

What is Sufism?

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Is it a forbidden innovation as many proclaim?

Is it truly a part of Islam?

What about the status of someone like Muhyuddin Ibn 'Arabi?

Question:

What are the origins of the practice of Sufism? Is this practice a Science or a sect (movement)? Was this practiced during the lifetime of the Prophet (pbuh) and the early Scholars, and was this practice accepted by the *'ulama* throughout Islamic history? Also, why do many Muslims reject this practice nowadays?

Ustadh Abdullah's response:

'Tasawwuf' or 'Sufism' is not a practice per se, in the sense that it can be said to be the distinguishing mark of those who call themselves "Sufis." Rather, it is more of a science or discipline, not a sect as many would have you believe, especially those who like to identify themselves as the "Saved Sect" in spite of the fact that the concept of being "Saved" is a fundamental "Christian and Jewish" concept and doctrine.¹

¹ If the intent of those who say they are members of the 'Saved-Sect' is that they are the only Muslims who will enter Heaven, this runs contrary to the standard view that all Muslims will enter Heaven even if they enter Hell prior to that. In addition, understanding 'Saved' in this way is equivalent to how Christians and Jews understand it, in that merely by being a Christian or being a Jew one will enter Heaven immediately without punishment regardless of one's sins. And this is not how Muslims with orthodox creed understand 'Saved.' But if they mean by it that they will enter Heaven without entering Hell, this understanding may be acceptable, except that it is a claim to have knowledge of the unseen. And that is kufr (unbelief). Then, if the intent is that the 'Saved Sect' spoken about in the hadith is a reference to Muslims who will enter Heaven without going to Hell beforehand, this would be a sound and acceptable interpretation of the hadith, since it doesn't assign that status to any particular group by name. So, if Salafis are not claiming that they will go straight to Heaven after they die, then there is no basis for them making a distinction between themselves and other Muslims who also may go to Hell after they die prior to going to Heaven. But if they are claiming that non-Salafi Muslims will not go to Heaven at all, they have equated non-Salafi Muslims with unbelievers and have given them the same ruling as those who reject faith who will enter Hell and never come out. And this is contrary to orthodox belief, and contrary to what Salafis themselves acknowledge as being true.

In other words, Sufism isn't spinning around in circles for hours (as done by the Whirling Dervishes), dancing, or leaping in the air out of joy - as a form of ritual. And Sufism is not believing that Allah is in everything or that everything is in Allah or is literally Allah. These are things done and believed by some of those who have disfigured the once good face of "Sufism" among those who have allowed their minds to be overtaken by Philosophy and Sophistic Idiocy.²

Was Sufism existent during the time of the Prophet? Indeed it was. This is as long as you understand that what I'm saying is that the reality of what Sufism truly is did indeed exist even if the name didn't - in the same way that the reality of the science of Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) existed even though the word wasn't used to refer to that science during the time of the Prophet. The same goes for words like 'Fiqh' (Law), 'Majaz' (Figurative Expression), 'Ta'wil' (Figurative Usage), and others. These are words whose more commonly understood meanings were not in existence during the lifetime of the Prophet (pbuh). But that doesn't change anything about their realities being present at that time.

The hadith known as the Hadith of Gabriel is the first basis acknowledging the reality of what Sufism is as expressed through the word 'Ihsan' (Excellence). When the angel asked Muhammad (pbuh) about the meaning of 'Ihsan', he replied that it is

"To worship Allah as if you see Him. And if you don't see Him, then He surely sees you."

So Sufism is that discipline that aims at helping the slave of Allah arrive at the state wherein one can worship Allah as if he/she sees Him.

There are other terms also used to refer to Sufism - terms like 'Tazkiyat al-Nafs' (Purification of the Soul), 'Ilm al-Suluk' (The science of behavior), 'Tahdhib al-Nafs' (Refining the Ego), and 'Ihsan' (Spiritual and Moral Excellence). All of these terms refer to the same thing. So they are all synonymous.

The terms Tasawwuf, Sufiyya, Mutasawwifa, and Sufi are older in usage than even the term, 'Salafi'.³

² These were the types of Sufis that Ibn Taymiyya was opposed to and rebuked harshly.

³ In the 1418/1997 version of Majmu'at al-Fatawa of Dar al-Jil publishing house of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, the Book of Sufism (Kitab al-Tasawwuf) is the sixth of 19 volumes, which has two sections beginning with Kitab al-Tasawwuf, section 11. Ibn Taymiyya says in this book:

"All praise is due to Allah. As for the word 'Sufism' (Tasawwuf), it wasn't popular during the three [virtuous] generations. But speaking about it did become popular after that [period]. And the use of it has been transmitted about more than one of the Imams and Shaykhs, like Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Abu Sulayman Al-Darani, and others. And it has been related that Sufyan Ath-Thawri spoke of it. And some

Ibn Khaldun mentions in his Muqaddima:

"This science is one of those which have appeared in the religion (milla). Its origin is that the approach of these people lasted - among the Salaf of this Ummah, the eminent among the Sahaba and Tabi'in, and those after them - as being the approach of truth and right guidance."

Then he says while defining it,

"Its foundation is being dedicated to worship and cutting one's self off [from others] to Allah - High is He, turning away from the allurements of the lower life (dunya) and its attraction, having indifference toward (zuhd) all that the overwhelming majority of people turn their attention to, be it pleasure, wealth, or status, and isolating one's self from the creation in seclusion for worship."

Then he says,

"And that was wide-spread among the Sahaba and the Salaf. But once turning one's attention to the lower life became widespread in the second century and after, and when the people begun to incline towards being absorbed in the world, those who turned their attention toward worship were then characterized by the terms 'Sufiyya' (Sufis) and 'Mutasawwifa.'"

[Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun: p. 381]

So this makes it clear that the word 'Sufi' was used during the time of the Salaf. As for the word 'Salafi', it didn't appear until after the first 3 generations⁴, in addition to the fact that there has never existed in the history of Islam until Mufti Muhammad 'Abduh of post-colonial Egypt any movement or madhhab (school of thought)

mention that about Hasan Al-Basri. And they disputed with one another about the meaning that is to be attached to the 'Sufi.' For verily it is one of the descriptive nouns of affinity (asma al-nasab), like Qurashi, Madani, and the likes of that..." [p. 7]

One should not be misled by his statement that the word 'Sufi' "...wasn't popular during the three [virtuous] generations" to believe that it means that it didn't exist. The *shaykh* said that it wasn't "popular," not that it was "non-existent." The idea that the word existed during the time of the Salaf is substantiated by the fact that he stated that it was mentioned by the aforementioned Tab'in and Atba' al-Tabi'in as well as the poem of Imam Al-Shafi'i found in his *Diwan*.

⁴ And likely this started after the death of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal who died in 241 AH, and after the great theological debates between the Shi'a, Mu'tizala, and the founders of the orthodox schools of creed ('aqida), Imams Abu al-Hasan Al-Ash'ari (324 AH) and Abu Mansur Al-Maturidi (333 AH).

known as the 'Salafiyya.' Before then, the term was loosely used to refer to Muslims living during the first 3 centuries/generations of Islamic history. So if someone was called a 'Salafi' then, it was used to indicate in particular that this person limits his doctrinal discourse about Allah and His attributes and the problematic verses of the Qur'an to what the Salaf had said as in the case of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal - may Allah show him mercy.

There were a number of Sufis among the Sahaba and Tabi'in: Among the Sahaba, the most famous were people like Abu Hurayra (rAa) and 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. And the most prominent among the Tabi'in and those immediately after were names like: Hasan Al-Basari, Fudail ibn 'Iyad, Ibrahim ibn Adham, Bishr Al-Hafi, Harith Al-Muhasibi (a contemporary and peer of Imam Ahmad), Imam Junayd Al-Baghdadi, and many others.

There are basically two types of Sufism: [1] Practical Sufism ('amali/ tatbiqi), which focuses on the implementation of the Shariah, the removal of the heart's diseases, and gaining mastery over one's urges, and [2] Philosophical/

Theoretical Sufism (falsafi/nazari), which is self-explanatory.⁵

All the Sufism of the time of the Salaf up until and/or after the time of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (505 a.h.) around the 12th/13th centuries C.E. was practical Sufism. The 12th and 13th centuries were the birth of Philosophical Sufism. And it has been the latter that has done more to damage the pristine image of Sufism and its reality and true teachings.

For example, some of the books attributed to Muhyuddin Ibn 'Arabi, The Literalist Scholar considered to be a saint by the followers of the modern-day Sufi orders, contain some very problematic statements and teachings, some even heretical. For this reason, there are three different views concerning Ibn 'Arabi and his writings:

⁵ Law based Sufis, who make it a condition for becoming a true Sufi that one first study the classical Islamic legal sciences, classify Sufism as 'amali' (practical) and 'dhawqi' (experiential). The latter (dhawqi) is a branch of the 'philosophical/theoretical Sufism' only that it is a positive form of that approach to the Sufi path, while there are other forms that are harmful to the soul, which mainstream Sufis have never acknowledged as being a part of their discourse. Examples of this are the discourse about '*wahdat al-wujud*' or 'The belief in the intertwined and incarnate relationship between Allah and the creation.' In other words, this is a belief that everything literally is Allah and Allah is everything in that Allah and His creation are inseparable in the material sense to the point of there being no difference or partition between the two. This belief was attributed to Muhyuddin Ibn 'Arabi, even though mainstream Sufis deny believing such a thing, just as they deny that it was the belief of Ibn 'Arabi. Rather, many of them say that these beliefs were lies concocted against him by his enemies and interpolated into his book, *Fusus al-Hikam*. And his creed as laid out in the introduction to his other famous work, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, contradict what is found in *Fusus al-Hikam*. But even if he did say this, Sufis say that no true Sufi holds such a belief. For this reason, Ibn Taymiyya says in his *Majmu'at al-Fatawa* [Dar al-Jil, 1418/1998; vol. 11/p. 130],

“...If Ibn 'Arabi and his likes have claimed that they are Sufis, then they are among the philosophical disbelieving Sufis. They are not the Sufis of the people of knowledge. Nay! Even more they are not among the scholars (mashayikh) of the people of the Kitab and the Sunnah, like Al-Fudayl ibn 'Iyad, Ibrahim ibn Adham, Abu Sulayman Al-Darani, Ma'ruf al-Karkhi, Al-Junayd ibn Muhammad, Sahl ibn 'Abd Allah Al-Tusturi, and their likes – may the pleasure of Allah be on them all!”

And this clearly shows how Ibn Taymiyya wasn't opposed to all Sufis, and that he made a distinction between true Sufis whose knowledge was rooted in the Kitab and Sunnah, and pseudo-Sufis whose knowledge and practice was rooted in sophistry. Then he says on the following page in condemnation of those so-called Sufis who accepted the concept of *wahdat al-wujud*,

“And the extent of the reality of these individuals (Ibn 'Arabi and the likes) is the denial of the foundations of faith (usul al-iman) of belief in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day. And the true nature of their affair is the rejection of the Creator. For verily they made the existence of the creation the existence of the Creator, and they said: The existence is one...”

1- His enemies interpolated things in his books. So the official position should be that we acknowledge his sainthood (*wilaya*), but we don't read his books.

2- His books are full of metaphor and other figurative expressions, which are only understood by one who has been properly taught his language.

3- Which happens to be the position of some of the students of Ibn Taymiyya (and perhaps his self), like Hafiz Al-Dhahabi, which is that Ibn 'Arabi was a heretic and an apostate from Islam due to his problematic declarations. This is also the view held by those who claim more than anyone else today to follow the Salaf even though it is not a view taken from the Salaf.⁶ But, of course, Ibn 'Arabi's fate is in Allah's hand.

Another proof that the word Sufi and its understanding was present during the first 3 generations is the fact that we find the poem written in Imam Shafi'i's (204 a.h.) well-known *divan* entitled '*Faqih and Sufi*':

He says,

"*Faqih* (jurisprudent) and *Sufi* (internalizer of jurisprudence), Be not only one!

For verily [I swear] by the right of Allah, I advise you [sincerely],

For that one (the *faqih* without *tasawwuf*) is cruel (*qasin*), his heart hasn't tasted piety (*tuqan*),

⁶ Naturally, this couldn't be a position taken from the Salaf, since Ibn 'Arabi didn't live during the time of the Salaf. The point is only to emphasize that it is not a Muslim's obligation to make it part of his creed that Ibn 'Arabi was an unbeliever. Rather, the most moderate stance one can take in my view is that his affair – as with Ibn Taymiyya – is with Allah. And the Prophet (pbuh) has told us,

“Do not revile the dead. For verily they have already issued to what they have sent forth.”

Bukhari, Kitab al-Jana'iz, Chapter 97

And he said,

“Whoever says to his brother, O Kafir! Then one of the two of them returns with it.”

Bukhari, Adab: 72; Muslim, Iman: 111

And in light of all of the debate about the *Iman* and *Kufr* of both Ibn 'Arabi (from the side of Salafis) and Ibn Taymiyya (from the side of Sufis), it would be most safe to just abandon all discussion about their *kufur*. And it is always best to try to find a way out for anyone who has ever professed their acceptance of Islam.

And that one (the *sufi* without *fiqh*) is profoundly ignorant (*jahul*).
How can one possessing ignorance act aright?"

[From the Divan of Shafi'i: p. 66]

In the end, the reality is that there are a number of factors that have distorted the true picture of Sufism:

- 1- Mystic philosophers and their writings who have attached the name 'Sufi' to themselves the same way that followers of the former Nation of Islam attached to themselves the name 'Muslim'
- 2- The Anti-Sufis like Muhammad ibn 'Abd Al-Wahhab and the Neo-Wahhabi Movement found today in those who call themselves the 'Salafiyya' or 'Salafiyyun'
- 3- The enemies of Islam who are educated and wish to enslave the world, and who know that the true thing they have to fear most in achieving their imperialistic goals is that they will be confronted by a people who don't care about this world and whose hearts aren't attached to anything in it, who will continue to fight until either victory in this world or paradise in martyrdom. This is what true Sufism produces.

And anyone claiming to be a Sufi who doesn't keep their religious obligations or believes that they are not required to do so because they believe they have reached a level of closeness to God that exempts them from doing so, if you meet such a person, know that he/she is not a Sufi, more less a Muslim.

Sufism encourages regular voluntary *fasts*, praying *tahajjud* on a regular basis, making vows to help aid in curing one's character defects, taking retreat in the *masjid* away from people, maintaining daily prescribed *wirds* (litanies), *tawba* (repentance), performing all recommended acts, avoiding both forbidden and disliked things, and even some things which are permissible that one fears will lead to something impermissible, avoiding eating *haram* and/or un-islamically slaughtered meat, etc., etc., etc.

And who can claim that none of these things are from the Sunnah?

Was Salam

Abdullah

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