

THE PRACTICE OF MYSTICISM IN SUFISM

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Abstract – This paper addresses the practice of mysticism within Sufism and explores the extent to which this practice is deemed significant. It examines the historical background of Sufism and of mysticism within Sufism (this being grounded within Islam), together with the contemporary understanding of Sufism and its place in the modern world. The paper also provides a discussion relating to positive and negative reactions to the practice from the Muslim and non-Muslim world.

Keywords – Sufism, Mysticism, Muslim, Islam, Religious Practice.

Islam is the second largest religion and the third of the three monotheistic religions practised worldwide. This ever increasing religion has branches of supporters with differing practices. Although all sects within the Islamic faith share the same core beliefs, many forms of expressing worship differ. ‘Sufism , or *Tasawwuf* as it is known in the Muslim world, is Islamic mysticism’ (Lings 1999, 15). Although Sufis are geographically present worldwide, they are predominantly based in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and India, due to the historical importance of spirituality in these countries. For example, India is one of the great centres of Sufism and home to two influential Sufi saints, Moinuddin Chishti (1141-1236) and Bakhtyar Kaki (1173-1235).

Andrew Rippin defines a Sufi as ‘an adherent to the mystical way of Islam’ (Rippin 2012, 336). Linguistically Sufi is derived from the Arabic word *suf*, meaning wool. By the eighth century the word was occasionally applied to Muslims whose austere inclinations led them to wear woollen garments. Gradually this attire became a way of distinguishing Sufis, their teachings and practices of the Qur’an and Prophetic traditions (*Sunnah*), from other Muslims. ‘At the approach of the ninth century, the gerund form was adopted by representatives of the group as their appropriate designation’ (Esposito 1995, 102).

Mysticism refers to the ‘spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect which may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender’ (Oxford Dictionary online). The practice of mysticism interlinks with Sufism because in order to attain the Sufi way of life one must practice mysticism. In addition, the definition of mysticism refers to knowledge. This is a pertinent concept within Sufism, as Sufis distinguish between two kinds of knowledge. The first is *Ilm*, ‘which is the sort of knowledge extrapolated from reading or hearing about something or someone’ (Shepard 2009,

149). The second type of knowledge is *Ma'rifa*, the direct and intimate knowledge gained from acquainting with a person. As the Merriam-Webb dictionary explains, 'Mysticism was traditionally conceived as the spiritual quest for union with God and the perception of its essential oneness' (2012, online). Currently, it is understood to encompass ecstatic experience and perception, including that of emptiness or the desertion of the soul. Many of these forms of Mysticism are present within all the major religions. Within Sufism the focus and main ideal of mysticism is on the purity of the heart. This purity of the heart can be attained by undertaking a journey. There is a path and a guide, in which there lies a greater struggle and a lesser struggle. Ultimately, the journey is comprised of self-purification of the inner-self, which then transcends to the outer-self.

To understand the Sufi practice of mysticism, it is essential to journey back to the seventh century after the passing of the Prophet Muhammad. This provides a context and foundation from which Sufism arose; eventually this led to the origins of mysticism. In the seventh century, the basis for asceticism in Islam was fear of retribution and God's punishment. This resulted in a deep consciousness of human desire and weakness, leading to the consequent aspiration of complete submission to God. Following Islam's expansion beyond the Arabian Peninsula, under the Rashidun Caliphate and the Umayyad Caliphate, the longing to submit to God existed even within the Umayyad period. The Sufi movement had its roots among the independent scholars and other pious people of the late Umayyad period, some of whom would engage in extreme asceticism (Shepard, 2009). In the year 850, over two hundred years since the passing of the Prophet, the term Sufi was being used to describe certain people in the Baghdad region, individuals who concentrated on their behaviour as the means to attaining piety and displayed a distaste for the materialistic aspects of the world. As Saeed explains, '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 recognisable Sufism' (2006, 74). By the mid-ninth century, eight generations of fathers and sons had lived since the Prophet established his community. The Sufis, during this time, were actively engaged in preserving the Prophet's message through legal, spiritual and moral forms. Green points out that 'Early records show the Sufis were deeply involved in the scriptural and exemplary legacy of the Prophet' (2012, 25); the Sufis were highly invested in the oral and written discourses of the Sunnah and Qur'an. In this way, the early Sufis used the distinct resources of the past to create their own 'way', which over time would be recognised by their contemporaries and rooted in legitimate sources of authority. This marks the origins of mysticism, as the Sufis used the Qur'an and Hadith as the beginning of achieving *Ihsan* (perfection of worship).

Mysticism is one way of understanding and approaching God. It is an approach which makes use of intuitive and emotional spiritual faculties. Mysticism, amongst other things, is attached to the concept of severe self-discipline, avoiding all forms of indulgence. This, Sufis believe, can be achieved through guided training, referred to as 'travelling the path', which aims at 'dispersing the veils which hide the self from the real' (Trimingham 1998, 1), thereby becoming absorbed into undifferentiating unison.

Before attempting to understand the practices that are entailed within the mystic path, one must trace the influence of these practices. Although all Sufi lineages trace back to the Prophet, the ninth century is marked for its rapid progression of mystics, each one famous for contributing to the emergent mystical viewpoint and laying the core tenets of Sufism. A key figure at this point is Al-Junayd of Baghdad (830-910), a pupil of Harith al-Muhasibi (781-857), founder of an Islamic Philosophy school in Baghdad. Al-Junayd is often given credit for establishing a 'true system of mystical speculation, bringing together the insights of his predecessors and creating a lasting system for all subsequent generations' (Rippin 2012, 141). Al-Junayd is mainly recognised for laying the groundwork for sober mysticism. The Persian mystic, Al-Hallaj (c.858-922), also shared this view, but was condemned to death for the blasphemy of considering that individuals should recognise their God-nature through mystical experiences. Al-Hallaj was renowned for his claim: 'I am the truth' (Rippin 2012, 142). Other figures considered to be part of the source of Sufi practice include Hasan al-Basri (642-748), who was known for his learning and piety and was taught through the fourth Caliph, Ali. Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240) is regarded as one of the most influential Sufis in Islamic history (Saeed, 2006). Although Ibn Arabi did not follow a *Tariqat* (religious path discussed below), his teachings are studied to this day. He emphasised serving God and disallowing the soul to long for existing things.

These early Sufi mystics are pivotal in the formation of traditions that continue to exist generations later. Their beliefs were subsequently developed by the mystical litany termed *Dhikr* (remembrance), a practice linked to the Qur'anic injunction to 'mention God often' (Qur'an, 33:21). This common practice within Sufism signifies the remembrance of God, by repeating the 'beautiful names' of God and phrases from the Qur'an. The practice serves as a focal point for most Sufis, in expressing love and devotion to their creator, God. Another form of practice which features within Sufism is the notion of *tawakkul* (total trust in God). The characteristics of this practice are 'complete indifference to the world and its affairs and a full dependence upon God supplying the

needs of the individual' (Rippin 2012, 140). This is demonstrated through Sufis' lack of possessions and deprivation of bodily comforts and luxuries. It is through this spiritual journey, devoid of materialism, that the practices of mysticism can be achieved.

The journey of a Sufi should be approached from both a metaphorical and a literal form. It must be understood in the sense of a struggle through the mind and body. This journey begins by attempting to find 'the way' and aspiring towards *Insan-i-kamil* (the perfect man). The stages of this journey and training are classified into *Sharia*; the Qur'an says to obey God and the Prophet. Entailed within this is living according to the orthodox law and therefore observing the rituals of fasting, praying, charity, pilgrimage, etc. When the Sufi's mind is trained in this manner to obey and serve, he then passes on to the stage of *Tariqat*, the pathway to Allah. This requires seeking the assistance of a spiritual guide, in addition to the religious observances. The guide is known as a *Pir* (in Iranian) or *Shaykh* (in Arabic). When one is admitted by his *Pir* into the Sufi order, 'he must observe his rules, such as service, humility, vigils, in vacations, occasional fasts as directed by his *Pir*, as a novice these rulings must be obeyed without hesitation' (Archer 1980, 66). Following the observance of these rulings of *Tariqat* to the satisfaction of the *Pir*, the Sufi is handed a garment, *Khirqa* – 'a Sufi ritual cloak, often of distinctive colour or design' (Green 2012, 240). The next stages comprise of mental illumination through divine knowledge and achieving the state of truth. Two other important practices within Sufism are *Fana* (annihilation) and *Baqa* (continuance). These concepts can be related to the Qur'anic verse 'all that dwells upon the earth is perishing [*Fana*], yet still abides [*Baqa*] the face of your Lord, majestic, splendid' (55: 26-27). According to Al-Junayd, reaching *Fana* will result in a primordial state, as through annihilation a person does not become divine, but experiences God's *tawhid* (unity) in its fullness. This is known as *Baqa*, which represents survival after enduring the experience of the ultimate (Green 2012).

The purpose of these practices and differing forms of mysticism are to gain self-purification. Self-purification is desperately desired due to the existence of undesirable personality traits (Nicholson, 1964). Personality refers to 'the combination of characteristics or qualities that form an individual's distinctive character' (Oxford Dictionary online, 2012). The same character can be made up of either good qualities: love, honesty, generosity, or bad qualities, which can be self-destructive, such as lust, jealousy and deceit. The path of Sufi mysticism aims to diminish the egocentric characteristics that exist within a person by replacing them with pure traits.

Over the centuries Sufism has been consolidated and expanded. Green argues that 'the related

organisational and conceptual developments, ... allowed Sufi leaders to address the basic obstacles of reproduction through time and space while at the same time maintaining a degree of consistency' by developing methods for standardising doctrine and practice (Green 2012, 81). Sufis achieved this by developing a geographical distribution network, a cross-generational system of inheritance and a specific 'branding' mechanism of distinguishing the tradition of one master to another. This resulted in the creation of 'brotherhoods' or 'orders', within which 'a new sense of identity began to emerge which was consolidated by a socialising ethic of companionship (*suhba*) and a gate-keeping ritual of initiation (*Bay'a*)' (Green 2012, 83). Furthermore, distinction between different orders can be made through outward appearance and the specific rulings of that order. For example, proprietary practices, training and new mechanisms were developed. This is evidence of the ongoing evolution of a self-conscious tradition in which 'precedent and community were far more important criteria than originality and individuality' (*ibid.*, 84). What is present now is the same method of transmission, i.e. *Pir*-disciple; however, there exists structurally fixed organisations. These organisations are often founded and based on a spiritual framework, encompassing rules of etiquette, meditation, behaviour and other forms of worship.

One of the most influential Sufi orders which currently exists is the Naqshbandiyya order. This order has had a far-reaching impact on Muslims worldwide and its spiritual affiliation is with the first Caliph, Abu Bakr (Archer 1980). In the present day, Naqshbandi groups exist in the United States and in Europe (Saeed 2006). Another, prominent Sufi order is the Shadhiliyya order, with early Shadhilis followed by the Maliki school of law which emphasised the doctrine of absolute unity (Nasr 1997). This implies that as the practice of the Sufi way has developed over time it has resulted in differing Sufi orders. Through these differences, there have emerged traditional and cultural changes worldwide in practicing Sufism and mysticism. For example, the Naqshbandi order believes there are three daily levels of spiritual practice, alongside the obligatory prayers and requirements of the religious law for Muslims. During these three daily levels, one must repeat certain phrases, invocations of the divine, a disciple at the second level must do the same but to an intensified level and the third level consists of rigorous spiritual practice and meditation. The Shadhili mystical practice conforms to the practice of religious law; alongside this, the disciple must engage in congregational recitation of poems, prayers and litanies.

One of the reasons for the development of Sufism, which led to its reformation, consolidation and expansion, was the impact and pressures of European colonization and its inherent Christian and western values (Green, 2012). These transformations of European modernity were creating new

Muslim populations, unconnected to the old Sufi institutions and forms of knowledge. This resulted in the religious legitimacy of Sufism being questioned, with the practice of mysticism being stigmatised and subject to misconceptions. Aside from Sufism and the practice of mysticism changing to adapt to colonialism, renewals within differing countries also contributed to its development. This was demonstrated through Sufis engaging in political, social, cultural and traditional practices, which led to an inevitable reform in order to adapt to the changing circumstances rather than opposing them.

Like other schools of thought and religious practices which have been censured at different times by dominant philosophers and politicians, Sufis have been 'targeted by zealous *Ulama* and political authorities that have objected to their teachings' (Saeed 2006, 82). These objections have been voiced by Sufis and non-Sufis, affecting the society and the practice of mysticism. One drawback to such criticism is the emergence of new belief systems which contradict the basic tenants of Islam. Ibn al-Jawzi (Hanbali jurist) accused Sufism of a tendency towards incarnationism (*hulal*). 'Incarnationism is the focus on the beautiful human form as the locus of divine manifestation' (Saeed 2006, 82). Abu Ya'la, the eleventh century Hanbali jurist, claimed that: 'the incarnationists have gone to the point of saying that God the Almighty experiences passionate love' (cited in Ernst 1985, 120). Such beliefs are not only considered blasphemous, they also question all that is related to Islam concerning the divine attributes of God. Nonetheless, these misconceptions, based on minority opinion, lead to the dismissal of Sufism.

Another critique of Sufism is related to their ecstatic sayings. As Ernst points out these sayings can be 'interpreted as being misrepresentative of God and the Prophet, especially in matters of eschatology or doctrine' (Ernst 1985, 125-6). The most famous example of this is Al-Hallaj, who claimed he was the truth, thereby implying he was God. The result is a conflict of interpretation between what is a literal saying and what may be intended as figurative or metaphorical. There also exists tension between Sufism and *Shari'ah* (divine law) in relation to certain ritual activities. Sufism is accused of superstition, non-Islamic activity and lack of relevance to modern society (Shepard 2009). However, alongside the criticism, Sufism offers many benefits to society, for it is regarded as Islam's mystical, tolerant and universal philosophy (Ahmed, 1993). Its message of peace is valued by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It is a way of life which can be enjoyed by all Muslim social classes and sects. Concepts within Sufism also allow the layman to appreciate the life of this world, whilst holding very little attachment to its materialistic aspects, which ultimately encourages a simple way of living. Furthermore, the particular emphasis of purifying the evils within oneself, is not

only an important concept within Sufism, it is also beneficial to society. The continuous emphasis on submission, repentance, sincerity and fear in God allows man to develop morals and ethics which allow for the closeness with God to be attained (Archer, 1980). Practices and rituals, expressed through dance, music, poetry and remembrance of God, are a means of expressing love and devotion to God, the Prophet and God's rulings. Entailed within this is an ideal type of behaviour and thought to abide by within religion and society. Sufism's message of love, humility and compassion is one which has universal appeal. This is evidenced by the worldwide support for the practice rather than opposition. Sufi mysticism is still an important part of Islamic religious experience in modern times. This is because the practice is intellectually rigorous and firmly grounded in Islamic teachings.

In some respects Sufi mysticism can be compared to Christianity, as it is argued the term 'Sufi' was first used in a Christian, rather than an Islamic, milieu to refer to a deviating trend that emerged in the late sixth century among the Nestorian Christians of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Early Muslim ascetics shared with Nestorian Christians 'both word and practice as an identification with a humble, lowly status and a recognition of values other than material' (Green 2012, 18). Another comparison can be made with Christian monks. Both Sufis and Monks dedicate their lives to servitude and sincere devotion. However, whereas Sufis are able to marry monks cannot. Vedantism, which originated in Hindu philosophy, is also similar to Sufism, not only in the practice of meditation, breathing exercises and observing fasts, but in their shared belief in universal love and tolerance towards other religions. Whilst Sufism is based on Islamic teachings with its principles supported by passages from the Qur'an, Vedantism is connected with earlier Indian thought and teachings of the great Rishis of India (Archer, 1980).

Mysticism within Sufism is significant because it plays a defining role in the practice of Sufism. Sufism's emphasis on 'following the path' and self-purification is attained through the realms of mysticism, as it is through this spiritual quest that the ultimate goal of avoiding all sources of self-indulgence can be reached. The significance of Sufism itself is further demonstrated in its rich historical context and many pious teachers who helped to preserve and develop the practices, practices such as *Fana* and *Baqa*, carried out alongside the basic tenants in order to reach the ultimate level of mysticism. Such is the significance of Sufism that even controversies and colonisation did not prevent it from expanding and adapting to the modern needs of Muslims and non-Muslims and its geographical presence worldwide. Mysticism within Sufism is crucial, because in the context of human needs it is a practice which strips the individual to the bare necessities required to exist, and only having achieved that station of simplicity can one be classed as a Sufi.

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