

IPRI STUDIES

COUNTERING EXTREMISM THROUGH SUFI PRACTICES

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Abstract

Accepting diversity as Nature's way and a norm of human life is the key to resolve the ongoing ideological contradictions and socio-ethnic ambiguities, which are the main drivers of extremism in Pakistan. In order to fight the growing menace of religious extremism, sectarian divide and ethnic intolerance, there is a dire need to find a way of life which functions on the basis of inclusiveness and shuns exclusiveness. Sufism provides such a viable option. Sufis feel that "Allah" has created diversity, so we must respect it. "Do not give me the scissors! Give me the needle! I sew together! I do not cut apart!" is Sufism's social doctrine.

Key Words: Extremism, Sufism, Islam, Pakistan.

Introduction

Sufism is Islamic mysticism. It is defined as "the inner mystical dimension of Islam."¹ Classical Sufi scholars have defined Sufism as "a science whose objective is the reparation of the heart and turning it away from all else but God." Darqawi Sufi teacher Ahmad ibn Ajiba describes it as, "a science through which one can know how to purify one's inner self from filth, and beautify it with a variety of praiseworthy traits." Classical Sufis were characterised by their attachment to *dhikr* (a practice of repeating the names of God) and asceticism.² Sufism does not relate to any particular religion. It belongs to all humanity.³

Concept of Sufism

Generally, two origins of the word Sufi are referred to. The lexical root of the word is traced to "Safa," which in Arabic means "purity." Another origin is

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¹ Jurgen Wasim Frembgen, *Journey to God* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17.

² "Sufism," Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sufism> (accessed October 15, 2012).

³ Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, "The True Meaning of Sufism," The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, <http://www.bmf.org/m/sufi/> (accessed October 15, 2012).

“Suf,” meaning “wool,” referring to the simple attire of early Muslim Sufis. The two were merged by Sufi al-Rudhabari who said, “The Sufi is the one who wears wool on top of purity.”⁴ Opinion also has it that the word may be a derivative of the term “ahl-e-Suffah” (the people of the bench), who were a group of the Prophet’s (PBUH) companions who held regular sessions of “*dhikr*.” The medieval Iranian scholar, Al-Biruni, maintains that the word is derived from the Greek “*Sofia*,” meaning wisdom.⁵

Some mainstream scholars of Islam define Sufism as simply the name for the inner or esoteric dimension of Islam. However, according to Idris Shah, the Sufi philosophy is universal in nature, its roots predating the rise of Islam and the other modern-day religions, except Buddhism and Jainism. Some Muslim thinkers consider Sufism outside the sphere of Islam⁶ while others accuse Sufi saints of preaching it for selfish ends. However, by and large Sufi Islam is accepted for its adherence to love in its truest form and selfless love of entire humanity in all its diverse ideological and cultural manifestations.⁷

The “Sufi” bestows love, kindness, compassion, and mercy on all creations. Just as Allah protects all lives and nourishes each being with exactly the right type of food for its needs, the Sufi gives to each one the explanation appropriate to his/her level of understanding. The Sufi explains, teaches, and leads people to the “*Good Path*,” within the fold of Allah’s⁸ mercy. The Sufi does not acknowledge differences of race, religion, or any other separation.⁹ Sufism does not believe in divisive messages; it prefers unity and cohesion amongst human beings, without any discrimination.¹⁰ Because of this, Sufis are dubbed as hypocrites by their critics.

Sufis believe in the Unity of God and acknowledge that the source of all knowledge is Allah and He alone knows the secrets of diverse systems of faith that different people follow. They find God in the heart of man, and believe that winning the hearts and minds of the people offers benefits to all. In the context of Sufism, love not only leads to tolerance but also eliminates all movements based on extremism and exclusiveness. One who loves all humanity always adopts an inclusive approach.

Contrary to the prejudice, fanaticism, bigotry and chauvinism, prevalent in puritan versions of various faiths, Sufism is liberal, broadminded and

⁴ Syed Ali Bin Usman Hajveri, *Kashf-al-Mahjoob* (Lahore: Ilmi printing press, 1971), 38.

⁵ Dr. Alan Godlas, “Sufism–Sufis–Sufi Orders Sufism’s Many Paths,” University of Georgia, <http://islam.uga.edu/Sufism.html> (accessed October 15, 2012).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Asghar Ali Engineer, “Why I love Sufi Islam,” *Dawn* (Karachi), September 7, 2012, <http://www.islamicpluralism.eu/WP/?cat=26> (accessed September 12, 2012).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Syed Ali Bin Usman Hajveri, *Kashf-al-Mahjoob*, 288-297.

moderate. Sufis are far more democratic with their universal and pluralist approach. They hold that truth is not anyone's exclusive monopoly; no community is privileged in this respect.

Muslim Sufis not only strictly observe all prescribed duties like the five times prayers and fasting etc but have the distinction of nurturing theirs and others' spiritual dimension. *Dhikr* as practised by these Sufis, is the invocation of Allah's divine names, verses from the Qur'an, or sayings of the Prophet (PBUH) in order to glorify Allah. *Dhikr* is encouraged either individually or in groups and is a source of tranquillity for the Sufis; hearts become serene through the remembrance of Allah. Many Sufis have used the metaphor of lovers to describe the state *Dhikr* leaves them in. Sufis say adherence to the "*Shariah*" manifests in the limbs and *Dhikr* manifests in the heart.¹¹

Sufi traditions cut across continental distances and national cultures. Their linguistic spread is also quite broad embracing Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu and over a dozen other languages. "Orders" (*Turuq*) of Sufism, which are either Sunni or Shia or admixed in doctrine, trace many of their original precepts to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).¹² Sufism gained popularity as a reaction to the increasing worldly power of Muslim rulers during the 8th century CE.¹³

Sufis love, not fear Allah. Love is their central doctrine.¹⁴ Sufis like Muhiyuddin Iban Arabi who founded the school of "*Wahdat al-Wujud*" demolished all segregations between various faiths and declared love of all human beings as the basis of their thought process. Ibn Arabi even went a stage higher by declaring: "*hubbi deeni wa shari'ati*" i.e., love is my religion and my "*Shariah*."¹⁵ It is indeed a cardinal statement for those who believe in the wholeness of humanity and aim to build human civilization on love, while eliminating interfaith discord. One who loves the entire humanity always adopts an inclusive approach.¹⁶

Sufis, in that sense are far more democratic with their pluralist approach. They feel Allah has created diversity and we must respect diversity as Allah's creation. Diversity negates the concept of exclusive monopoly over truth by one group. And if truth is not an exclusive monopoly, no single community can be privileged as the sole possessor of truth. Moreover Sufism is based on the spiritual approach and spiritualism is far more inclusive. Maulana Rumi, when asked about his identity, replied "love;" as love is inclusive of all

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jurgen Wasim Frembgen, *Journey to God*, 17.

¹³ "Sufism," Wikipedia.

¹⁴ Dr. Alan Godlas, "Sufism–Sufis–Sufi Orders Sufism's Many Paths."

¹⁵ Asghar Ali Engineer, "Why I love Sufi Islam."

¹⁶ Ibid.

identities.¹⁷ For Sufis, love of humanity is based on the principles of respect, dignity and integrity of all faiths which are sincerely held by any human being or a community of human beings.¹⁸ Sufism, in essence, is primarily concerned with direct personal experience, and as such has sometimes been compared to other non-Islamic forms of mysticism.¹⁹

Towards the end of the first millennium CE, a number of books began to be written about the doctrines of Sufism, illustrating select Sufi practices. Of these, two have been rendered into English as well: the “*Kashf al-Mahjub*” of Hajveri, and the “*Risala*” by Qushayri. Two of Imam Al Ghazali’s greatest treatises, the “Revival of Religious Sciences” and the “Alchemy of Happiness,” argued that Sufism originated from the Qur’an and was thus compatible with mainstream Islamic thought, and did not in any way contradict Islamic Law.²⁰

Evolution of Sufism

In its early stages of development, Sufism effectively referred to nothing more than the internalization of Islam.²¹ However, Muslim conquests had brought large numbers of Christian monks and hermits, especially in Syria and Egypt, under the rule of Muslims. They retained a vigorous spiritual life for centuries after the conquests, and many pious Muslims who founded Sufism were influenced by their techniques and methods.²² From the traditional Muslim Sufi point of view, the esoteric teachings of Sufism were transmitted from the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to those who had the capacity to acquire the direct experiential gnosis of God.

Important early contributions through writings are attributed to Uwais al-Qarni, Harrm bin Hian, Hasan Basri and Sayid ibn al-Mussib, who are regarded as the first batch of Sufis of Islam. Harith al-Muhasibi was the first one to write about moral psychology. Rabia Basri was a Sufi known for her love and passion for God, expressed through her poetry. Bayazid Bastami was among the first theorists of Sufism; he concerned himself with “*fana*” (annihilation) and “*baqa*” (eternity): the state of annihilation of the Self in the Presence of the Divine.²³

Sufism had a long history before the formal institutionalization of Sufi teachings into devotional orders (*tariqat*) in the early “Middle Ages.” Almost all

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Sufism,” Wikipedia.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Khawaja Shams-u-Din Azeemi, *Khutbat-e-Multan* (Multan: Bahauddin Zakariya Universty, 2008), 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ Khawaja Shams-u-Din Azeemi, *Ehsan-o- Tassawaf* (Multan: Department of Islamic Studies, Bahauddin Zakariya Universty, 2004), 173.

Muslim Sufi orders trace their chains of transmission (*silsila*) back to Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) via Hazrat Ali bin Abu Talib. However, the Naqshbandi order traces the origin of its teachings to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through the first Islamic Caliph, Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq.²⁴

Role of Sufi Influence in Proliferation of Islam

Sufism has had a significant role in the spread of Islam as well as evolution of Islamic cultures, especially in Africa and Asia. Persian Sufi poets and philosophers such as Rumi and Attar of Nishapur enhanced the spread of Islamic culture in Anatolia, Central Asia, and South Asia as well. Sufism was also catalytic in resisting European imperialism in North Africa and South Asia. It also produced a flourishing intellectual culture throughout the Islamic world. No important domain in the civilization of Islam remained unaffected by Sufism during 13-16 centuries CE.²⁵ The current Sufi orders include Ba-'Alawiyya, Chishti, Naqshbandi, Jerrahi, Nimatullahi, Oveyssi, Qadiria Boutshishia, Qadiriyyah, Qalandariyya, Sarwari Qadiri, Shadhliyya and Suhrawardiyya.²⁶ Sufism is popular in some African countries like Morocco and Senegal, where it is seen as a mystical expression of Islam. One reason of Sufism's appeal is its ability to assimilate local beliefs and customs. That is why followers of Sufis include a large number of non-Muslims as well. In the twentieth century CE, some modernist Muslims have dubbed Sufism as a superstitious religion that holds back Islamic achievements in the fields of science and technology.²⁷

Theoretical Perspectives in Sufism

Al-Ghazali firmly defends the concepts of Sufism within the Islamic faith.²⁸ Sufi psychology has influenced many areas of thinking both within and outside Islam. Magic has also been a part of Sufi practice, notably in India. This practice intensified during the declining years of Sufism in India when the Sufi orders grew steadily in wealth and in political influence while their spirituality gradually degenerated into Saint-worship, miracles, magic and superstition.²⁹ Some Sufi orders also engage in ritualized *dhikr* ceremonies, or *sama*. *Sama* includes various forms of worship such as: recitation, singing (*Qawwali*), instrumental music, dance (whirling *dervishes* of the Mevlevi order), incense,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Sufism," Wikipedia.

²⁶ Khawaja Shams-u-Din Azeemi, *Ehsan-o- Tassawuf*, 174.

²⁷ "Sufism," Wikipedia.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

meditation, ecstasy, and trance.³⁰ The practice of “muraqaba” resembles the practices of meditation practised by various other faiths as well. One description of “muraqaba” is: to collect all bodily senses in concentration, and to cut-off from all preoccupation and notions that inflict themselves upon the heart, and to turn one’s full consciousness towards God.³¹

Sufism and Islamic Law

The relationship between traditional Islamic scholars and Sufism has remained complex. In this context, W. Chittick explains the position of Sufism and Sufis:³²

In short, Muslim scholars who focused their energies on understanding the normative guidelines for the body came to be known as jurists, and those who held that the most important task was to train the mind in achieving correct understanding came to be divided into three main schools of thought: theology, philosophy, and Sufism. This leaves us with the third domain of human existence, the spirit. Most Muslims who devoted their major efforts to developing the spiritual dimensions of the human person came to be known as Sufis.

Perception of Sufism outside Islam

In recent decades, there has been a growth of neo-Sufi movements in the West. The examples include: Universal Sufism movement; Golden Sufi Centre; Sufi Foundation of America; Neo-Sufism of Idries Shah; the International Association of Sufism; and Sufism Reoriented. Rumi has become one of the most widely read poets in the United States.³³ The Islamic Institute in Mannheim, Germany, which works for integration of Europe and Muslims, perceives Sufism as particularly suited for interreligious dialogue and intercultural harmonisation in democratic and pluralist societies; it considers Sufism as a symbol of tolerance and humanism, representing a non-dogmatic, flexible and non-violent facet of Islam.³⁴

Sufi Influence on the West

A number of Westerners have embarked upon the path of Sufism. One of the first representative of a Sufi order was the Swedish-born Sufi Abd al-Hadi

³⁰ Syed Ali Bin Usman Hajveri, *Kashf-al-Mahjoob*, 393-400.

³¹ Khawaja Shams-u-Din Azeemi, *Ehsan-o-Tassawuf*, 219.

³² “Sufism,” Wikipedia.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Aqhili. Rene Guenon, the French scholar, became a Sufi in the early twentieth century and was known as Sheikh Abdul Wahid Yahya. His interesting writings pointed to the universality of Sufism. Other Sufi teachers in the West include Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, Inayat Khan, Nazim Al-Haqqani, Javad Nurbakhsh, Bulent Rauf, Irina Tweedie, Idries Shah and Muzaffer Ozak. Active Sufi academics include: Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, Nuh Ha Mim Keller, Abdullah Nooruddeen Durkee, Abdal Hakim Murad and Faouzi Skali.³⁵ Robert Frager, a Sufi teacher commissioned the “Khalwati Jerrahi” order. Frager was a trained psychologist, he extensively wrote on Sufism and psychology. Sufi cosmology and Sufi metaphysics are also noteworthy areas of intellectual accomplishment.³⁶ Sufism has had profound influence on contemporary Western poetry, prose, music, cinema and social media.

Influence of Sufism on Judaism

Sufism had cast its shadow on the ethical writings of Jews, especially during the “Middle Ages.” Abraham bin Moses bin Maimon, believed that Sufi practices and doctrines continue the tradition of the Biblical prophets. He introduced into the Jewish prayer such practices as reciting God’s names (*dhiker*). Some of these Sufi-Jewish practices are still observed in a few Oriental synagogues. Abraham Maimuni’s principal work was originally composed in Judeo-Arabic and entitled “*Kitab Kifayah al-Abidin*” (A Comprehensive Guide for the Servants of God). In the book, Maimuni showers praise on Sufism. The followers of his path continued to foster a Jewish-Sufi form of pietism for at least a century, in Egypt.³⁷

Persecution

Sufism has periodically faced fierce resistance as well. For example, before the First World War, there were around 100,000 disciples of the Mevlevi order throughout the Ottoman Empire. However, in 1925, in a quest to create a secular state, all Sufi orders were banned and their endowments expropriated; all religious titles were abolished and dervish clothes outlawed. In 1937, playing of the “ney,” the Sufis’ reed flute, was also outlawed.³⁸

The government and clergy of Iran also have a bias against the Sufis. There are numerous reports of Shi’a clerics and prayer leaders denouncing Sufism and the activities of Sufi Muslims in their sermons and public statements. According to the 2009 “Annual Report of the United States

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Khawaja Shams-u-Din Azeemi, *Khubat-e-Multan*, 1-19.

³⁷ “Sufism,” Wikipedia.

³⁸ Ibid.

Commission on International Religious Freedom” in February 2009, at least 40 Sufis in Isfahan were arrested after protesting the destruction of a Sufi place of worship; though all were released within days.³⁹

Relevance of Sufism for Countering Extremism

Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, openly advocated the importance of, human equality and fair play in Islam. He asserted that non-Muslims including Hindus, Christians, Parsis and others were all Pakistanis. And that they would enjoy compatible political rights and privileges and play their rightful part in the affairs of Pakistan. The constitution of Pakistan also provides full freedom, security and civil rights to all citizens of Pakistan irrespective of their creed, caste, religion and ethnic origin. Unfortunately the present day Pakistan proffers a very different situation in which extremism; terrorism, sectarian divide, corruption, exploitation; target killing and extortion seem to be the defining characteristics of Pakistani social order.

Fortunately the social contract of Pakistan and its cultural foundations blended with the large heartedness of Sufism are dexterously flexible and deftly persuasive to accommodate the dissenting thoughts and opposing beliefs. In fact the majority in Pakistan imbibes the Islamic teachings as inspired by the Sufi Saints, who are loved, cherished and followed as symbols of the Islamic philosophy which emphasizes tolerance and respect for religious beliefs of other communities.

The main strength of the Sufis lies in their readiness to engage in dialogue and maintain unconditional esteem of others. They approach the opposing faiths without any fear of getting converted; but with an urge to learn and understand the rationale of that belief system. They live within the community they belong to, and solve the problems faced by the common masses, regardless of their ethnic origin, creed and religion. Sufism does not believe in divisive messages; they prefer unity and cohesion among human beings. They teach the message of tolerance and respect for other religions, faiths and sects and hence could help in countering the growing threat of extremism. Sufism projects the values of justice and forgiveness. Sufis are generous and kind and treat all communities with love and compassion.

Conclusion

Socio-political and ideological ambiguities are interlinked and if dealt carefully these could help to reconstruct a new social contract for Pakistan. Ambiguities are not a unique phenomenon in societies but in Pakistani perspective the issue is more worrisome because here ideological confusions are linked to

³⁹ Ibid.

violent behaviours.⁴⁰ Pakistani culture has the potential to promote the Islamic values as interpreted and preached by Sufism. At this critical juncture when Pakistan has continuously been facing target killings, attacks on places of worship, bomb blasts and burning of schools due to growing menace of religious extremism, sectarian and ethnic divisions, there is a need to fall back on Sufi traditions and practices. Tolerating the values of diversity and pluralism can help resolve the prevailing socio-political and ideological ambiguities in Pakistan and counter the threat of extremism and violence.⁴¹ Accepting diversity as a norm of nature and human life is the key to resolve ideological ambiguities. Sufism openly asserts, “Do not give me the scissors! Give me the needle! I sew together! I do not cut apart!”■

⁴⁰ “Accepting Diversity is the Key to Resolve Ideological Ambiguities,” *Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies*, October 23, 2012, <http://www.san-pips.com/index.php?action=events&id=102> (accessed October, 24, 2012).

⁴¹ Ibid.