

The Origin of Sufism

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As the history of Islamic religious sciences tells us, religious commandments were not written down during the early days of Islam; rather, the practice and oral circulation of commandments related to belief, worship, and daily life allowed the people to memorize them.

Thus it was easy to compile them in books later on, for what had been memorized and practiced was simply written down. In addition, since religious commandments were the vital issues in a Muslim's individual and collective life, scholars gave priority to them and compiled books on them. Legal scholars collected and codified books on Islamic law and its rules and principles pertaining to all fields of life. Traditionists established the Prophetic traditions (hadiths) and way of life (Sunna), and preserved them in books. Theologians dealt with issues concerning Muslim belief. Interpreters of the Qur'an dedicated themselves to studying its meaning, including issues that would later be called "Qur'anic sciences," such as naskh (abrogation of a law), inzal (God's sending down the entire Qur'an at one time), tanzil (God's sending down the Qur'an in parts on different occasions), qira'at (Qur'anic recitation), ta'wil (exegesis), and others. Thanks to these efforts that remain universally appreciated in the Muslim world, the truths and principles of Islam were established in such a way that their authenticity cannot be doubted.

While some scholars were engaged in these "outer" activities, Sufi masters were mostly concentrating on the Muhammadan Truth's pure spiritual dimension. They sought to reveal the essence of humanity's being, the real nature of existence, and the inner dynamics of humanity and the cosmos by calling attention to the reality of that which lies beneath and beyond their outer dimension. Adding to Qur'anic commentaries, narrations of Traditionists, and deductions of legal scholars, Sufi masters developed their ways through asceticism, spirituality, and self-purification in short, their practice and experience of religion.

Thus the Islamic spiritual life based on asceticism, regular worship, abstention from all major and minor sins, sincerity and purity of intention, love and yearning, and the individual's admission of his or her essential impotence and destitution became the subject matter of Sufism, a new science possessing its own method, principles, rules, and terms. Even if various differences gradually emerged among the orders that were established later, it can be said that the basic core of this science has always been the essence of the Muhammadan Truth.

The two aspects of the same truth the commandments of the Shari'a and Sufism have sometimes been presented as mutually exclusive. This is quite unfortunate, as Sufism is nothing more than the spirit of the Shari'a, which is made up of austerity, self-control and criticism, and the continuous struggle to resist the temptations of Satan and the carnal, evil-commanding self in order to fulfill religious obligations. While adhering to the former has been regarded as exotericism (self-restriction to Islam's outer dimension), following the latter has been seen as pure esotericism. Although this discrimination arises partly from assertions that the commandments of the Shari'a are represented by legal scholars or muftis, and the other by Sufis, it should be viewed as the result of the natural, human tendency of assigning priority to that way which is most suitable for the individual practitioner.

Many legal scholars, Traditionists, and interpreters of the Qur'an produced important books based on the Qur'an and the Sunna. The Sufis, following methods dating back to the time of the Prophet and his Companions, also compiled books on austerity and spiritual struggle against carnal desires and temptations, as well as states and stations of the spirit. They also recorded their own spiritual experiences, love, ardor, and rapture. The goal of such literature was to attract the attention of those whom they regarded as restricting their practice and reflection to the "outer" dimension of religion, and directing it to the "inner" dimension of religious life.

Both Sufis and scholars sought to reach God by observing the Divine obligations and prohibitions. Nevertheless, some extremist attitudes occasionally observed on both sides caused disagreements. Actually there was no substantial disagreement, and it should not have been viewed as a disagreement, for it only involved dealing with different aspects and elements of religion under different titles. The tendency of specialists in jurisprudence to concern themselves with the rules of worship and daily life and how to regulate and discipline individual and social life, and that of Sufis to provide a way to live at a high level of spirituality through self-purification and spiritual training, cannot be considered a disagreement.

In fact, Sufism and jurisprudence are like the two schools of a university that seeks to teach its students the two dimensions of the Shari'a so that they can practice it in their daily lives. One school cannot survive without the other, for while one teaches how to pray, be ritually pure, fast, give charity, and how to regulate all aspects of daily life, the other concentrates on what these and other actions really mean, how to make worship an inseparable part of one's existence, and how to elevate each individual to the rank of a universal, perfect being (al-insan al-kamil) a true human being. That is why neither discipline can be neglected.

Although some self-proclaimed Sufis have labeled religious scholars "scholars of ceremonies" and "exoterists," real, perfected Sufis have always depended on the basic principles of the Shari'a and have based their thoughts on the Qur'an and the Sunna. They have derived their methods from these basic sources of Islam. Al-Wasaya wa al-Ri'aya (The Advices and Observation of Rules) by al-Muhasibi, Al-Ta'arruf li-Madhab Ahl al-Sufi (A Description of the Way of the People of Sufism) by Kalabazi, Al-Luma' (The Gleams) by al-Tusi, Qut al-Qulub (The Food of Hearts) by Abu Talib al-Makki, and Al-Risala al-Qushayri (The Treatise) by al-Qushayri are among the precious sources that discuss Sufism according to the Qur'an and the Sunna. Some of these sources concentrate on self-control and self-purification, while others elaborate upon various topics of concern to Sufis.

After these great compilers came Hujjat al-Islam Imam al-Ghazzali, author of *Ihya' al-'Ulum al-Din* (Reviving the Religious Sciences), his most celebrated work. He reviewed all of Sufism's terms, principles, and rules, and, establishing those agreed upon by all Sufi masters and criticizing others, united the outer (Shari'a and jurisprudence) and inner (Sufi) dimensions of Islam. Sufi masters who came after him presented Sufism as one of the religious sciences or a dimension thereof, promoting unity or agreement among themselves and the so-called "scholars of ceremonies." In addition, the Sufi masters made several Sufi subjects, such as the states of the spirit, certainty or conviction, sincerity and morality, part of the curriculum of madrassas (institutes for the study of religious sciences).

Although Sufism mostly concentrates on the individual's inner world and deals with the meaning and effect of religious commandments on one's spirit and heart and is therefore abstract, it does not contradict any of the Islamic ways based on the Qur'an and the Sunna. In fact, as is the case with other religious sciences, its source is the Qur'an and the Sunna, as well as the conclusions drawn from the Qur'an and the Sunna via *ijtihad* (deduction) by the purified scholars of the early period of Islam. It dwells on knowledge, knowledge of God, certainty, sincerity, perfect goodness, and other similar, fundamental virtues.

Defining Sufism as the "science of esoteric truths or mysteries," or the "science of humanity's spiritual states and stations," or the "science of initiation" does not mean that it is completely different from other religious sciences. Such definitions have resulted from the Shari'a-rooted experiences of various individuals, all of whom have had different temperaments and dispositions, and who lived at different times.

It is a distortion to present the viewpoints of Sufis and the thoughts and conclusions of Shari'a scholars as essentially different from each other. Although some Sufis were fanatic adherents of their own ways, and some religious scholars (i.e., legal scholars, Traditionists, and interpreters of the Qur'an) did restrict themselves to the outer dimension of religion, those who follow and represent the middle, straight path have always formed the majority. Therefore it is wrong to conclude that there is a serious disagreement (which most likely began with some unbecoming thoughts and words uttered by some legal scholars and Sufis against each other) between the two groups.

When compared with those who spoke for tolerance and consensus, those who have started or participated in such conflicts are very few indeed. This is natural, for both groups have always depended on the Qur'an and the Sunna, the two main sources of Islam.

In addition, the priorities of Sufism have never been different from those of jurisprudence. Both disciplines stress the importance of belief and of engaging in good deeds and good conduct. The only difference is that Sufis emphasize self-purification, deepening the meaning of good deeds and multiplying them, and attaining higher standards of good morals so that one's conscience can awaken to the knowledge of God and thus embark upon a path leading to the required sincerity in living Islam and obtaining God's pleasure.

By means of these virtues, men and women can acquire another nature, "another heart" (a spiritual intellect within the heart), a deeper knowledge of God, and another "tongue" with which to mention God. All of these will help them to observe the Shari'a commandments based on a deeper awareness of, and with a disposition for, devotion to God. An individual practitioner of Sufism can use it to deepen his or her spirituality. Through the struggle with one's self, solitude or retreat, invocation, self-control and self-criticism, the veils covering the inner dimension of existence are torn apart, enabling the individual to acquire a strong conviction of the truth of all of Islam's major and minor principles.