

Understanding Islam Series Two: Standing before God

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Part Twelve: Sufis and the inward journey to God

The journey deeper into a life lived according to God's guidance is traditionally seen as being threefold. These three stages go with the keywords *islam*, *iman* and *ihsan* [Q. 49:13-14; 16:90]. The first stage, *islam*, is the outer submission of every human act in obedience to the will of God, as transmitted by the Prophet. The second stage, *iman*, is faith based on the revealed Word of God in the Qur'an. Now we turn to the third stage, *ihsan*, which is "living the good and beautiful," and is normally spoken of as "to worship God as if you see him." This is a wide term, which applies to all Muslims, and can be thought of as "authentic religious experience." It is often associated with the sufis.

Sometimes this is referred to as the mystical dimension of Islam; a journey into the depths of the human heart and also the ascent of the heart to God. The heart is seen as the centre of life: of consciousness, intelligence and intentionality. The heart can thus be seen as the true "self." This heart or self needs to be "polished" or purified so that it radiates the light of God through the entire person in both thoughts and actions. This invisible spiritual presence, sometimes called the love of God, permeates all aspects of Islam.

In a text often quoted amongst the sufis, God says, "I was a hidden treasure, so I loved to be known. Hence I created the creatures so that I might be known." The great sufi poet Rumi uses the image of God as a beautiful woman sitting on a rooftop, who throws a stone into the crowds of people down below. The stone is the creation. It is not made to be admired in itself but rather to draw attention to God who created it. In this way, the act of God provokes the response of love, worship, service and obedience on the part of human beings. Bringing forth this response is the heart of the sufi way of living constantly in the love of God.

The imitation of Muhammad

How is this to be done? The key verse often quoted here is Q. 3:31, "Say [Muhammad], if you love God, follow me: God will love you and forgive you your sins." Here we see clearly that imitating Muhammad is the key to living a life that pleases God and thus will be rewarded by being drawn into the love of God. Muhammad is *al-insan al-kamil*, the perfect human being, so those who seek perfection should follow his example in all things. The first step in following the Prophet is to align the human will with the will of God by obeying all the commands and prohibitions of God. The second step is through additional voluntary acts of service, worship and love. This is summarised in a saying of God placed on the lips of Muhammad (*Hadith Qudsi*):

My servant draws near to me through nothing that I love more than what I have made obligatory for him. My servant never ceases drawing near to me through additional voluntary works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks.

This is the state of absolute selflessness.

Muhammad is the embodiment of all the spiritual virtues. He more directly manifests the attributes of God than any other creature. He thus lives most fully in the state of *ihsan*. The path of human perfection, the path of love, is thus “doing the good and beautiful” in all things in this life. This is the path that leads, should God will, to Paradise where ultimately the “lover of God” will dwell beside him [Q. 54:55].

One of the ways in which Muhammad acts as a role model for Muslims is in the relative simplicity of his lifestyle and his lack of concern with material wealth and possessions. There was a group of Muslims at the time of the Prophet, the “people of the bench,” who used to seek his company so that they might be guided by him on the journey within; these were the first sufis. The word sufi may well be derived from *suf* meaning wool, which may refer to the simple clothing that they wore. This simplicity of life gives to many sufis their ascetical character, which led some to a life of voluntary poverty (*faqr*) or renunciation.

The ascent of the believer

At the heart of the sufi way lies the command of the Qur'an to remember God without ceasing [Q. 33:41-42]. This is achieved through the prayer of the heart or *dhikr*. Training the heart constantly to remember God, especially by reciting and meditating on the Divine Names, brings about a transformation of the whole of one's being and life. So the sufi way is one of interiorisation and intensification of faith (*iman*) and practice (*islam*). Through such practices one grows in God-consciousness or *taqwa*, until, God willing, one reaches the state of *ihsan*, the constant awareness that one stands always in the presence of the unseen God. Then God may draw them into a ‘spiritual embrace.’

A symbolic model for the sufi path is the ascent of Muhammad or *mi'raj* into the presence of God, during which he was given knowledge. This knowledge, sought by the sufi, is not knowledge of the intellect but knowledge of the heart. It brings an absolute certainty, grasped as a whole and through the power of intuition. It is like a light that radiates through the recipient, who becomes translucent to the light of God. In this way, the spiritual quest of the Muslim is like an ascent towards the divine presence, or something of a *mi'raj* [Q. 53:11-12]. As Muhammad is reported in a Hadith to have said: “Prayer is the ascent of the believer.”

Categories of sufi practice

Two broad categories were seen to emerge in sufi practice. These were known by the Arabic terms *sukr*, which can be translated as “intoxicated or enraptured,” and *sahw*, “sober or reserved.”

Those characterised by *sukr* became overcome by the presence of God. They tended to stress the presence of God everywhere, the nearness of God and the possibility of ultimate union with God. Their experience was generally expressed through poetry, which contained themes of love, intimacy and joy at finding “the eternal source within.” Two of the great Persian sufi poets associated with this school were Rumi (1207-1273) and Hafiz (c1325-1390).

Some went as far as speaking of God as an all-embracing unity, in which the human being is united with God in their very being. They had a particular understanding of the Hadith of Muhammad that “God was, and nothing was with him.” As God is outside of time, the verb here is also timeless: so God was, is and will be the only truly existent being, and they longed to be united with God in this existence; indeed, at the extreme end of this school, there were those who spoke of “losing the delusion of “the self” as being independent of God.”

Those characterised by *sahw* tended to stress the difference between the creator and the creature, the otherness of God and the loving servanthood of the human being. They generally wrote in prose, which focused on the themes of wonder, awe, majesty, and fear of God, including God’s vengeance and wrath. Rather than direct experience, they sought a deeper knowledge of God. They rejected notions of union with God and emphasised a spirituality of action in conformity with God’s revealed ethical will. Abu'l Qasim al-Junayd (d.910) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292-1350) might be mentioned as masters of this school.

Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), who counselled people to “see with both eyes” or to keep a balance between these two schools, was the master of the esoteric knowledge of Islam or a form of gnosis. He spoke of direct knowledge of the self and of God that could flow freely through the purified heart. Through this process of purification, the veils of the heart were lifted by God so that one could see the true reality of things. The unpurified heart does not see with the clarity of God, like being constantly in the shade, but through the purification of knowledge, one was able to see things “from the sunny side,” from the true perspective of God.

Shaykhs and tariqas

Within the sufi tradition different groups or *tariqas* were formed, whose members follow different practices or systems to journey towards their ultimate goal. These are often referred to as Sufi Orders, but not in the sense of a monastic order, more an established system or path associated with the group and its teachers. Most are based around repeated rituals of *dhikr*. These may consist of certain phrases that are

repeated and counted on the *tasbeih* (string of beads). Some groups chant *dhikr* aloud, either alone or in a sufi gathering or circle. Often *dhikr* involves the regulation of the breath, so that certain phrases are said as one breathes in and out. The tempo of both chanting and breathing can vary. Some groups concentrate on silent *dhikr*; other groups add music or rhythm to the chanting. The use of bodily movement has also been incorporated by some groups, this may be rhythmic swaying, bowing or jumping, or spinning round on an axis (as in the whirling of the dervishes).

Under the supervision of a *shaykh* (f. *shaykah*, a sufi teacher or spiritual guide) the use of music, movement or control of the breath can lead to changes in the composition of blood gases and so bring the devotee to an altered state of consciousness. The importance of the *shaykh(ah)* must be emphasised. There is a tradition amongst the sufis that those who attempt to follow the sufi paths without the guidance of a *shaykh(ah)* will go astray, "Shaytan himself will become their *shaykh*," although historically there were a few who are understood to have travelled the path without one. These practices are not things to be taken lightly or used by the uninitiated by way of an experiment. There is a good deal in common between the practices of the sufis and those of Jewish and Christian mystics. Some scholars have even spoken of an ecumenism between them on the esoteric level. It is clear that there were sufi *tariqas* in Islamic Spain that took into full membership Jews and Christians as well as Muslims, and in India, it is known that Hindus prayed with sufi *tariqas*.

Sufi systems of spiritual growth

A typical pattern amongst many sufi *tariqas* is to progress along a series of stations or *maqamat*. In some systems there are twenty stations through which one must pass in order without missing any. The length of time that one spends in a station is under the direction of the *shaykh* who sets exercises to be done until a certain spiritual character has been reached through the blessing of God. Such stations are given names like repentance (*tawbat*), conversion (*inabat*), renunciation (*zuhd*) and trust in God (*tawakkul*). Having passed through these stations, most sufis hold that once attained they are never withdrawn. One is then in a disposition to have a higher state bestowed by God. These states or *ahwal* are held to be more fleeting and have names such as love (*mahabba*) and yearning to be constantly with God (*shawq*).

Muhammad is the key to understanding the sufi system. His life was spent in seeking the pleasure of God and being filled with the ultimate awareness of and closeness to God. He is *al-insan al-kamil*, the perfect human being. He became the first teacher or *shaykh* to his companions on the sufi path. He passed on to them the hidden knowledge contained in the Qur'an and wisdom that was given to him by God. They in turn became *shaykhs* to those who took them as teachers and guides. In this way, a spiritual lineage or *silsila* was created whereby contemporary sufi *shaykhs* can trace their *silsila*, from disciple to teacher, all the way back to the Prophet himself. One of these *silsilas* is traced back through the Caliph Abu Bakr, but all the rest go back through Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of Muhammad, who the Shi'a hold to be the rightful successor of the Prophet and heir to his esoteric knowledge, the first Imam,

and the Sunnis respect as the fourth Caliph. Therefore those who follow the sufi ways can be found in both Sunni and Shi'a communities.

Diverse sufi ways

Trying to pin down a precise definition of the sufi ways is not possible. For some, this means an organised system in one of the sufi *tariqas*, for others, especially amongst the Shi'a, it is much more an individual experience. The most widely accepted “path to human perfection” was simply to follow the life and practice of Muhammad as closely as possible and to be filled with devotion to the Prophet: “an imitation and celebration of the Prophet.” There were those who developed their sufi way into a kind of religious order of chivalry, especially when men were needed to fight in *jihads*, to defend the borders of the Muslim territories, from Morocco in the west to the far eastern borders during the Ottoman period. Some went beyond all generally accepted norms, like the Qalandars from the 13th century onwards, who lived a wandering unmarried life of voluntary poverty and license, ignoring all social conventions and outer observances.

Some Muslim individuals and groups will want nothing to do with sufi practices. They regard the whole issue as deviating from the pure practice of Islam, which is based on the Qur'an and *sunna* understood in a literal way and regulated by the shari'a. Such Muslims point to those sufis who have become so rapt in ecstasy that they have lost contact with the basic duties and practices of Islam and highlight the risk of exploiting the innocent. There have been a small minority of sufis who have taught that once one ascends higher on the sufi path, the outer forms of the shari'a no longer apply. The majority of sufi groups are adamant about the need to observe the full shari'a at all times.