

Mystical thought

Sufism

Sufism (or Islamic mysticism) is one way of understanding and approaching God in Islam. It is related to asceticism, rooted in divine revelation and comprehended through shari‘a. It is an approach to God that makes use of intuitive and emotional spiritual faculties, considered by Sufis to be dormant unless discovered through guided training. One definition of Sufism, therefore, is that which ‘embraces those tendencies in Islam which aim at direct communion between God and man’.¹ Training in Sufism is known as ‘travelling the path’ and aims at ‘dispersing the veils which hide the self from the Real² and thereby become transformed or absorbed into undifferentiated Unity’.³ This mystical training reacts against the rationalization of Islam in law and theology, and focuses instead on spiritual freedom that allows our intrinsic intuitive spiritual senses their full scope.⁴

Early development of Sufism

The basis of asceticism in Islam was fear of God’s judgement, resulting in a deep consciousness of sin and human weakness, and consequent desire for complete submission to the Will of God. The first century of Islam was favourable to the spread of asceticism as a result of dissatisfaction with materialism and religious and political dissension. In the second half of the first/seventh century, the ascetic movement was still ‘orthodox’ and leaders were of the ‘pietist type’.⁵ The ascetic movement of the first two centuries of Islam – with encouragement to renunciation and otherworldliness – was gradually combined with tendencies towards mysticism, thus developing the earliest form of recognizable Sufism.⁶

Sufi asceticism developed through supererogation (observing rules and rituals beyond that required by religious law), and the renunciation of unlawful and even some lawful things. Examples of Sufi ascetic practices and beliefs include:

- the wearing of a patched robe (*khirqā*)⁷
- eating only ‘lawful’ food, i.e. that earned by the labours of a Sufi’s own hands

- voluntary fasting of varying duration and severity⁸
- holding the view that the true fasting was ‘abstention from desire, and that the fasting of the heart was more important than the fasting of the body’⁹
- spending much time in prayer and recitation of the Qur’an as a means of drawing near to God, as well as prayer in the form of remembrance of God (*dhikr*).

Among the most important of Sufism’s ideas is renunciation of the world, which means the abandonment of the transient pleasures of this life, and even of desire for eternal bliss. Rabi’a al-Adawiyya (d. 185/801) was the first Sufi to place emphasis on the notion of unselfish love for God. She is said to have prayed:

O Lord,
 If I worship You
 From fear of Hell, burn me in Hell.
 If I worship You
 From hope of Paradise, bar me from its gates.
 But if I worship You for Yourself alone
 Then grace me forever the splendour of Your Face.¹⁰

According to al-Qushayri (d. 465/1072), a true Sufi is one who ‘should be indifferent to this world and the next’.¹¹ True Sufi poverty involved the sacrifice of all material goods as well as the exercise of patience and resignation to the will of God,¹² and the glad endurance of affliction in this life for the sake of drawing nearer to God in the hereafter.¹³

Development of Sufi orders

Sufism developed ways of purification through the medium of religious orders: the organized cultivation of religious experience, based on the idea of a master–disciple relationship.¹⁴ A disciple accepted the authority and guidance of a master who had travelled the stages of the Sufi path. Initially, the ‘path’ (*tariqa*) referred to a gradual and practical method of contemplative and soul-releasing mysticism, which took a disciple through a succession of ‘stages’ (*maqamat*) in order to experience divine reality.¹⁵ Later it also came to refer to particular Sufi groups with distinct initiation rites and ritual practices that developed over centuries through chains of master–disciple relationships back to a single ‘founding’ master, in whose honour the *tariqa* was named.¹⁶

These developments were not well received by many ulama, the experts in religious law, who viewed them with suspicion. The ulama resented the Sufis’ disassociation from what the ulama recognized as legitimate spheres of

religious authority, and were incensed by areas such as the Sufi *sama'* (spiritual concert for inducing ecstasy).¹⁷ However, by the fifth/eleventh century, more moderate trends in Sufism came to be recognized as legitimate, mostly owing to the activities of well-respected Muslim scholars who were also Sufis, such as al-Sulami (d. 412/1021), his disciple al-Qushayri and perhaps most notably Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111).¹⁸

Al-Ghazali first gained fame as a respected theologian who was appointed head professor at the Nizamiyya College in Baghdad. After suffering a breakdown, he turned to Sufism and retreated into the life of an ascetic. He continued to write and teach and harmonized the pursuit of Sufism with what was considered orthodox theology and law, and contributed greatly to the wide acceptance of Sufism in orthodox circles. Official recognition did not mean the suspicions of the ulama disappeared, however, and Sufism continued to develop on separate paths from non-mystical Islam.¹⁹

Because many would-be Sufis travelled widely seeking masters, the orders established centres (hostels, rest houses, hospices, retreats) throughout the Muslim world.²⁰ By the fifth/eleventh century, organized Sufi convents had become numerous, contributing to the islamization of borderland and non-Arabic regions in central Asia and northern Africa.²¹ Rules of convent etiquette began to develop known as 'companionship' (*suhba*).²² By the sixth/twelfth century, many Sufi convents had become flourishing establishments,²³ but a new direction developed in the phenomenon of single masters who withdrew from convent life to a small retreat, or took up the wandering life with a group of disciples. By the seventh/thirteenth century, tariqas were associated with a single master, whose teachings, mystical exercises and rules of life were handed down through a chain (*silsila*) of spiritual guides.²⁴

The Sufi path

The central aim of all ascetic exercises was a direct spiritual experience: the mystic consciousness of union with God. For Sufis, this goal could be attained only by the faithful following of the sufi path, with its numerous stages, which enabled the soul to be purified, to acquire certain qualities and to rise higher until, with the help of divine grace, it would find its home in God.²⁵

Perhaps the first systematic exposition of Sufism as a way of life and thought was *The Book of Flashes* (*Kitab al-luma'*) by Abu Nasr al-Sarraj (d. 378/998), a Sufi scholar from the city of Tus in the Iranian region of Khurasan. Sarraj discusses seven stations (stages of spiritual attainment) along the Sufi path: repentance; watchfulness; renunciation; poverty; patience; trust; and acceptance. Furthermore, Sarraj lists ten states (spiritual moods given by God): meditation; nearness to God; love; fear; hope; longing; intimacy; tranquillity; contemplation; and certainty.²⁶ While Sarraj acknowledges that anyone can join Sufism and participate in this mystical tradition, he notes that there

is a rigorous set of standards for the seeker in the areas of self-discipline, psychological self-awareness, intuitive or mystical understanding, and emotional and poetic sensitivity.²⁷

According to al-Junayd (d. 298/910), the first stage of repentance involves not only the remembrance of sins but also the forgetting of them.²⁸ The early stages of the path include patience and gratitude, hope and fear. Al-Rudhabari (d. 322/934) compared hope and fear to the wings of a bird in flight: if one fails its flight falters, if both fail it dies.²⁹ Other stages include poverty, renunciation and dependence on God. Among the higher stages is satisfaction – that the human being is satisfied with all God has ordained for him or her – and, later, remembrance of death. The final stages include love and gnosis leading to the vision of God and the ultimate goal of union with the divine.³⁰ Other Sufis, such as al-Qushayri and al-Ghazali, gave even more comprehensive lists of the stages of the Sufi path.

Sufi orders³¹

During the first four to five centuries of Islam, Sufi instruction was transmitted via an individual master (known variously as *shaykh*, *pir* or *murshid*) to a group of students. After a while, a more structurally tight-knit organization developed, more often than not named after a founder and based on a spiritual framework encompassing rules of etiquette, behaviour, meditation and other forms of worship.³² Below are some of the most influential Sufi orders.³³

The Qadiriyya order

This order was named after Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 561/1166), who was born in a village in northern Iran. His ideas influenced other founders of mystical orders such as Khwaja Mu'in al-Din Chishti (d. 633/1236) and Abd al Qahir al-Suhrawardi (d. 564/1168). He is said to have remarked: 'My foot is on the head of every saint.'³⁴ The order was formed several decades after his death, and stories of his miracles were later circulated by biographers such as Ali ibn Yusuf al-Shattanawfi (d. 713/1314).³⁵ Al-Jilani viewed shari'a as the source of all spiritual advancement and culture, and followed the Hanbali school of law (see [Chapter 4](#)).³⁶ Initially, Qadiri teachings spread in and around Baghdad, then moved into Arabia, Morocco, Egypt, Turkestan, parts of Africa (Khartoum, Sokoto, Tripoli) and India.³⁷

It is unlikely that al-Jilani himself instituted a rigid set of prayers and rituals to follow, and different Qadiri groups have different practices, although nominal allegiance is given to the caretaker of al-Jilani's tomb in Baghdad. Pilgrimages are often made to places associated with the Qadiri order and

festivities are held in honour of the founder at which gifts are presented to his descendants. Qadiris also perform *dhikr* accompanied by music.³⁸ Al-Jilani's sermons were collected into a work titled *The Sublime Revelation (al-Fath ar-rabbani)*. In his fifteenth 'discourse', he said:

No one knows how to behave correctly with the shaykhs unless he has served them and become aware of some of the spiritual states [*ahwal*] they experience with Allah (Almighty and Glorious is He). The people [of the Lord] have learned to treat praise and blame like summer and winter, like night and day. They regard them both as from Allah (Almighty and Glorious is He), because no one is capable of bringing them about except Allah (Almighty and Glorious is He). When this has become real for them, therefore, they do not place their confidence in those who praise them, nor do they fight with their critics, and they pay no attention to them. Their hearts have been emptied of both love and hate for creatures. They neither love nor hate, but rather feel compassion.³⁹

The Shadhiliyya order

In the western Muslim world, i.e. around the Mediterranean, the end of the Almohad empire in the seventh/thirteenth century gave rise to several dynastic regimes. Under one of these – the Hafsiids of Tunis – the Shadhili order came into being, named after Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili (d. 656/1258).⁴⁰ His order prospered in Spain, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and under the Mamluks in Egypt, attracting notable intellectuals including the prolific author Jalal ad-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505). After its initial start in North Africa, the order gained prominence in the eastern parts of the Islamic world; today it is mainly represented in North Africa with active branches in Egypt and the Sudan.⁴¹

Early Shadhilis followed the Maliki school of law (see [Chapter 4](#)) and emphasized the doctrine of the absolute unity of God (*tawhid*). Their goal was the gnostic realization of God based on strict adherence to religious law and Ash'ari dogma.⁴² From early in their history, many sub-branches of the Shadhili order sprang up. They avoided ostentatious dress or spectacular public displays, although visiting the tombs of saints was an important feature of their practice. Later, Shadhilis also played an important role in resisting European colonization of Muslim lands, and generated a number of revivalist movements.⁴³

Shadhili mystical practice conforms to the practice of religious law. It includes congregational recitation of poems, prayers and litanies. For example, 'The Cloak' (*al-Burda*), a famous poem honouring the Prophet Muhammad, was written by a Shadhili Sufi, al-Busiri (d. 695/1296). In this he says:⁴⁴

Muhammad, leader of the two worlds
 and of Man and the jinn,
 Leader also of the Arabs and
 non Arabs and their kin.
 Our Prophet, Commander of right,
 prohibits evil's way,
 Yet no one's speech more gentle could be
 than his nay or yea.⁴⁵

The Naqshbandiyya order

Named after Khwaja Baha' al-Din Muhammad Naqshband (d. 791/1389), this order has had a far-reaching impact on Muslims all over the world. Its spiritual affiliation is with the first caliph, Abu Bakr, unlike most Sufi lineages, which reach back to the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law Ali.⁴⁶

The order was established in Central Asia, but, despite its early history in the Persian world, the Sunni-focused Naqshbandi order lost influence in Persia with the rise of the Shi'i Safavid dynasty (908–1149/1502–1736). After its founding, the Naqshbandis spread through Turkestan, Syria, Turkey, Afghanistan, Java, Borneo, Africa and China. The Mujaddidi branch, established by Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1034/1624), gained prominence in India, but also migrated to Turkey. Another significant Indian Naqshbandi influence came in the form of the teachings of Shah Wali Allah (d. 1176/1762).⁴⁷

The Naqshbandis did not shy away from involvement in politics. They had a generally favourable relationship with the Ottomans; the Turkish Shaykh Ahmed Ziyauddin Gumush-Khanewi (d. 1311/1894), who developed a large following that exists to the present day, fought in the Ottoman–Russian war of 1877.⁴⁸ Other Turkish Sufi shaykhs fought in the First World War and the Turkish War of Independence, while militant Naqshbandis opposed the establishment of the secular Turkish state. In India, Naqshbandis played an important role in developing Mughal ideology; in particular, Ahmad Sirhindi attempted to reform the ruling classes.⁴⁹ The Naqshbandis, joined by the Qadiris, were also active in attempting to resist the Russian entrance into Caucasia.⁵⁰

In the present day, a prominent Naqshbandi group has moved into the United States and Europe under the direction of the charismatic Shaykh Muhammad Nazim al-Haqqani and his deputy Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani.⁵¹ According to the Naqshbandiyya–Haqqaniyya, there are three levels of daily spiritual practice depending on one's stage along the path. Along with the obligatory practices that all Muslims perform (such as the five daily prayers and following the requirements of religious law), an initiate in the Naqshbandiyya–Haqqaniyya order repeats certain phrases, invocations, lists of the divine names and Qur'anic chapters (suras) multiple times,

and also prays blessings on the Prophet Muhammad. A disciple at the next level does the same but with increased repetitions. At the third level, the disciple undergoes more rigorous spiritual practice and meditation. Periods of seclusion are required in order to heighten spiritual awakening.⁵²

Ibn Arabi and his school

Abu Abd Allah ibn Arabi (d. 638/1240) is probably one of the most influential Sufis in Islamic history. Known as Muhyi al-Din (meaning the reviver of the religion) and al-Shaykh al-Akbar (the greatest master), he was born in Murcia, Spain, in 560/1165.⁵³ Early in his life, he had a conversion experience following an illness, and, although he did not found a specific Sufi order, his influence on Sufi thought is ubiquitous. Ibn Arabi had the opportunity to meet a number of important scholars and teachers. He travelled through Spain, North Africa and the eastern Islamic world, and made a pilgrimage to Mecca, where he stayed for two years, reportedly experiencing mystical visions and dreams.⁵⁴

He wrote on several esoteric currents existing within the world of Islamic thought, such as Pythagoreanism, alchemy and astrology, and various Sufi trends, which he developed into a vast synthesis shaped by the Qur'an and Sunna.⁵⁵ Around eight hundred and fifty works have been attributed to Ibn Arabi, of which seven hundred are extant, and of these about four hundred and fifty are considered authentic. Among them are the famous *The Meccan Opening* (*al-Futuh al-makkiyya*), *The Ringstones of Wisdom* (*Fusus al-hikam*) and *The Tree of Engendered Existence* (*Shajarat al-kawn*).⁵⁶ Two of Ibn Arabi's most important doctrines are the 'Unity of Being' (*wahdat al-wujud*) and the 'Perfect Man' (*al-insan al-kamil*).⁵⁷

Ibn Arabi's theosophy

Crucial to Ibn Arabi's theosophy and metaphysics is the concept of 'Unity of Being' (*wahdat al-wujud*), a term often used by his followers, but not by Ibn Arabi himself. The phrase 'Unity of Being' means that from the perspective of transcendence of God (*tanzih*) there is only one Being; nothing else has true existence besides the indivisible One. The outside, the created world, is not an objective reality. However from another perspective, that of immanence (*tashbih*), all things are the disclosure or self-manifestation of the Existent.

According to Ibn Arabi, an image of the essence of every creature exists in God's knowledge. These images are called 'the subsistent archetypes' (*al-a'yan al-thabita*) because they subsist in God's knowledge and never leave His knowledge or mind. Because these 'ideals' are identical to the attributes of God, which are also identical with His essence, the many-ness perceived

on the 'outside' is not real; it just appears to exist objectively. Distinctions appear as Being determines itself; therefore, multiplicity proceeds from unity. The same one Being manifests itself under different forms without undergoing any division or blemish. In the Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*), the manifestation of all of God's attributes occurs.⁵⁸

While existential determinations are finite and ideal determination is infinite, Ibn Arabi professes the ontological unity of all that exists. Multiplicity perceived by human beings exists only in their imagination and imaginative power. It takes a particular spiritual taste and a sharp eye to be able to witness God's immanence in the world without losing sight of His transcendence.⁵⁹

The distinction between the creator and creation is only relative. In his *Fusus*, Ibn Arabi says:

If you wish you can say that the world is God, or you can say that it is a creation; if you would rather, you can say that it is God on the one hand and a creation on the other, or you can plead stupefaction because of the lack of differentiation between the two.⁶⁰

According to Ibn Arabi, God's Essence is perceived as a substance that somehow penetrates the world and intermingles with it. On this basis, Ibn Arabi adds that there is nothing essentially evil in creation. This has given rise to the charge of pantheism and contradiction of the values of the shari'a, according to which there is both good and evil.⁶¹

It is often assumed that Ahmad Sirhindi of India (d. 1034/1624), of the Naqshbandi order, was a vehement opponent of Ibn Arabi, because of Sirhindi's criticism of the notion of 'Unity of Being'.⁶² A deeper analysis of his views, however, suggests that those whom Sirhindi takes to task are more the 'pretenders' who think they are on the path of Ibn Arabi, while failing to appreciate his most delicate distinctions. Thus, Sirhindi's criticisms of 'Unity of Being' concern these groups of aspirant Sufis, rather than Ibn Arabi himself.⁶³ However, Sirhindi was no mere imitator of Ibn Arabi. He had his own mystical visions and spiritual experiences and developed the notion of *wahdat al-shuhud* (unity of witnessing), which he considered different and even superior owing to the fact that his teachings were considered safe for the masses. Ibn Arabi, on the other hand, was 'guided' but might not necessarily guide others. Sirhindi does not personally see himself as superior to Ibn Arabi; in many places he eulogizes the latter and acknowledges his indebtedness, viewing his own insights as a refinement.⁶⁴

In his concept of Being, Sirhindi inclines towards the position of the ulama using the expression 'everything is by Him'. Sirhindi does not maintain that the world has an original existence: it is a 'shadow' of God, a place in which God manifests Himself. God's attributes can be found in creation, and the attributes and essence of the world of creation denote the attributes and Essence of God. Being is the source of all perfection.⁶⁵ However, contrary to

the views of some followers of Unity of Being, and following the precepts of the Qur'an, Sirhindi sees it as imperative to maintain a distinction between God and His creation. The Essence of God supports the world through the divine names and attributes, which have their own reality.

Critique of Sufis and Sufism⁶⁶

Like other schools of thought and practice at different times, Sufis have been targeted by zealous ulama and political authorities that have objected to their teachings. Often, theological persecutions were related to politics and social instability.⁶⁷ For example, during the Abbasid inquisition regarding the status of the Qur'an (whether it was created or not), a well-known Sufi, Dhu al-Nun (d. 246/860), was persecuted along with Ahmad ibn Hanbal for upholding the uncreated nature of the Qur'an. Similarly, the Sufi writer al-Qushayri suffered when the Ash'ari theological school was persecuted in Khurasan between 440/1048 and 455/1063.⁶⁸

It was not only non-Sufis who criticized Sufism. Other Sufis criticized aspects of Sufism, among them key figures such as al-Sarraj (d. 378/988), al-Hujwiri (d. circa 470/1077) and al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111).⁶⁹ Among the strongest critics was Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597/1200), a strict Hanbali jurist and writer. Ibn al-Jawzi held to a literalistic application of the law, jealously aiming to 'purify' the shari'a.⁷⁰ He criticized what he saw as Sufi tendencies towards libertinism.⁷¹ Ibn al-Jawzi listed six main areas of libertinism (among certain sections of Sufism) based on a list by al-Ghazali:

- Since all of our acts are predetermined, we need not perform any religious duty.
- God does not need our prayers, and therefore we need not perform them.
- Whatever we do, God is generous and will forgive.
- Since the law does not eliminate human weakness, it is worthless as a means of spiritual advancement.
- Sufis who see heavenly visions and hear celestial voices have reached the goal, and need not perform prayer.
- Sanctity and the state beyond the law are proved by the performance of miracles.⁷²

Ibn al-Jawzi also accused Sufism of a tendency towards incarnationism (*bulul*). Incarnationism is the focus on the beautiful human form as the locus of divine manifestation. The divine beauty was often contemplated in the masculine form; thus we find the phenomenon of 'gazing upon youths' as a phenomenon of *bulul*.⁷³ The fifth/eleventh century Hanbali jurist and heresiographer Abu Ya'la wrote: 'The incarnationists (*al-bululiyya*) have gone to the point of saying that God the Almighty experiences passionate

love!⁷⁴ The Indian scholar al-Thawfi (d. 1158/1745) remarked that the incarnationists were:

[a] sect of vain pretenders to Sufism who say that it is permitted to gaze on young men and women. In that state they dance and listen to music and say, 'This is one of the divine attributes that has descended among us, which is permitted and lawful!' This is pure infidelity.⁷⁵

Another critique of Sufis is related to their ecstatic sayings, which were interpreted as being misrepresentative of God and the Prophet, especially in matters of eschatology or doctrine.⁷⁶ Perhaps the most famous example is that of al-Hallaj (d. 309/922), who was executed on the basis of his ecstatic statement 'I am the Truth' (meaning 'I am God').⁷⁷

There are no clear legal principles for dealing with ecstatic sayings in religious law. Their literal interpretation as blasphemous (warranting sanction in religious law) violates the intentions of the Sufis.⁷⁸ The demarcation between jurists who hold to the literal interpretation of ecstatic comments and jurists who hold to their spiritual interpretation is the same as that between scholars who reject and those who accept ecstatic sayings.⁷⁹

Sufism today

Sufism is still an important part of the Islamic religious experience in modern times, and has even spread into the West. In the Muslim world, Sufism has been ferociously denounced by puritanical groups such as the Wahhabis and Salafis who view it as an unacceptable innovation. However, Sufism has also spurred revivalist movements in the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia and Africa.⁸⁰ In the West, it has been popularized in the poetry of Rumi (d. 672/1273) and has long been the subject of Orientalist interest. One of the world's leading authorities on Sufism was the German scholar Annemarie Schimmel (d. 2003), who devoted a lifelong career to the academic study of Islamic mysticism.⁸¹

Sufi groups in the West can be divided into three categories.⁸² The first comprises those who adhere to Islam and practise Islamic religious law. Examples of this category include branches of the Shadhili, Naqshbandi, Qadiri, Chishti and Nimatullahi orders which have been established in North America, Europe and Australia. A number of prominent Western converts have been involved with groups in this category, including Shaykh Abdalqadir as-Sufi, Shaykh Nuh Hah Mim Keller, and Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley. In the second group the shaykh and perhaps some of the disciples may be Muslims and practise Islamic law in some fashion, but this is not required for entrance into the group. Two examples of this category include the Bawa Muhayyadeen Fellowship and the Threshold Society (a Mevlevi Order). The third group comprises those who have been inspired by

historical Sufism or Sufi teachers but whose disciples may not consider themselves as Muslims, nor do they practise Islamic religious law. Examples from this category include the Sufi Order International founded by Hazrat Inayat Khan, and the Golden Sufi Centre headed by Irina Tweedie and Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee.