

Sofi

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Sofi is used to designate the followers of Sufism, particularly by speakers of Persian and Turkish. Others use Sufi. I think the difference arises from the different views of the word's origin. Those who claim that it is derived from sof (wool), safa (spiritual delight, exhilaration), safwat (purity), or sophos (a Greek word meaning wisdom), or who believe that it implies devotion, prefer Sufi. Those who hold that it is derived from suffa (chamber), and stress that it should not be confused with sofu (religious zealot), also use Sufi.

The word sofi has been defined in many ways, among them:

- A traveler on the way to God who has purified his or her self and thus acquired inner light or spiritual enlightenment.
- A humble soldier of God who has been chosen by the Almighty for Himself and thus freed from the influence of his or her carnal, evil-commanding self.
- A traveler on the way to the Muhammadan Truth who wears a coarse, woolen cloak as a sign of humility and nothingness, and who renounces the world as the source of vice and carnal desire. Following the example of the Prophets and their followers, as well as sincere devotees, they are called mutasawwif to emphasize their spiritual states and belief, conduct, and life-style.
- A traveler to the peak of true humanity who has been freed from carnal turbidity and all kinds of human dirt to realize his or her essential, heavenly nature and identity.
- A spiritual person who tries to be like the people of the Suffa the poor, scholarly Companions of the Prophet who lived in the chamber adjacent to the Prophet's Mosque by dedicating his or her life to earning that name.

Some say that the word sofi is derived from saf (pure). Although their praiseworthy efforts to please God by serving Him continually and keeping their hearts set on Him are enough for them to be called pure ones, such a derivation is grammatically incorrect. Some have argued that sofi is derived from sophia or sophos, Greek words meaning wisdom. I think this is a fabrication of foreign researchers who try to prove that Sufism has a foreign and therefore non-Islamic origin.

The first Muslim to be called a Sofi was the great ascetic Abu Hashim al-Kufi (d. 150 AH9). Thus, the word sofi was in use in the second Islamic century after the generation of the Companions and their blessed successors. At this point in time, Sufism was characterized by spiritual people seeking to follow the footsteps of our Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, and his Companions by imitating their life-styles. This is why Sufism has always been known and remembered as the spiritual dimension of the Islamic way of life.

Sufism seeks to educate people so that they will set their hearts on God and burn with the love of Him. It focuses on good morals and proper conduct, as shown by the Prophets. Although some slight deviations may have appeared in Sufism over time, these should not be used to condemn that way of spiritual purity.

While describing Sufis who lead a purely spiritual life, Imam Qushayri writes:

The greatest title in Islam is Companionship of the Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings. This honor or blessing is so great that it can only be acquired by an actual Companion of the Prophet. The second rank in greatness belongs to the Tabi'un, those fortunate ones who came after the Companions and saw them. This is followed by the Taba'i al-Tabi'in, those who came after the Tabi'un and saw them. Just after the closing years of this third generation and coinciding with the outbreak of internal conflict and deviation in belief, and along with the Traditionists, legal scholars, and theologians who rendered great services to Islam, Sufis had great success in reviving the spiritual aspect of Islam. Early Sofis were distinguished, saintly people who led upright, honest, austere, and simple and blemish-free lives. They did not seek bodily happiness or carnal gratification, and followed the example of the Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings. They were so balanced in their belief and thinking that they cannot be considered followers of ancient philosophers, Christian mystics, or Hindu holy men. Early Sofis considered it the science of humanity's inner world, the reality of things, and the mysteries of existence. A Sofi studied this science, one determined to reach the final rank of a universal or perfect being.

Sufism is a long journey of unceasing effort leading to the Infinite One, a marathon to be run without stopping, with unyielding resolution, and without anticipating any worldly pleasure or reward. It has nothing to do with Western or Eastern mysticism, yoga, or philosophy, for a Sofi is a hero determined to reach the Infinite One, not a mystic, a yogi, or a philosopher.

Prior to Islam, some Hindu and Greek philosophers followed various ways leading to self-purification and struggled against their carnal desires and the world's attractions. But Sufism is essentially different from these ways. For example, Sofis live their entire lives as a quest to purify their selves via invocation, regular worship, complete obedience to God, self-control, and humility, whereas ancient philosophers did not observe any of these rules or acts. Their self-purification if it really deserves to be considered as such usually caused conceit and arrogance in many of them, instead of humility and self-criticism.

Sofis can be divided into two categories: those who stress knowledge and seek to reach their destination through the knowledge of God (ma'rifa), and those who follow the path of yearning, spiritual ecstasy, and spiritual discovery. Members of the first group spend their lives traveling toward God, progressing "in" and progressing "from" Him on the wings of knowledge and the knowledge of God. They seek to realize the meaning of: There is no power and strength save with God. Every change, alteration, transformation, and formation observed, and every event witnessed or experienced, is like a comprehensible message from the Holy Power and Will experienced in different tongues. Those in

the second group also are serious in their journeying and asceticism. However, they may sometimes deviate from the main destination and fail to reach God Almighty, since they pursue hidden realities or truths, miracle-working, spiritual pleasure, and ecstasy. Although this path is grounded on the Qur'an and the Sunna, it may lead some initiates to cherish such desires and expectations as spiritual rank, working miracles, and sainthood. That is why the former path, which leads to the greatest sainthood under the guidance of the Qur'an, is safer.

Sofis divide people into three groups:

- The perfect ones who have reached the destination. This group is divided into two subgroups: the Prophets and the perfected ones who have reached the Truth by strictly following the prophetic examples. Not all perfected ones are guides; rather than guiding people to the Truth, some remain annihilated or drowned in the waves of the "ocean of meeting with God and amazement." As their relations with the visible, material world are completely severed, they cannot guide others.

- The initiates. This group also consists of two subgroups: those who completely renounce the world and, without considering the Hereafter, seek only God Almighty, and those who seek to enter Paradise but do not give up tasting some of the world's permitted pleasures. Such people are known as ascetics, worshippers, the poor, or the helpless.

- The settlers or clingers. This group consists of people who only want to live an easy, comfortable life in this world. Thus, Sofis call them "settlers" or "clingers," for they "cling heavily to the earth." They are mainly people who do not believe, who indulge in sin and therefore cannot be pardoned. According to the Qur'an, they are unfortunate beings who belong to "the group on the left," or those who are "blind" and "deaf" and "without understanding."

Some have also referred to these three groups as the foremost (or those brought near to God), the people on the right, and the people on the left.