

Shari`ah, Tariqah and Haqiqah

S H Nasr

The *Tariqah* or Spiritual Path which is usually known as *Tasawwuf* or Sufism is the inner and esoteric dimension of Islam and like the *Shari`ah* has its roots in the Quran and prophetic practice. Being the heart of the Islamic message it, like the physical heart, is hidden from external view, although again like the heart it is the inner source of life and the centre which coordinates inwardly the whole religious organism of Islam. The *Tariqah* is the most subtle and difficult aspect of Islam to understand at the same time that its external effect is to be seen in many manifestations of Islamic society and civilisation. Our task ... [here is to] to delineate the essential principles of the *Tariqah* and its Quranic roots. It is to outline the features that characterize Islamic spirituality of which the *Tariqah* is the custodian and for which it provides the means of realization.

As pointed out [previously], the *Shari`ah* is the Divine Law by virtue of whose acceptance man becomes a Muslim. Only by living according to it can man gain that equilibrium which is the necessary basis for entering upon the Path or

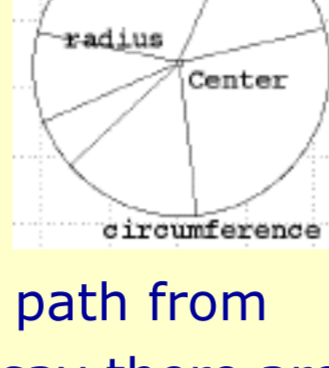


Tariqah. **Only a man who can walk on flat ground can hope to climb a mountain.**

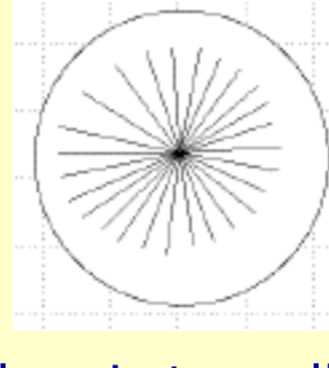
Without participation in the *Shari`ah* the life of the *Tariqah* would be impossible and in fact the latter is interwoven in its practices and attitudes with the practices prescribed by the *Shari`ah*.

Some of the traditional Sufi masters, especially those of the Shadhiliyah order, have used the geometric symbol of a circle to depict the relation between these fundamental dimensions of Islam. From any point in space there can be generated a circle and an indefinite number of radii which connect every point of the circumference of the circle of the

Center. The circumference is the *Shari`ah* whose totality comprises the whole of the Muslim community. Every Muslim by virtue of accepting the Divine Law is as a point standing on this circle. The radii symbolize the *Turuq* (plural of *Tariqah*). Each radius is a path from the circumference to the Centre. As the Sufis say there are as many paths to God as there are children of Adam. The *Tariqah*, which exists in many different forms corresponding to different spiritual temperaments and needs of men, is the radius which connects each point to the Centre. It is only by virtue of standing on the circumference, that is, accepting the *Shari`ah*, that man can discover before him a radius that leads to the Centre. Only in following the *Shari`ah* does the possibility of having the door of the spiritual life open become realized.



Finally at the Centre there is the *Haqiqah* or Truth which is the source of both the *Tariqah* and the *Shari`ah*. Just as geometrically the point generates both the radii and the circumference, so does metaphysically the *Haqiqah* create both the *Tariqah* and the *Shari`ah*, that *Haqiqah* or Centre which is 'everywhere and nowhere'. The Law and the Way have both been brought into being independently by God who is the Truth, and both reflect the Centre in different ways. To participate in the *Shari`ah* is to live in the reflection of the Centre or Unity, for the circumference is the reflection of the Centre. It is thus the necessary and sufficient cause for living a whole life and being 'saved'. But there are always those whose inner constitution is such that they cannot only live in the reflection of

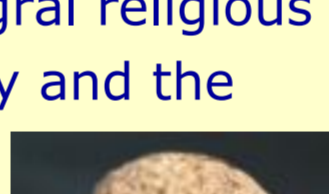


the Centre but must seek to reach It. Their Islam is to walk upon the Path towards the Centre. For them the *Tariqah* is providentially the means whereby they can attain that final End or Goal, that *Haqiqah* which is the Origin of all things, from which the integral tradition comprising the Law and the Way or the circumference and radii originate.

Although Islam in its totality has been able to preserve throughout its history a balance between the two dimensions of the Law and the Way, there have been occasionally those who have emphasized one at the expense of the other. There have been those who have denied the radii in favour of the circumference, who have negated the validity of the *Tariqah* in the light of the *Shari`ah*. Some of them have had the function, as custodians of the *Shari`ah*, to defend it and its absolute necessity, while on another level they may have accepted or even participated in the *Tariqah* themselves. Such men are called the '*ulamâ' al-zâhir*', the doctors of the Law, whose duty it is to guard and preserve the teachings of the Sacred Law. Others have gone to the point of negating the Way completely, being satisfied solely with an external interpretation of the religion. They are the superficial (*qishri'*) '*ulamâ'* who would break the balance and equilibrium between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions were they to dominate the whole of the Muslim community. But, although as a reaction against the modern West, a certain trend closely connected with such a view has gained ascendancy in certain quarters, such a point of view has never prevailed over the total orthodoxy and has remained a peripheral position. For the vast majority of orthodox Muslims, the Sufi remains a devout Muslim who is respected for the depth of his religious life even if all that he does and practices is not known or understood by the rest of the community at large.

On the other hand also there have been those who have tried occasionally to break the balance in favour of the *Tariqah* as if it were possible for the Way to exist in the world without the Law which serves as its outward shield and protects it from the withering influence of the world. In fact so many of the movements which have ended in the creation of a sect or even deviation from and break with the total orthodoxy of Islam have come about as the attempt to exteriorize esotericism without the support of the *Shari`ah*. In general many a pseudo-religious and devious sect begins from an esoteric background which by breaking the protecting mould of the *Shari`ah* itself deviates from its original nature, resulting in either relatively harmless small sects or positively harmful pseudo-religions depending on the climate in which such movements grow.

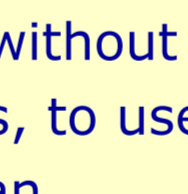
Islam in its totality, however, has been able to preserve this balance between the exoteric and the esoteric or *tafsir* and *ta'wil* as far as the Quranic interpretation is concerned. The larger orthodoxy of the Muslim community has always been able to prevail and prevent either the Law from stifling the Way or the Way from breaking the mould of the Law and thereby destroying the equilibrium of Islamic society. The religious and spiritual vitality of Islam has come from the presence of both these dimensions over the ages which together have constituted an integral religious tradition capable of creating a religious society and the norms of the inner spiritual life. According to



the well-known Sufi symbol Islam is like a **walnut** of which the shell is like the *Shari`ah*, the kernel like the *Tariqah* and the oil which is invisible yet everywhere present, the *Haqiqah*. A walnut without a shell could not grow in the world of nature and without a kernel would have no end and purpose. The *Shari`ah* without the *Tariqah* would be like a body without a soul, and the *Tariqah* without the *Shari`ah* would be devoid of an external support and simply could not subsist and manifest itself in this world. For the totality of the tradition the one like the other is absolutely necessary.

Many of the sayings of Sufi masters which on the surface seem to break or negate the *Shari`ah* must be understood in the background of the conditions that prevailed and the audience to whom they were addressed. If a Hafez wrote that one should throw away his prayer mat or an Ibn `Arabi wrote that his heart was the temple of idol-worshippers it does not mean that these masters were negating the Divine Law. Actually they were addressing an audience for whom the practice of the *Shari`ah* was taken for granted and they were inviting men to transcend the world of forms by penetrating into the inner meaning of the *Shari`ah*. There is a world of difference between a community where everyone practices the Divine Law and one where no one does so.

Today many want to transcend the world of forms, without possessing the forms. They want to burn the scrolls, to use a Buddhist term, without having the scrolls. But man cannot throw away that which he does not possess. The Sufis who were inviting men to throw away the external forms were addressing persons who already possessed these forms. There was no danger of men falling below forms; the *Shari`ah* was always present to prevent such a danger.



Today they are many who live without a religious form and mistake the transcending of forms from above with a falling below the forms. The *Tariqah* cannot be reached save through the *Shari`ah* and the apparent negation of the Path is not of the *Shari`ah* itself but the limiting of the Truth to external forms alone. Nothing is further from the intention of the Sufis than to break the *Shari`ah* and to introduce a kind of individualism and revolt against religious forms which some modernists would like to carry out in the name of Sufism. The freedom which the *Tariqah* provides through the acceptance and subsequent transcending of the forms of the Divine Law is the antipode of the quantitative 'freedom' of rejecting the Divine Law altogether. One renews the other only in the sense that Satan is the ape of God. Only a simple soul or one who does not want to understand can mistake one freedom for the other. One cannot reject an exotericism in the name of an esotericism which one does not possess. The tree is judged by its fruit and no better proof is needed of the futility of such an attempt than the bitter fruit that it has borne.

No better proof is needed of the inner connection between the *Tariqah* and the *Shari`ah* than the fact that in many regions of the world Islam spread through Sufism. In certain sections of India, in Southeast Asia and in much of Africa, Islam first spread through the personal example of Sufi masters and the establishment of a Sufi order. Only afterwards did the *Shari`ah* spread and Islam become widely accepted. Had Sufism been an alien intrusion into Islam, as many orientalists would like us to believe, how could it serve as a spearhead for the spread of the *Shari`ah*? It is the inner link between the Law and the Way that has made possible the spread of Islam in many areas through the Sufi masters and saints who have provided a living example of Islamic spirituality.

From: Ideals and Realities of Islam, S H Nasr

- More texts by [S. H. Nasr]

Disclaimer

First of all it is Islam that reigns (see Sura 5:3). Traditional Islam does not accept the notion that the world-religions (or even any other man-made belief systems) are equally valid roads to God - Allah, these are perennialist interpretations.

◊ Even so - except for elements of corruption and deviation - they still reflect some sacred truth, they did not turn into complete falsehood by being abrogated.

◊ In the words of Muhyiddin Ibn `Arabi:

"The religious laws (*shara'i* - of different religions) are all lights, and the law of Muhammad (Allah bless him and give him peace) among these lights is as the sun's light among the light of the stars..." [\[more\]](#)

And he wrote:

"So all paths return to look to the Prophet's path (Allah bless him and give him peace): if the prophetic messengers had been alive in his time, they would have followed him just as their religious laws have followed his law..."

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