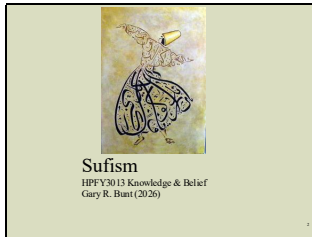


What is Sufism?

- The word 'Sufi' comes from the Arabic sufi - "an 'adept of the mystical path' of Islam.
- 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." Idries Shah

Sufism – suggested reading

Voll, John O. and Karen Obrada. "Sufism." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. Oxford Islamic Studies Online. <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/abstract/01.009.0292>

The Encyclopedia of Islam article 'tariqa' provides an overview of Sufi orders in different regional contexts. 'Tariqa' Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition. Edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, Brill Online. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-islam-2/tariqa-CQH_1162

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

Bunt, Gary R. Sufism chapter in *Islamic Algorithms* (London, Bloomsbury, 2014)

Sufism's Islamic identity is heightened through the symbols applied as theophanies ('manifestations of the divine');

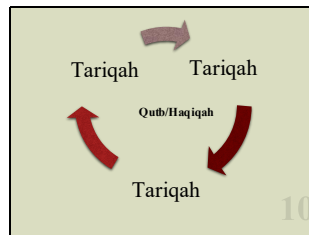
- the use of the Qur'an;
- the regard for Muhammad as an exemplary model;
- its use of Arabic;
- the fact that Sufis (theoretically) retain all Islamic practices and precepts.

1
20/03/2026

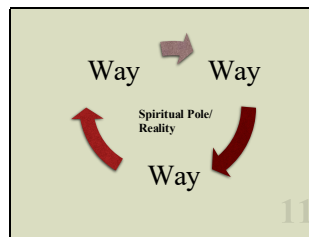
2
20/03/2026

Sufi religious expression may 'augment' universal Islamic values with specific elements, such as:

- extra prayers
- meditation
- music,
- different textual and other 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 Sharī'ah) whose radii (tariqah) is the Way to the central spiritual pole (qutb) or Reality (haqqiah)



"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."

Idries Shah

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.

13

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.

16

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)

14

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)

17

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."

(The 'Ata'Allah al-Ikhdani, Anvari, Daner, & Thackston, 1969, 9-10)

15

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

al-insan al-kamal - Universal or Perfect (human).

18

5

20/03/2026

6

20/03/2026

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."

(The 'Ata'Allah al-Ikhdani et al., 1969, 13)

19

"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.

22

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').

20

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.

23

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 (shuud)] 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."

(Mameri & Jackson, 9)

21

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'.

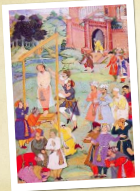
24

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.

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

25



Mansur al-Hallaj

He pronounced an al-Haqq ("I am God" (tawhid)) and was "martyred" in Baghdad for his blasphemy.

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.

26



Abu Hamid al-Ghazali 1058-1111)

a legal scholar who became a Sufi master, reconciling the shari'a and the tariqa of Sufism

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 & Aminin, 1980, 107)

27



Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (1078-1166

a student of jurisprudence (Shafi'i) student and public preacher, who presented a wider 'Sufism' with an emphasis on law.

9

20/03/2026

10

20/03/2026



Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240)

influential in his approach towards speculative theology and ideas surrounding 'divine unification'

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 can be found in diverse locations, with branches reflecting a broad range of Sufi perspectives.

34



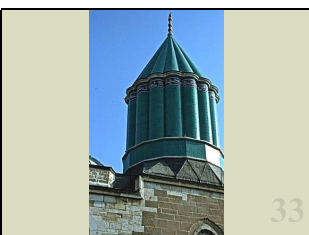
Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (1207-1273)

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.



35



33

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.

Sufi orders played an important role in anti-colonial movements in the 19th and 20th centuries, for example in the Maghreb, Libya, Somalia, Senegambia (Senegal and Gambia), Indonesia, Malaysia and Dagestan.

36

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.





