

V. Sufi Networks: Communications and Concepts



Photo: Mausoleum Of Jelaluddin Rumi, Konya, Turkey [© Gary R. Bunt 2005]

Introducing Sufism

The word 'Sufi' comes from the Arabic *sufi* - "an 'adept of the mystical path' of Islam (Denny, 1985, 242). *Sufi* may be derived from Arabic for *suf* 'wool' or *safa* 'purity'. The Arabic word *tasawuf* is used in relation to Sufism.

There are certainly many parallels between Sufism and other forms of mysticism, whilst they all have specific individualistic traits:

"Sufism is the knowledge whereby man can realize himself [sic] and attain permanency. Sufis can teach in any vehicle, whatever its name. Religious vehicles throughout history have taken various names." (Rais Tchaqmaqzade, 'Deep Understanding', chapter in Shah, 1980, 286).

Sufism's Islamic identity is heightened through the symbols applied as theophanies; the use of the Qur'an; the regard for Muhammad as an exemplary model; its use of Arabic; the fact that Sufis (theoretically) retain all Islamic practices and precepts. Sufi religious expression may 'augment' universal Islamic values with specific elements, such extra prayers, meditation, music, and textual sources. There is no denial of Islam by Sufis, although elements in so-called 'orthodoxy' may suggest that the Sufis' actions alone are a sufficient 'statement' of withdrawal.

Islam has been described, in the context of Sufism, as a circle (symbolising *Shari'ah*) whose radius (*tariqah*) is the Way to the central spiritual pole (*qutb*) or Reality (*haqiqah*):

"To the Sufi, religion as understood by ordinary man is a coarse, external thing. Their symbols are indicative of certain states. They are legitimate as

using the symbol 'God' for something which one does not know at all, apart from the illusion of it which is caused by emotion.”(Shah, 1980, 284)

According to many Sufi traditions, the *tariqah* path is not 'man-made', but created by Allah. It is not a 'physical' but a spiritual reality, beyond the senses.

Sufis may also claim to be 'orthodox' Muslims, following 'non-mystical' obligations within Islam. Additional *sunnah* ways of the Prophet and other Qur'anic practices (not necessarily incumbent upon non-Sufis) are practised. “Sufis take for granted man's [sic] obligation to perform the pillars of Islamic practice.” (Rumi & Chittick, 1983, 150) Sufism is described as “a body of teachings and methods having love and knowledge of God as their goal ...” and considers itself “the very essence of Islam - and even its spiritual heart.” (Ibn 'Ata'Allah al-Iskandari, Ansari, Danner, & Thackston, 1969, 9-10)

To Sufis, there can be three spiritual 'lights' of Faith: *islam* - the light of the station of submission, which “resembles the faint light of stars”; *iman*, the light of the station of faith; and *ihsan*, “spiritual virtue”, “... like the light of the sun.” This esoteric order of *islam-iman-ihsan* changes in exoteric Islam to *iman-islam-ihsan* because it was legal opinion that 'faith' precedes submission.(Ibn 'Ata'Allah al-Iskandari et al., 142)

If the prospective Sufi cannot 'find' or join the *tariqah*, 'exoteric' action is recommended:

“So go before the teachers of conventional knowledge - busy yourself with jurisprudence and become a master of the science of “This is permitted and that is forbidden.””(Rumi & Chittick, 340)

Sufism has Islamic historical roots, applies the sacred texts of Islam, and is practised by people who call themselves 'Muslims'. The two principle doctrines of Sufism are *wahdat al-wujud* - Transcendent Unity of Being - and *al-insan al-kamal* - Universal or Perfect Man.

There are ninety-nine Divine Names and Qualities, “[T]he most Excellent Names” (*The Qur'an*, Surah al-A'raf, 'The Heights', 7:180) [Qur'an 7:180] which derived their existence from the One Being who alone 'is' [the 'Hidden' Name]. God is ‘... closer to him [humanity] than his jugular vein” (*The Qur'an*, Surah Qaf, 50:15) **and** above “every form, thought or thing in the universe.” (Ibn 'Ata'Allah al-Iskandari et al., 1969, 133)

The Names, and God's speech, have a creative element in them which is referred to in the Qur'an: “He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth, and when He decrees something, He says only 'Be', and it is.” (*The Qur'an*, Surah al-Baqara, 'The Cow', 2:117). This has particular implications for Sufis: God is the Creator of all things. His Essence is in all things: divine and non-divine; substantial and accidental; existent and non-existent; sole and undifferentiated; macro- and micro- cosmic.

Ibn al-Arabi sees Reality as its own Sole Being and its own sole Perception of its own Being. The Cosmos is nothing other than God - one does not exist within the other. The following hadith is frequently cited in this regard:

“I (God) was a hidden treasure, and longed to be known, so I created the Cosmos.”(Hadith cited in Ibn al-`Arabi & Austin, 1980, 27)

The affirmation of Unity in Sufism implies a ‘creative’ relationship with Allah, one in which humanity can influence the Ultimate Reality which exists ‘within’ the self. The attainment of Unity by a Sufi was interpreted by Shabistari: “He who is free from self, when he obtains that freedom, through his echoing sound resounds, ‘Verily I am God,’ and in eternity is opposition overwhelmed, and then the pilgrim and his progress are but one.”(Shabistari Mahmud ibn `Abd, 1969, 48) Junayd said: “The water’s colour is the colour of the cup” (Maneri & Jackson, 1980, 104) that is to say the lover’s ‘colour’ is the hue of his Beloved, or the Sufi is the ‘same’ as God.

The analogy is applied, of the Divine and humanity being a ‘mirror image’ of one another:

“When the lover contemplates the Beloved’s beauty in form’s mirror, pain and pleasure are born, grief and joy are manifest, fear and hope come together, contradiction and expansion make their rounds. But when he strips off the robes of form and dives into Unity’s All-embracing Ocean, he knows nothing of torment or bliss, expectation or dread, fear or hope, for these depend on past and future, and he now drowns in a sea where Time is abolished, where all is Now upon Now.”(Maneri & Jackson, 91)

A Sufi adept follows a spiritual journey, after initiation by a master who is part of the *silsilah* chain: this links back through other masters, the Prophets, and Adam by *barakah* grace - a ‘substance of the soul’ effected by *hudur* (‘Divine Presence’).

The process towards Unity requires passing through numerous *maqam* ‘stations’, cleansing the soul and stripping away the ‘humanity’ to distill the core divine-essence within the heart. Ascetic practice and mystical techniques are applied [initiation, meditation (*fikr*), invocation (*dhikr*) and contemplation (*shudud*)] ultimately to reach annihilation in Allah (*fana*) via the ‘stations’ in between. The human soul undertakes a journey in which it is transformed “from sensible to spiritual” and becomes “the spiritual Heart, the instrument of intuition.” (Maneri & Jackson, 9)

Attributes are acquired (*maqamat*) through inner-striving, whilst gifts (*hal*) are ‘given’ by God to those upon the Path. There are many Sufi schools, but only one path:

“Everyone who has looked with the glance of divine Unity, and sees the existence of the universe as something other than God, and found that whatever is other than God is transient and destructive, has then rushed towards the world of divine Unity. God has awarded him [sic] the prize of paradise, clothed him with the robe of righteousness of a

truthful servant, and given him the wine of fidelity in paradise. He exclaimed, 'I have been granted a proof of God!' As the Prophet attested, 'When the servant says "There is no god but God" the Creator replies, "My servant has spoken correctly. There is no other god but Me! Bear witness, O My angels, that by virtue of the truth of his speech, I have forgotten all his sins."' (Maneri & Jackson, 154)

"The glance of divine Unity" is, perhaps, the ultimate Sufi 'goal'. The Qur'an indicates a 'separation' between Humanity and God, both in this world and the next: the idea that humanity might somehow 'join' or become one with God is, perhaps, anathema to 'orthodox' Muslims.

A form of Divine Audience in this life, according to orthodoxy, is essentially through angelic-intermediaries, and strictly within the realm of prophets or saints:

"Those who have no knowledge also say, 'If only God would speak to us!' or 'If only a miraculous sign would come to us!' People before them said the same things: their hearts are all alike. We have made Our signs clear enough to those who have solid faith." (*The Qur'an*, 2004, Surah al-Baqara, 'The Cow', 2:118).

The secretive nature of aspects of Sufism, the limited numbers of published texts, and the inherent difficulties in studying translated material means that additional 'veils' are drawn over the subject. Experiences illustrated in Sufi texts are 'exceptional' rather than mundane: unwillingness or incapacity to write down mystical-encounters, and the loss to history of other texts, places further limitations on primary material. Sufism can be interpreted as a mystical form that does not actively seek adherents: texts demonstrate Sufi masters dissuading individuals from joining 'circles' because the individual's motivation was suspect. In certain contexts, however, membership of a *tariqa* can be a common factor - part of everyday life and an expression of 'being Muslim'.

"There is no such thing as Sufism *and* Islam, for such a concept creates a false dichotomy between mysticism and religion ... Yet, there is such a thing as Sufism in Islam, and indeed Sufism is considered by its authorities as the most profound nature of the Islamic Revelation." (Ibn 'Ata'Allah al-Iskandari et al., 9)

Daily prayers and recitation are one re-affirmation of the covenant between humanity and God, but Sufic practices upon the *tariqah* path towards *tawhid* indicate another. The Sufi may present a challenge to the 'conventional order' of Islam, by this challenge:

Rumi introduces a progression of thought and 'progress'; from (orthodox) Islam towards Unity: to the Sufi, Islam and Sufism are one. Some Sufis believe that

“If a person knew only religious faith and not the special science of the Sufis ... his belief would be the most perfect of religious beliefs, it could not be inferior to the religious belief of a Sufi.”(Shah, 286)

The precepts of Islam should not be superseded or forgotten within the networks of Sufi knowledge.

Whilst invoking Islamic precepts, there is a point at which Sufism goes ‘beyond’ the foundations of exoteric Islam. *Ma’rifah* (gnosis) is considered the very summit of the spiritual Path in Sufism; the gnostic is he who possesses perfect knowledge and love of the divine Absolute of Allah.”(Shah, 11) Gnosis is not monopolised by Sufis, according to their texts: other faiths and forms of mysticism can attain gnosis themselves. This might provide Sufism with another identity - as part of ‘*world mysticism*’ - and its connection with practices and techniques that are ‘un-Islamic’ (at least superficially).

A further speculative area is opened up, when decided whether Sufism’s roots lay in Gnosticism, and were later augmented by Islamic precepts; or whether Islam ‘came first’ and was later augmented by gnostic principles.

The challenge of Sufism is that it offers a different ‘non-orthodox’ interpretation(s) of (elements of) the Qur’an, which ‘conservative’ scholars and interpreters had interpreted as being immutable and inviolable: commentaries were not open to major challenges on pertinent issues in the Qur’an. Rationalistic, fatalistic - the *mutazilah* upheld the *Shariah* law as entirely without fault: the suggestion that an individual might aspire to Unity in/with God was anathema and illogical: if Man is God is Man, then where does Muhammad fit into the equation? If God can be reached through ‘mystical techniques’, what is the point of having a Law? Taking the Qur’an at a literal level alone, orthodox theologians’ knowledge and reputations are questioned when hidden ‘secret’ meanings of the Word of God are ‘found’. The diversity of interpretation is reflected in the variety of Muslim networks.

Certain prominent Sufis simultaneously held positions as doctors of Law, or came from legalistic backgrounds [i.e. Rumi, ibn al-Arabi, Maneiri]. There was clearly no discrepancy between one position and another, unless subterfuge was practiced. Sufis have practised openly in many cultural and religious contexts. The orders encouraged members to continue in trades and professions, in order that Sufism might permeate society.

Aspects of Sufism entered ‘mainstream’ Islamic culture, and became forms of Islamic expression (i.e. in art and music) or part of religious practices (especially in Shi’ism). This can be seen as a two-way process. The history of Sufi masters show many travelling, and being welcomed in some places, and endangered (or martyred) in others. Some Muslims believe that Sufi practices and ideas have invigorated Islam throughout diverse networks, providing fresh approaches, and generating popular enthusiasm.

When attempting to ‘find’ and study Sufism, parallels might be drawn with Ibn al-Arabi’s comment on finding ‘True Reality’:

“Of this there is no academic proof in the world,
For it is hidden, and hidden, and hidden.”(Ibn al-`Arabi & Austin,
1980, 107)

Different forms of *Sufism* have emerged: individual adherents might not describe them as ‘mystical’, but simply ‘Islam’. Many Sufis were focussed on the *shari’ah*, and saw no separation or contradiction in this (al-Junayd). Some had reputations in other spheres i.e. philosophy (al-Ghazali).

Key historical Sufi figures include:

- ❖ al-Hallaj (d.922), a mystic who visited India and Central Asia, becoming familiar with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity]. He pronounced *ana al-Haqq* (“I am God”/truth/reality) and was ‘martyred’ in Baghdad for his blasphemy.
- ❖ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali: (1058-1111), a well travelled Persian, a legal scholar who became a Sufi master, reconciling the shari’a and the tariqa of Sufism. As a teacher in Baghdad, as an expert in *kalam* (‘theology’) and *falsafa* (‘philosophy’), he discussed the ‘inconsistency of the philosophers’ (*Tahafut al-falasifa*). Eventually he left his teaching job, taking a Sufi path, travelling in the Hijaz, Syria, and Palestine. He was highly regarded, for bringing disparate strands together, and was possibly the first to establish a ‘brotherhood’ - *zawiya* in Arabic - requiring strong allegiances between shaykh and disciple. Several orders formed from this, which spread internationally, to influence modern Islam. Founders and descendants were revered, their lives celebrated as ‘saints.’
- ❖ Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (1078-1166, a student of jurisprudence (Hanbali *fikh*) student and public preacher, who promoted a sober ‘Sufism’ with an emphasis on law. He saw that asceticism was necessary to be devoted to God. His work guides the development of the Qadiriyya Order(s).
- ❖ Ibn al-`Arabi (1165-1240) as interpreted by stepson Sadruddin Qonawi, he was influential in his approach towards speculative theology and ideas surrounding ‘divine unification’, articulated in his work ‘Bezels of Wisdom’ or ‘unity of perception’ (Ibn al-`Arabi & Austin, 290). Ibn al-`Arabi focused on the nature of ‘knowledge’, and the idea that human beings can travel on pathways to, from and into God (“Ibn al-Arabi” in Bearman, Bianquis, Bosworth, van Donzel, & Heinrichs, 2004). Ibn al-`Arabi’s comment on ‘finding’ ‘True Reality’ was: “Of this there is no academic proof in the world, for it is hidden, and hidden, and hidden.”(Ibn al-`Arabi & Austin, 1980, 107)
- ❖ Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (1207-1273) was born in Afghanistan, the son of theologian. He composed epic poetry, and lay the foundations for the Mawlawi order, famous for its ‘dervishes’. He believed that aspects of God are hidden and revealed. His encounters with spiritual guide

Shams al-Din al-Tabrizi, seen as 'divine beloved', form the basis of some of his most famous work.

Sufis have significance in our understanding of Muslim networks, through the development of diverse orders and affiliations through history, which transcended (on a number of levels!) conventional political-religious boundaries. Religious ideas were transmitted through traditional relationships between spiritual guides and their disciples, across generations. The 'authority' could also be transmitted through genealogical ties. Significant Sufi orders include: Naqshbandi, Shadhiliyya, Chistiyya, Kubrawiyya, and Khalwatiyya - all of which can be found in diverse locations, with branches reflecting a broad range of Sufi perspectives.

Exploring the Sufism map (Smart, 1999, 178-179, Moodle), it is possible to gather an understanding of how diverse orders spread beyond their traditional heartlands. In some cases, Sufi traders contributed to the diffusion of Islam across the world, and their messages were well-received in contexts with a prior affinity to esoteric religious dimensions – for example in parts of the Indian subcontinent and South East Asia. 'Sufi' interpretations of Islam formed a significant element of the early networking process for Islam.

Contemporary frameworks:

Sufism remains a dynamic force within contemporary Islam, with many orders and adherents across the world. In some cases, these have taken advantage of contemporary communications media to network effectively. Their presence can be located in many 'minority' contexts too, and their message can have a resonance with those (potential) converts seeking to explore dimensions of personal spirituality on an Islamic pathway of knowledge. The works of Rumi have acquired popularity in 'western' contexts, even appearing in 'bestseller' listings. This has an important bearing on our understanding of contemporary Muslim networks, providing perspectives on Islam beyond the stereotypes presented in much of the popular media.

Further reading

Voll, John O. and Kazuo Ohtsuka. "Sufism." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. Oxford Islamic Studies Online.
<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0759>.

The *Encyclopaedia of Islam* article 'tarika' provides an overview of Sufi orders in different regional contexts. *Encyclopaedia of Islam* Online Edition (available through the Electronic Resources, Brill Online)

In *Muslim Networks*, Carl Ernst, 'Ideological and Technological Transformations of Contemporary Sufism': this discusses many aspects of Sufi expression, how the media interact, and the effects this is having on religious expression.

Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003) chapter on Sufism.

Jørgen S. Nielsen, 'Transnational Islam and the Integration of Islam in Europe', taken from *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and Across Europe*, Stefano Allieve and Jørgen S. Nielsen, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003) - this chapter provides a discussion on the networking of a Naqshabandi group led by Sheikh Nazim al-Qubrusi al-Haqqani.



Photo: Sheikh Nazim al-Qubrusi al-Haqqani, taken from Naqshbandi.org, <http://www.naqshbandi.org/chain/40.htm>

Gary R. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments*, (London, Pluto Press, 2003). This is a brief discussion on how various Sufi orders are applying the internet to promote their networking activities. It also highlights URLs of selected Sufi orders/websites.

Bruce Lawrence and Carl Ernst, *Sufi Martyrs to Love: The Chishti Brotherhood in South Asia and Beyond*, Palgrave Press

Further Listening

The Rough Guide to Sufi Music CD. If you are interested in the ways in which Sufi networking can take an artistic form, then this CD will introduce you to the international musical expressions of Sufism. Details:
<http://www.roughguides.com/store/details.html?ProductID=238>



Picture taken from nurmuhammad.com, Naqshabandi Muhibeen: Sufi Meditation Muraqaba
<http://nurmuhammad.com/Meditation/Core/naqshbandimeditationillustration.htm>