes up the theme of poetry in Sufism. Because of the constant and often violent criticism from the *shari'a*-minded literalists, poetry and song have often been the communication medium of preference for Sufi scholars. In addition, poetry and song more easily express the esoteric, the emotions and the language of the heart. For many this language of their heart becomes the song of the lover seeking the beloved. Interestingly, some of the world's most famous poetry, especially that of Rumi, has come from the pen of Sufis. Not surprisingly, then, poetry is referred to in a number of the chapters: those by Nazir-Ali, Injeeli and Bales. As such it highlights the significance of this form of expression within Sufism.

The final chapter in this section considers the place of women in Sufism. Nicholls takes up the theme of the contradicting and dissonant voices that are constantly heard not only regarding the place of women in Islam itself but also in relation to their practice of Sufism. However, it is in Sufism that women have found a freedom to pray, worship and encounter transcendent reality as they search for blessing which for them is the yearning of their hearts.

Since Sufism has often been at the forefront of the spread of Islam, it is not surprising that Sufism adapts to the countries to which it has spread where it has taken on, to varying degrees, its own shape having, in turn, been influenced by those countries. Such deviation is much to the displeasure of the literalist *shari'a*-minded Muslims who demand strict and unchanging practice of what they consider to be pristine Islam. While it is not possible to cover every local expression of Sufism, three of the chapters consider Sufism as it is practised primarily in Asia. In two of the countries, India-Pakistan and Indonesia, Muslims are in the majority. In the other two, China and Australia, Islam is a minority. Bales' chapter on Sufism in Pakistan focuses on the practical expressions of Sufism while also reflecting on its emotional expressions in the form of poetry, the language of the heart. Riddell's chapter, while dealing with an Indonesian scholar, addresses a theme that is relevant across the Muslim world; namely, Sufis who travel beyond their native lands to Arabia and elsewhere to study the Islamic sciences in depth, before returning home to make their particular mark.

As Islam in general and Sufism in particular moved across cultural and linguistic boundaries, two opposing forces came into play. The one was to introduce Arabian Islam per se as an imposition on the existing culture virtually obliterating the pre-existing culture. The other was to integrate or contextualise Islamic and Sufic concepts or philosophy into the existing worldview and cultural framework. Lee's chapter on Wang Yangming and Wang Daiyu examines Wang Daiyu's attempt to express Islamic and Sufic concepts within the complex framework of a number of Chinese philosophies with their own unique concepts and terminology. Consequently, this chapter presents the reader with several challenges. The first relates to presenting Chinese philosophical concepts in English and the second is understanding a range of Sufic philosophical concepts as contextualised in the Chinese culture using English words which have their own inbuilt range of reference and meaning. Since Australia is the country of origin of this volume, it was felt fitting to consider a Sufi meeting here in Melbourne. Power's chapter reflects on an actual Sufi gathering that takes place in the city of Melbourne, where a multicultural group of men, women and children meet together for *dhikr*.

While the first two sections of this book have considered Sufism from an academic, theoretical perspective, the final section considers the impact of Sufism in the lives of ordinary people. Nicholls' final chapter looks at how one Sufi order deals with the problem of evil spirits and the role that the Qur'an and Islamic ritual practice play in the lives of people who consider they have been affected by these powers.

An important issue which is not addressed in these chapters, but one which must always be central to any understanding of the topics discussed in these chapters, is the question of terminology. For example, the terms "god" and even "mystical experience" can have multiple shades of meaning. Readers should understand the meaning of the word in the context of the chapter, not in terms of any preconceived understandings.

For Sufis, they are on a spiritual journey – a desire to attain perfection and spiritual unity with God, the transcendent reality or to be absorbed in the divine. For them, it is the longing of their heart. Their practices are an attempt to express the voice, the feelings and the longings of their hearts. This book can only hope to begin to articulate some of these Sufi voices. There are many more and they long to be heard. Understanding Sufism is a journey in itself. The goal here is to assist the reader on that journey – a journey that is an expression of the Islamic heart.

Melbourne, 30 December 2019

SECTION 1:

OUTLINING SUFISM

CHAPTER ONE

SUFISM:
A SURVEY

MICHAEL NAZIR-ALI

What is mysticism?

Sufism or *tasawwuf* is also, and rightly, known as Islamic mysticism. This immediately drives us to ask: what is mysticism? Not surprisingly, different answers have been given to this question depending on who is answering the question. Thus, for Annemarie Schimmel, a noted scholar of Sufism, mysticism is to be understood as knowledge which is not attained by ordinary means or by intellectual effort. It is a knowledge, she uses the term *gnosis*, of the heart, of inner illumination which is direct and unmediated. It is usually attained through detachment from the seductions of this world and its goal is an experience of union with the Divine Beloved or, alternatively, the Beatific Vision where the lover can contemplate the Beloved. Indeed, love is the driving force in the attainment of mystical goals whether of mystical union or the beatific vision.[1] In much of such an understanding of mysticism, we could be talking about mediaeval Christian mystics, such as Meister Eckhart, St John of the Cross or St Teresa of Avila. In due course, we will have to ask what have been the distinctives of Sufism, but we can also note similarities with other traditions of mystical thought.

Schimmel distinguishes between, first, the "voluntaristic" approach where the mystic seeks to merge his or her will with the divine will (as reflected in the Prophetic Hadith *takhallaqu bi-akhlaq Allahi*, (create in yourselves the divine qualities) and, second, one of the "gnostic" types which seeks greater knowledge of the Divine Being and how such a being relates to the universe. In the later history of Sufism, the two tendencies are distinct but also intermingle, sometimes in the work of a single mystic. The

[1] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 4ff.

Oxford scholar R. C. Zaehner (1913-1974), on the other hand, tends to analyse mystical experience as falling into a number of quite different categories. There are, first of all, the "nature-mystics" who feel a oneness with the rest of the natural world. He regarded the American poet Walt Whitman as falling into this category, though he could also be regarded as a pantheist who believed in the identity of God and nature. There are, then, the monists who see the Absolute as the only real existent and the phenomenal world as only appearance. The goal of the mystic is to merge with this Absolute as a drop of water merges into the ocean.

Some of the Hindu Upanishads, and their later commentators, emphasise such a monism. Zaehner was also aware of drug-induced mystical experience and was very critical of its contemporary advocates. Finally, there is theistic mysticism where the mystic experiences "union" with God but also realises God's absolute transcendence and the self's enduring identity, even in the course of the unitive experience.

For his psychology of mysticism, Zaehner depends on the first manual of Sufi discipline written by Al-Qushayri in his *Risala* or letter on Sufism. Qushayri discusses the experience of expansiveness or *bast* and that of contraction or *qabd*. In the former phase the mystic experience is "oneness" or union, whereas in the latter, the mystic is more conscious of the inwardness of his or her own soul and its distinct identity, even isolation from everything else. Zaehner interprets this in terms of the manic-depressive syndrome and points out that it is in the "manic" phase that union or at-one-ness is experienced and extolled, whereas preoccupation with contemplation and ascetical practices arise in the "depressive" phase. It seems that such a "manic-depressive" cycle is to be found in all the kinds of mystical experience identified by Zaehner.[2]

Against Zaehner, the great Indo-Muslim mystic, Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624), also known as *Mujaddid-alf-thani* (the Renewer of the Second Islamic Millenium) and his modern followers, such as Allama Iqbal (1877-1938), see rather the different experiences of the annihilation of the self, the existence only of the Absolute and the illusoriness of the phenomenal world not as radically different kinds of mystical experience but as stages towards mystical maturity which is reached when the mystic can affirm both unity with the Divine Beloved and the reality of the self. They warn, therefore, of the dangers of settling too easily and too early into an immature mystical state. In fact, one of their charges against traditional Sufism is that this is

[2] R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1957), and *Concordant Discord* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1970).

precisely what has happened and has resulted in cutting the nerve of genuine spirituality in the Islamic world.[3]

The Origins of Sufism

There has been much speculation about the origins of Sufism whether they are of Neo-Platonic or Christian or Indian inspiration. These and other influences do, indeed, merit discussion but we have to begin with the mystical sense of the Qur'an itself and with the spiritual experiences of the Prophet of Islam. The famous Light Verse of the Qur'an has been hugely influential in encouraging a tradition of "Light Mysticism":

> "God is the light of the heavens and the earth
> His light is as if there were a niche
> And within it a lamp:
> The lamp enclosed in glass:
> The glass as it were
> A brilliant star:
> An olive neither of the East
> Nor of the West,
> Whose oil is well nigh luminous
> Though fire scarce touched it:
> Light upon light!
> God doth guide
> Whom he will
> To his light." (Q24:35)[4]

There is then the Throne Verse which expresses both God's transcendence and his immanence in his creation:

> "His throne extends over the heavens and the earth
> He feels no fatigue in guarding them
> For he is supreme over all." (Q2:255)

His omnipresence is celebrated in another well-known passage:

> "To God belong the East
> And the West: wherever

[3] See further Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 152ff., and Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 367ff.

[4] Ed. It should be noted that the numbering of verses in English translations of the Qur'an can vary significantly, sometimes within a range of up to five verses.

> You turn there is the Face
> Of God." (Q2:115)

The omnipresence of God is complemented by his omniscience. He knows what is in the hearts of human beings because he is *nearer to humankind than the jugular vein* (Q50:16). The Sufis have often interpreted the *two bow lengths or nearer* of Q53:9 to mean their prophet's proximity to the Divine Being. This has then led to his being considered as the archetypal *arif* or adept whose mystical and ascetical practices should be emulated by those desiring to travel on the Sufi path or *tariqa*. The sense of proximity naturally leads to questions about the mystic's relationship with the one who is near. The Sufi answer here is that the relationship is one of love. Because Islam has traditionally emphasised surrender and obedience, Sufis have had to search the Qur'an for teaching about God's love for us and ours for him. One of their favourite verses has been Q5:57 which states that God intends to produce a people *uhibbuhum wa yuhibbunahu* that is "whom he will love and they will love him". The great mystic and poet, Jalaluddin Rumi, explained this as meaning that God's love is primary, whereas ours is secondary or responsive.[5] There are other references to God's love, for example, in the refrain that he *loves the righteous* (*al-muhsinun*, Q2:195) but *does not love sinners* (*al-mu'atiddun*, Q5:90). The foundations for the great edifice of love which the Sufis built up are so slender that we are driven to ask from where and how such inspiration came to them.

Both Margaret Smith and Annemarie Schimmel point to the importance of the Prophet of Islam's own ascetical and mystical practices as important sources for Sufism. According to Schimmel, Muhammad is the first link in the spiritual genealogy of Sufism. The *mi'raj*, or his ascension into heaven, into the divine presence (Q17:1), becomes the Sufi's own aspiration. Smith emphasises the role played by the Hadith on such practices as prayer, fasting, devotions, silence and the renunciation of worldly goods. Traditions attributed to their Prophet served as the basis for the development of Sufi ideas. The Prophet became the ideal whose example had to be imitated. His veneration attained dizzy heights as friend and servant of God, who intercedes for his community, is the Perfect Man, and the agent and goal of creation. Such devotion remains common in many parts of the Muslim world. They are **an** integral part of worship in the form of *darud* which is a form of the *Du'a* or the extra prayers which are said after the *Salat* (ritual prayer). A great deal of devotional literature has grown up around the

[5] See Michael Nazir-Ali, *Faith, Freedom and the Future* (London: Wilberforce, 2016), 25ff.

subject. One of the most popular devotional manuals in use is *Dala'il Al-Khairat* (Guides to the Good) by the 15th century Moroccan Sufi scholar Al-Jazuli. This book contains a list of the *Asma Al-Husna* (the 99 beautiful names of God) and the *Asma An-Nabi* (the 201 names of Muhammad). Many of these names of the Prophet are the same as the divine names except that they are without the definite article. For example, if God is *Ar-Rahim* (the Merciful), the Prophet is *Rahim* (Merciful), if God is *Al-Haqq* (The Truth), the Prophet is simply *Haqq* (Truth) and so on. The 13th century Berber Sufi poet Al-Busiri's *Qasida Al-Burda* is another instance of devotion to Muhammad as an example of poverty, prayerfulness and spiritual alertness. It was written after the author had seen the Prophet in a dream, during an illness, and woke up having been healed.

The doctrine of the *Nur Muhammadi* (the light of Muhammad) or the *Haqiqa Muhammadiyya* (the truth of Muhammad) represents the Prophet of Islam as a sort of created Logos or First Principle from whom everything has come into existence. According to the Shi'a and their many sympathisers, this light or truth is, to some extent, transmitted through Muhammad's descendants who are accorded veneration and authority in the community.[6] Schimmel, drawing on the Jesuit Paul Nwyia's work, has pointed out the connection between the Shi'a and early Sufism. It seems that the sixth Imam of the Shi'a, Ja'far As-Sadiq (c.740), had a fine mystical sense. His commentary on the Qur'an discerned different levels of meaning in the text. This led him to distinguish between ordinary, faithful Muslims and those initiated into deeper mysteries. Schimmel holds that later Sufi discussion about the *maqamat,* or stations, through which the adepts had to pass, was influenced by Ja'far's hermeneutic. It was only later that a divide occurred between the Sufis and the Shi'a when the former backed Sunni orthodoxy against Shi'a claims.[7]

Christian Influence

There has been a long tradition, of course, of claiming Christian influence on Islam in general and on the rise of Sufism in particular. Richard Bell's Gunning Lectures at Edinburgh in 1925 are a good example of examining

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[6] Margaret Smith, *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East* (1931; repr., Kila, MT: Kessinger, 2003), 125ff.; Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 213ff.; Michael Nazir-Ali, *Frontiers In Muslim-Christian Encounter* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books, 1987), 130ff.; Sharafuddin Al-Busiri, *Qasida Burda*, and Al-Jazuli, *Dala'il Al-Khairat* (Karachi: Taj Company, n.d.).
[7] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 41, 82ff.

such influence on Islam.[8] Where Sufism is concerned, we shall consider two witnesses, one Muslim and the other western. Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the great Indo-Pakistani scholar, in his early work *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia,* identifies a number of reasons for the rise of Sufism: the political unrest within the Islamic world of the eighth and ninth centuries which drove pious Muslims to the peace of a contemplative life; the barrenness of legalism and its opposition to freedom of thought and expression; growing moral laxity in the Abbasid period and the widespread presence of Christian monasticism as a working ideal of life. He is quick to point out, however, that it was the actual lifestyle of the monks, rather than their beliefs, which exercised such fascination for the early mystics of Islam.[9]

Smith, on the other hand, explores a common spiritual hinterland from which arose many Islamic beliefs and practices in general and Sufi ones, in particular. After the conquest of the mainly Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian populations in the Near and Middle East, Muslims lived in a common culture with non-Muslims and depended on them for forms of government, medicine, education, technology and civilisation in general. She is aware that Muslim times and postures of ritual prayer, not to say the term (*salat*) itself, are closely related to the monastic offices, as are attitudes to fasting, contemplation and renunciation. She lists many common words used by Muslims which have an Aramaic Christian or Jewish derivation eg. *tasbih* (praise), *furqan* (enlightenment or salvation), *'abd* **(**servant of God), *dhikr* (remembrance, a typically Sufi word), *sawm* (fasting) and many others. Although the meanings of words and phrases change in different contexts, there is an element of continuity, as well as discontinuity, in Muslim use of Jewish and Christian material. As far as the rise of Sufism is concerned, the background of Syrian, Mesopotamian and Egyptian monasticism is crucial for understanding the particular situation in which Sufism arose. Again and again, Smith reminds us of the echoes of Christian mystics such as Ephraim the Syrian and Isaac of Nineveh in the early Sufi Masters. Attitudes to fear of God, repentance for sins, the coming judgement and commitment to a life of prayer are common features on both sides. Even the robes worn by the Sufis, made of wool (or *suf*), from which their name derives, seem to have been an emulation of the monks and hermits of the desert.[10]

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[8] R. Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London: Macmillan, 1926).
[9] M. Iqbal, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia* (Lahore: Bazm-Iqbal, 1964), 76ff.
[10] Smith, *Studies in Early Mysticism*, 125ff.

The Centrality of Love

Central to the thought and practice of the (Christian) desert fathers and mothers is an awareness of God's love for people, his willingness to forgive those who repent and his redemption of the world by the Lord Jesus Christ. They know also that their love for God can arise only because God's love for them makes it possible for them to love him.[11] Given the limited use of love as a category to describe divine-human relationships in the foundational texts of Islam, we have to ask about the provenance of the Sufi insistence on love as the key to our relationship with God, not submission, obedience or even fear as such, but love. How did the sorrowful and strict asceticism of the early Sufis change to a celebration of love? We must disagree with Iqbal and consider the possibility of early Sufism being influenced not just by the lifestyle of the monks and nuns but also by some of their key ideas. It seems that the famous woman mystic, Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, was the first to speak uninhibitedly of the love of God. Her love did not arise out of fear of hell or hope of paradise but for God's loveliness alone. Basing themselves on Qur'anic usage, the early Sufis used the term *mahabba* for love but gradually those who saw such love *as a divine fire which devours completely* began, more and more, to use the term *'ishq,* or passionate love, for the love of God. At first this was frowned upon by the more orthodox but eventually it gained nearly universal currency, at least in Sufi influenced circles.[12] Thus the mediaeval mystic, Rumi, can sing:

> "O pleasant madness, Love!
> Thou physician of all our ills,
> Thou Plato and Galen of our souls!"

and again:

> "I am neither Christian nor Jew,
> Neither Magian nor Muslim,
> I know none other except 'O He'
> And 'He who is'
> I am drunk with love's cup,

[11] Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (London: Mowbrays, 1975), and Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001).
[12] See Michael Nazir-Ali, "Love and Law in Christianity and Islam," in *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*, ed. David Thomas and Clare Amos (London: Melisende, 2003), 319ff.

Heaven and Hell are nought to me!”[13]

Neo-Platonic and Indian Influences

The end or purpose of love increasingly became union with the Beloved. So much so that it came to characterise Sufism and also became a cause of division within it. What kind of union? Is it absorption or divine infilling or a relationship in which the lover’s identity survives and is even sharpened?

The influence of Neo-Platonism is clearly important. The so-called Theology of Aristotle (which is in reality Porphyry’s commentary on Plotinus’ *Enneads*) was translated into Arabic as early as 840AD in the circle of Abu Yusuf Al-Kindi. Neo-Platonism was also influential through Jewish and Christian contacts. In fact, we can say that “Neo-Platonism was in the air”. The great mystic and martyr Mansur Al-Hallaj (858-922) had certainly travelled to India and it seems that Bayazid Bistami’s teacher was of Indian origin. As some Sufis took a more and more pantheistic and monist position, Indian influence cannot be discounted. This is usually thought to be Vedantic: summed up in the dictum *tat tvam asi* or “that art thou”, taken in the sense of the self’s identity with the Absolute. Johan Elverskog, in his highly revisionist view of the relation of the Islamic world with what lay to the East of it, has shown considerable Buddhist interaction as well, though Schimmel denies that the idea of *fana’* or *istighraq* (annihilation or absorption into the Divine Beloved) has anything to do with the Buddhist concept of *nirvana.*

Such attitudes came to be known as *wahdat al-wujud* or essential monism. Its leading metaphors for the soul’s relationship to the Divine Being are of the river flowing into the ocean or of the drop of water lost in the sea. Such language is, of course, also used in the Vedantic material thus strengthening the case for an Indian connection. In discussing whether this or that Sufi is a pantheist or monist, a difficulty which arises is one which has confronted both Muslim and Christian mysticism: ie. whether the work of the mystic is addressed to different kinds of people. So the same poet could write in an orthodox way for the masses but altogether differently for the mystical elite. Thus Rumi’s *Mathnawi* appears orthodox but the *Diwan-i-Shams-i-Tabriz* speaks another language in the desire for union with the Beloved. Similarly, whilst Imam Ghazali’s *Ihya’ ‘Ulum Ad-Din* (the Renewal of the Religious Sciences), can be read in a mostly orthodox way, the *Mishkat Al-Anwar* (Niches of Lights) and the *Kimiya’-i-Sa’adat* (the

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[13] Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1925), 124; and *Diwan-i-Shams-i-Tabriz*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1898), 126.

Alchemy of Happiness in Persian) are in a different category.[14] Although Louis Massignon's work has shown how the martyr-mystic Hallaj's ecstatic cry: *Ana'l-Haqq* (I am the creative Truth) could be interpreted in a theistic light, Schimmel refers to elements in his theory which would certainly have made the orthodox uncomfortable.[15]

The Orthodox Reaction

By the time of the orthodox reaction, it can safely be said that the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*, or essential monism, was prevalent in many parts of the Islamic world. The reaction was led by the Naqshbandiyya order of Sufis and the name most prominently associated with it is that of the Indo-Muslim master Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624). As we saw above, he came to be known as *mujaddid-i-alf-thani* or the renewer or reformer of the second Islamic millennium. Sirhindi is credited with opposing *wahdat al-wujud* with the more orthodox *wahdat al-shuhud*: here the experience of union with the Divine Beloved is not the acme of mystical experience because, after this, the mystic must pass through many *maqamat* (stations of mystical discipline) and *ahwal* (states of ecstasy bestowed by God) before he realises both unity with and distinctiveness from the Divine. This fits Muhammad Iqbal's own view so exactly that he is proud to stand within this tradition and he describes Sirhindi's work as a "fearless analytical criticism of contemporary Sufism". Iqbal has famously described such an ultimate experience as that of Sirhindi as "union in separation" or, alternatively, "separation in union". Because the relationship between the Divine and the soul or the self is one of love, it follows that although they are united in their love one for another, nevertheless, they must also be distinct for there to be a relationship of love. As Iqbal puts it, "separation agrees with the nature of lovers".[16] Schimmel points out that Naqshbandi influence has continued to be felt in reform movements within Sufism and, indeed, beyond that, in literature and also in politics. While many mystics of the pantheist, monist and pacifist type continue to be celebrated, there has also been an insistence on a strict observance of *Shari'a* and a veneration of the Prophet of Islam.

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[14] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 10, 142; Smith, *Studies in Early Mysticism*, 253ff.; Nazir-Ali, "Love and Law," 321ff.; and J. Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 173ff.

[15] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 72ff.

[16] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 366ff.; Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 152ff., and *Armughan-i-Hijaz* (Lahore: Sheikh Ghulam Ali, 1970), 174ff., and *Zabur-i-'Ajam* (Lahore: Sheikh Ghulam Ali, 1970), 220.

In some cases, this has led to the birth of religio-political movements such as the Barelvi in South Asia and the Ikhwan Al-Muslimin in Egypt.[17]

Sufism and Armed Conflict

Dr Akhtar Injeeli, in his important book *Sufism and Jihad*[18]**,** has drawn our attention to the involvement of many Sufis and, indeed, of Sufi orders in armed *jihad* whether in the Middle East, in South Asia, in West Africa or in the Caucasus. This challenges a stereotype which is dear to many in the West and in the Muslim world of Sufism as a wholly pacifist movement. As Injeeli points out, much more work needs to be done on the relationship between Sufism and militancy. More than a century ago Sir Thomas Arnold showed that, after the Arab, Pathan and Mughal conquests of India, a great deal of Islam spread through the preaching, poetry and miracle-working of Sufis which sought to rival that of the Hindu sadhus and *rishis*. Even here, however, as Injeeli has shown, Sufi militancy was not absent.

Social and Political Involvement

An example of Sufi involvement in politics is the Gülen movement in Turkey and worldwide. Although Sufi orders were banned in Turkey after the Kemalist revolution, the founder, Fethullah Gülen, launched his movement, *Hizmet Harekati* (Movement of Service), which seeks to imbue society with the ideals of Sufi Islam through education, media and interfaith dialogue. At first, it worked closely with the ruling AKP party of Turkish President Recip Erdoğan but gradually there was a falling out over increasing Gülen influence in the Police, Judiciary and the Media. This has become a full-scale hunting down of alleged Gülen supporters since the July, 2016 failed coup. Debate has raged internationally as to whether Gülen is a cult, a terror organisation or a progressive Sufi movement. Whilst acknowledging Gülen's educational service and its involvement in dialogue, we must not lose sight of its political ambition. In this, Gülen is not unique since Sufi leaders and their followers are active politically in Pakistan, Egypt and Indonesia.

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[17] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 403ff.

[18] Akhtar Injeeli, *Sufism and Jihad* (London: CGE Publishing, 2012), 101ff., and Thomas Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam* (London: Constable, 1913).

Sufism and Other Religions

Because of their insistence on a religion of the heart and of immediate experience rather than of cult and ritual, at least some Sufis have been open to the possibility of other religions being within divine providence. Love of God, according to them, is latent in everyone and can be expressed in their religious traditions.[19] This often leads them to engagement in interfaith discussion. Their openness is to be welcomed but Christians will need to be careful that everything is not reduced to a *philosophia perennis*, the notion that all religions, at bottom, are the same and, more specifically, that all spiritual experience is essentially the same.

Sufism and Folk Islam

As will be shown, in many parts of the world Sufism has become part of folk Islam. Its shrines are often places of popular devotion to the Sufi saints buried there and the faithful come, sometimes in large numbers, to receive from the *karamat* (or blessings) of these saints. Clearly, this can degenerate into corruption and superstition. The celebrations of '*Urs*, the death anniversary of the saint, regarded as a union or wedding with the Beloved, often involve ecstatic music and dance with a loss of conventional inhibitions, for instance, regarding intoxicants or the public behaviour of women. It is often this, as well as Sufi doctrine, which calls down the wrath of Wahhabi and Salafi Islam on the Sufis.[20]

Conclusion

We have seen that Sufism has a long history in Islam. It is found in most parts of the Muslim world and there is considerable variety in its beliefs, expression and place in society. The following chapters will explore some of the variety but also the similarities in the world of Sufism.

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[19] Rumi, *Fihi ma Fihi* (Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1959), 240ff.

[20] See Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 150, 426ff.; Bill Musk, *Touching the Soul of Islam* (Crowborough, UK: MARC, 1995), 175ff.; and Christopher Ondaatje, *Sindh Revisited* (Toronto, ON: Harper Collins, 1996), 271ff.

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CHAPTER TWO

DIVINE IMMANENCE IN THE WORLD OF ISLAM

JANNAH WALTERS

The purpose of this chapter is to examine a very specific aspect of the nature of God within Islamic belief: that is, His immanence within man and the created order. This is a question of "know-ability" and perhaps, more importantly, one of "relate-ability". To what degree has God revealed Himself, that man might know Him or be in relationship with Him? To most mainstream Muslims, this would be a closed issue. Citing passages that speak of the great and unknowable character of God, these Muslims emphatically assert that "God does not reveal Himself. He does not reveal Himself to anyone in any way. God reveals only His will."[1] He is utterly outside of anything we might comprehend – wholly unknowable and utterly unique.

Yet, it would appear that this issue is not so easily confined and diffused–for there are Muslims of another theological persuasion who would argue that both divine knowledge and mystical union with God are attainable. These Muslims, known as Sufis, rely heavily upon passages which seem to indicate the closeness of God to man. Furthermore, an allegorical method of commentary is often applied to the Qur'anic text, whereby the mystic perceives esoteric meanings unapparent to the average reader, or even the literalist scholar.[2] Rather than focusing on the unapproachable characteristics of God, Sufis have developed a rather extensive theology on the means by which one may both know and relate to God. Thus, this matter of no small consequence in the Muslim world, is one of great and historic controversy.

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[1] Ismail R. Al-Faruqi, *Islamic Da'wah Its Nature and Demands* (Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications, 1986), 17.

[2] Marcia K. Hermansen, "The Prophet Muhammed in Sufi Interpretations of The Light Verse (Aya Nur 24:35), Part I," *Islamic Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (1998): 146.

The Orthodox View[3]

> "Aisha said… 'Whoever tells you that Muhammad saw his Lord, is a liar… It is not fitting for a human being that Allah should speak to Him except by inspiration or from behind a veil."[4]

The traditional Islamic view is fairly straightforward. The doctrine of the oneness and unity of God (tawhid) is emphasized. This view can be aptly summarized by the following Qur'anic passage:

> "That is Allah, your Lord! There is no god but He, the Creator of all things: then worship ye Him: and He hath power to dispose of all affairs. No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision: He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things."[5]

and again,

> "(He is) the Creator of the heavens and the earth …there is nothing whatever like unto Him, and He is the One that hears and sees (all things)."[6]

Expounding on the latter text, the 7th century Muslim commentator, Ibn Abbas, explains that this negation of comparability, applies collectively to His attributes, knowledge, power, and providence.[7]

In addressing Qur'anic passages which seem to indicate the nearness of God to man or His creation, non-Sufi scholars have a variety of explanations for each, combing out the apparent contradictions. For example, in an explanation of the famed passage, "We are nearer to [man] than his jugular vein,"[8] Ibn Kathir (c1300–1373) reads the opening "We" as a reference to angels.[9] It is then the angels, not God, who are closer to man than his own neck vein. A more common explanation, however, is that while the "We"

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[3] Ed. The term "orthodox" is used to refer to non-Sufi scholars who engage, sometimes critically, with Sufi thinking and teaching. It is not meant to imply that all Sufi groups are heterodox. Such terms are needed to differentiate complex theological arguments, but they are inherently fraught with ambiguity.
[4] Muhammad Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Vol. 6, Book 60, No. 378. https://sunnah.com/urn/45330: accessed 29/12/19.
[5] *The Qur'an*, trans. Yusuf Ali, Q6:102-103.
[6] Ibid., Q42:11.
[7] Ibn Abbas, *Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn 'Abbas*, trans. Mokrane Guezzou (Amman, Jordan: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007), 559.
[8] *The Qur'an*, Q50:16.
[9] Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* (Lahore: Darussalam Publishers and Distributors, 2000), 9:228.

here does refer to God, it is but the knowledge of God that is in view.[10] This passage is then not an affirmation of the immanence of God Himself, but only of His knowledge – that He knows the internal thoughts and ways of man better than man knows himself.

The only thing which man may know about God is through His divine revelation. This revelation, as summarized by Kenneth Cragg, "is conceived of, not as a communication of the Divine Being, but only of the Divine Will. It is a revelation, that is, of law not of personality."[11] Some would go so far as to say that His divinely revealed attributes ought to be understood "in terms of their fruits and goals not their meaning or etymology."[12] Those holding this position, as articulated here by the brilliant 11th century philosopher and theologian al-Ghazali,[13] understand the attributes of God to be

> "Lofty and above any likeness to our own. This knowledge is, therefore, inadequate…and it must be rejoined always with an absolute denial of similarity while acknowledging a sharing in name."[14]

In other words, the goal of divine attribution is merely "practical for man's sake and not descriptive with respect to God."[15] In this sense, many Muslims hold to a variety of agnosticism – whereby the believer may know the whole of divine revelation, but will nonetheless be unable to attain to any real knowledge, comprehension, or experience of God Himself. This is the traditional Muslim position – pointing to a rather uncomplicated theology of the immanence of God: it does not exist.

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[10] Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, trans. Feras Hamza (Amman, Jordan: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007), 608.

[11] Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 47-48.

[12] Al-Ghazali, quoted in Fadlou Shehadi, *Ghazali's Unique Unknowable God: A Philosophical Critical Analysis of Some of the Problems Raised by Ghazali's View of God as Utterly Unique and Unknowable* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 111.

[13] Ed. Al-Ghazali was himself a Sufi, but lived at a time of polemic between scriptural literalists and Sufis. He succeeded in bring a measure of reconciliation between these two poles of Islamic expression.

[14] Al-Ghazali, quoted in ibid., 110.

[15] Ibid.

The Sufi Way

> "Allah said… 'My slave keeps on coming closer to Me through performing Nawafil (praying or doing extra deeds besides what is obligatory) till I love him, so I become his sense of hearing with which he hears, and his sense of sight with which he sees, and his hand with which he grips, and his leg with which he walks…"[16]

To indulge in a rather comical understatement, the Sufi understanding of the immanence of God is somewhat more developed and complex than that of the traditionalist. In one of his more popular songs, the contemporary Islamic singer, Sami Yusuf (who has been censored by those of the more fundamental Islamic movements[17]), sings of the presence of God in this way:

> "Look again don't hide your eyes
> He is there in disguise
> Reaching out to you and I
> He is there in every tear
> Not far away he's right here
> Oh how could he be more near."

The obvious question is, on what basis can a Muslim say (or sing) such things? Does Yusuf have any theological grounds to proclaim such comforting words of Divine presence in the face of human suffering? The basis of this counter-theology seems to be founded upon an altogether divergent set of underlying values and assumptions. These assumptions appear to have direct relevance to the topic at hand – that is the know-ability and relate-ability of God. Without ever using the word "immanence" *per se*, Sufis boast a rich heritage of literature – myth, legend, narrative, commentary, poetry, etc. – which seem to promulgate this very concept.

One such myth which is widely known and referred to among Sufi mystics is that of *Layla and Majnun*. In this Persian legend, the Romeo-esque character of Majnun falls madly in love with Layla, whose love is forbidden him by family and tradition. The rest of his life is spent wandering as a *majnun* (literally, "madman") with thoughts and passions only for Layla. He becomes so consumed that his life and his very self becomes

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[16] Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Vol. 8, Book 76, No. 509. https://sunnah.com/bukhari/81/91: accessed 29/12/19.

[17] Abu Mussab Wajdi Akkari, "The Classical Hit, It's Bad! (A Message to Sami Yusuf and All Present-Day 'Munshideen')," video, 9:10, April 22, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpPGdyjkc_E, accessed September 19, 2011.

irrelevant, and he wastes away in love for her.[18] The process by which Majnun loses all regard for anything other than Layla and is overtaken by this consuming and self-devastating love, is the picture which Sufis often use to describe the mystical journey of one who would attain to intimacy with God.

Whether a cause of this alternative paradigm or a result (or both), the Sufi approach to understanding and interpreting the Qur'an is vastly different to that of the "orthodox" Muslim. Engaging in a highly abstract and allegorical method of commentary, the Sufis not only "find" Qur'anic scripture to validate their position, indeed, they utilize the whole of Qur'anic content as a means of exploration into esoteric knowledge (or, *gnosis*). One of the foundational passages of Sufi teaching comes from what have been termed "The Light Verses" (see Sura 24, especially verse 35). While ambiguous in terms of literal meaning, this passage is christened with rich esoteric interpretations by Sufi scholars. The 12th-13th century philosopher Ibn al-'Arabi understood these verses as a description of "the connection and flowing of the spirit in the body, and [the] flowing and manifesting of absolute being of the Real ["God"] in all separate and material existences."[19]

In one common Sufi interpretation of this apologue (and there are many[20]), the candle is the Light of Allah, and this is placed in the believer's heart (the niche). When the believer becomes illumined by this light, he or she is supernaturally empowered to discern true knowledge – or, the Real from the illusory. Quoting Malik ibn Anas, al-Tustari explains, "Knowledge is not just about how much you can relate from memory, but … is a light that God places within the heart."[21] The believer then begins to *see*, as it were, with the eyes of God. It is in the sense of this "vision of the heart" that the Sufi dares to utter that which would be otherwise unutterable – that he *sees* God.[22]

> "When my Beloved appears,
> With what eye do I see Him?
> With His eye, not with mine,
> For none sees Him except Himself."
> (Ibn al-'Arabi)[23]

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[18] Ganjavi Nizami, *Layla and Majnun*, trans. Collin Turner (London: Blake Publishing, 1997).
[19] Hermansen, "The Prophet Muhammed in Sufi Interpretations of Light Verse," 220.
[20] Ibid., 144-152.
[21] Sahl ibn Abd Allah al-Tustari, *Tafsir al-Tustari*, trans. Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler (Amman, Jordan: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2011), 86.
[22] Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, http://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/ Mystics-of-Islam.pdf, accessed September 19, 2011.
[23] Ibid.