

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Spiritual Renewal in Post Mongol Islamic World

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The word Sufi literally means a practitioner of *tasawwuf*, a term that derives from the Arabic root s-w-f, meaning purity. In the context of *tasawwuf*, it means purity of heart. A second meaning derives from the word *suf*, meaning wool. The Prophet sometimes wore a blanket of wool and hence the word *suf* harkens back to a connection with the Prophetic tradition. A deeper connotation for *suf* comes from its association with Fatimat uz Zahra (r), beloved daughter of the Prophet, who is known to have knit wool. Just as a weaver takes strands of wool and knits a woolen robe from it, so does *tasawwuf* integrate a holistic worldview from the disjointed inputs of mundane life. In Sufi terminology, the “knitting work of Fatima (r)” connotes purification and molding of the soul and its integration into a holistic self. A third meaning of the word *tasawwuf* derives from *Ahl as saff*, or people of the first rank, those who have distinguished themselves through self-purification, love of the Prophet and selfless service of humankind.

Tasuwuwuf is another term for *tazkiyat un nafs* (purification of the soul). *Tazkiya* (purification) is emphasized in the Qur’an in multiple contexts: “Lo! Allah loves those who purify themselves.” (9:108). “By the soul and what perfection was bestowed upon it; by its awareness of its defects and its awareness of the divine; verily, he attains felicity who purifies it.” (91:7-9). A heart that is purified becomes the home of *Asma ul Husna*, the most beautiful divine Names; it becomes a repository of divine Love and a reflector of divine Light.

Tasawwuf grew in the cradle of Islam and was not imported from the Greeks or the Buddhists as some modern writers profess. Most Sufis trace their spirituality to the Prophet through Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) and some trace it through Abu Bakr as Siddiq (r). Abu Dhar al Ghifari (d. 652), a companion of the Prophet, was a well-known Sufi. In functional usage, *tasawwuf* means intuitive and immediate spiritual knowledge of the love of God. The Sufis express this love through constant remembrance of God (*dhikr*), selfless service, sublime poetry, devotional songs, ecstatic music, lyrics replete with longing for divine love and a renunciation of worldly gains. Whatever be the origin of the word, there is no question that *tasawwuf* runs like a mighty river throughout Islamic history, turning its vast landscape into a veritable spiritual garden. In the all too checkered history of Muslims, often punctuated by disagreement, rancor, warfare and mayhem, *tasawwuf* is one common stream that has drawn freely from all segments of Muslim thought-Sunni, Shi’a, Fatimid, Zaidi and others. Besides the *Shariah* and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, *tasawwuf* is the only amalgam that has melted and molded together different groups among the Muslims.

Spirituality is innate to Islam. The Prophet himself was an embodiment of this spirituality. His legacy was passed on to the *Suhaba* (Companions of the Prophet) and after them to the *Tabiyeen* (those who learned from the Companions) and the *Tab e Tabiyeen* (those who learned from the Tabeyeen). Successive generations kept this tradition alive. In the first centuries of Islam, as the wealth and opulence of the ruling classes increased, a revulsion to the worldliness of the courts set in among some of the scholars. Among the notable Sufis of early Islam were Hassan al Basri (d. 728), Rabia al Adawiya (d. 802) and Mansur al Hallaj (d. 922). However, *tasawwuf* as a discipline ran as a sub-stream in the social milieu and did not come into its own until the 11th century. By contrast, the sciences of *Fiqh* were codified and institutionalized in the 8th and 9th centuries and the sciences of *hadith* were well established by the 10th century.

Throughout the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries, historical currents moved inexorably in favor of the Sufis. Al Gazzali (d. 1111), through his eloquent writings, bestowed respectability to *tasawwuf* and brought it squarely into the mainstream of Islam. He took issue with the theologians, the philosophers and the Fatimids and showed that *tasawwuf* was the only mode through which certainty of knowledge could be assured. In *Tahaffuz al Filasafa*, he repudiated the rational (philosophical) approach to knowledge as insufficient and inadequate in arriving at the truth. In *Ihya Ulum al Din*, he argued against the esoteric approach of the Fatimids and their search for an infallible and invisible leader. At the other end of the spectrum, the theologians relied solely on a prosaic interpretation of texts without understanding their spiritual underpinnings. True knowledge, argued Al Gazzali, comes only from illumination of the soul after it has been cleansed.

Tasawwuf grew its roots and had solidified its position in the Islamic world when the Mongol cataclysm descended upon it. Genghiz Khan and his successors destroyed a civilization. Centers of learning and culture like Bukhara, Samarqand, Nishapur, Herat and Baghdad were obliterated. The Islamic heartland extending from Bukhara to Baghdad was depopulated. According to Ibn Kathir, the number of people killed in and around Baghdad itself exceeded one million. Entire regions became depopulated. Dams were destroyed. Agriculture perished. Cities became grazing land. Books were thrown into the Tigris River. Libraries were burned. Mosques were demolished. Men of learning were slaughtered. In summary, the curtain fell on the classical Islamic civilization.

With its political power destroyed and culture decimated, Islam turned inwards to its spiritual roots. It was the Sufis who kept the lamp of faith shining in the darkness of the 13th century. The Mongols killed the rulers, destroyed the libraries, enslaved the scholars, but their sword could not touch the heart of the Sufi. The Sufis persisted, fought a battle of the soul with the Christians and won it with the conversion of the Mongol prince Baraka (Burke) Khan (1252) and Ghazan the Great of Persia (1295). In small cells and in far-away hideouts, the fire of faith continued to burn and when the darkness lifted, it was these small fires that became beacon lights and carried the message of *Tawhid* to the far corners of India, Pakistan, Indonesia and eastern Europe, transforming the social landscape of Eurasia and profoundly influencing the course of global events. Over a span of more than a thousand years, *tasawwuf* provided the guiding principle for reform in the far-flung corners of the Islamic world as well as the cutting edge for political movements. If the center of gravity of the Muslim world today is closer to Singapore than to Cairo, it is due not so much to the power of the Sultans or the preaching of the *mullahs*, but to the spiritual approach of the Sufi shaykhs.

In the generation that experienced the Mongol deluge, one finds a grim determination not only to survive but also to serve and expand the sphere of faith. The genius of the age expressed itself through spirituality. Sufi tareeqas (*tareeqa* literally means method or process of purification of the soul) grew up

everywhere and provided the life raft for Muslims in their darkest hour. Among the ones that have left a lasting imprint on history were the orders founded by Shaykh Abdul Qadir al Jeelani (Baghdad, d. 1166), Khwaja Moeenuddin Chishti (Ajmer, India d. 1236), Ziauddin Jahib Suhrwardi (Baghdad, circa 1150), Ali al Shadhuli (Egypt, d. 1258), Jalaluddin Rumi (Turkey, d. 1273) and Khwaja Bahauddin Nakhshband (Bukhara, d. 1386). Ibn al Arabi (d. 1240) introduced Sufi thought into Spain about this same time. The Qadariya Order spread throughout the Muslim world and profoundly influenced religious, social and political movements. The Chishti order was the major instrument in introducing Islam in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. Ibn al Arabi's writings influenced the development of tasawwuf the world over. The Shadhuliya School found its followers in Egypt, Syria, Malaysia, East Africa and North Africa. Jalaluddin Rumi's Mawlawiyya order influenced the Turks and the Europeans. The resilience of Islam, manifest in its spiritual dimension, not only absorbed the shock of the Mongol invasions, it ultimately succeeded in converting the Mongols themselves to Islam.

While not compromising on the Shariah or the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, *tasawwuf* melted together Islamic spirituality with local cultures and evolved a folk Islam that spread through the India-Pakistan subcontinent, Indonesia and deep into Africa. The history of these regions cannot be understood unless the spiritual dimension of Islam is kept in mind. Many of the movements that sprang up to reform the Sufi bent of the Muslim masses were themselves strongly rooted in Sufi thought. Examples are the reform movements of Ibn Taymiyah (Syria, d. 1326), Ahmed Sirhindi (India, d. 1615), Muhammed al Sanusi (Libya, d. 1859) and al Mahdi (Sudan, d. 1885).

The triumph of the *Awliya* (sages; friends of God) must be looked at in its historical context. The Afghans had conquered Hindustan (1292) only 25 years before Genghiz Khan's invasion of Central Asia. Islam had only gained a toehold in the Indonesian islands when Hulagu destroyed Baghdad (1258). The Islam that entered India and the Far East was less the didactic Islam of the *ulema*, but more the spiritual Islam of the Sufi. Specifically, Sufi movements profoundly influenced the eastern lands of Islam, constituting what are today Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Central Asia, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia as well as the West African nations south of the Sahara. In the core regions of the Arab world, which escaped conquest and devastation by the Mongols thanks to the victory at Ayn Jalut (1261), Sufi influence was less pronounced and the area remained faithful to the legacy of classical Islam, with a heavier emphasis on the Shariah and political legitimacy. For instance, the *ghazi* spirit of the Ottomans in the 14th and 15th centuries was deeply animated by Bektashi, Naqshbandi and Qadariya influence. Uthman dan Fuduye (d. 1817), who led a struggle to establish Islamic rule in West Africa was a follower of the Qadariya Sufi order. Abdel Qader al Jazairi, a Qadariya Shaykh, led the resistance to French occupation of Algeria (1840). Shamayl Daghestani who resisted Russian occupation of the northern Caucasus in the 1840s was a Nakhshbandi Shaykh. Shaykh al Hajj Umar Tal led the resistance to French occupation of Senegal and Mali (1860). As late as 1911, it was the Sanusi movement in North Africa that resisted the colonial invasion by Italy. Even in modern times, Sufi orders continue to provide the leadership for national independence movements in many of the non-Arab Islamic regions. As an illustration, for over a century, the resistance to Russian rule in the Caucasus has been led by the Naqshbandi order. By contrast, in the 18th century, the battle cry of the Wahhabi movement in Arabia was strict adherence to the Shariah. Modern day Islamic movements in Egypt and Algeria are animated by a call to rule by the Shariah and political legitimacy.

The Sufis "conquered" India, Africa and Indonesia and profoundly influenced the politics, language, art, music and culture of the Muslim peoples of the east. The spirituality of the Sufis was uniquely suited to the ancient Asian mind. Hindus and Buddhists alike entered the fold of Islam in droves. Thus it was that Khwaja Moeenuddin Chishti of Ajmer, Baba Fareeduddin of Punjab, Khwaja Khutbuddin of Deccan and Nizamuddin Awliya of Delhi made a more lasting impact on the Indian subcontinent than did Mahmud

of Ghazna or Alauddin Khilji. The asceticism of Indonesian Buddhism found Sufic Islam to be more acceptable than the pedantic recitations of *mullahs*. The animist soul of Africa resonated to the drumbeat of *tasawwuf* and Africans entered Islam by the millions.

The impact of *tasawwuf* on subsequent developments in politics, music and culture was no less profound. The Safavid dynasty originated as a Sufi movement. Babur, the first Moghul Emperor, was an avid Sufi as is manifest from his Babur Namah. The early Ottomans were the "Ghazis of Rum", many of whom followed the Naqshbandi Order. The Moghul emperors Akbar and Jehangir were devout followers of Shaykh Salim Chisti. The Chishtis and the Nakhsbandis profoundly influenced Hindustani music marrying devotional singing with classical ragas, as in *Qawwali*, *Naat*, *Hamd* and *Ghazals*. It is a tribute to the universal genius of Shaykh Jalaluddin Rumi that he is perhaps the most widely read poet in North America today.

Despite its historical triumphs, the absence of empirical criteria opened up Sufism to abuse. In the 18th century, accompanying a general political and social decay of Muslim societies, spirituality and ethics also suffered. Just as religion devoid of spirituality degenerates into rituals, spirituality devoid of the Shariah degenerates into imagination and the talisman. This inherent weakness of the spiritual approach was the target of movements such as the Wahhabi movement in Arabia and the movement of Shah Waliullah of Delhi in India in the 18th century. The French exploited this weakness in the 20th century to foster deviant Sufi practices in West Africa as a means of confusing the Muslim resistance movements. However, it must be kept in mind that the abuse of *tasawwuf* was not the cause but a result of the political and social decay of the Muslims.

Tasawwuf was the dynamic force that rescued Islam in its gravest hour, conquered the Mongols and propelled the faith deep into Asia, and Europe. Today, it is in the spirituality of Islam that Muslims search for renewal in the face of a global challenge of an agnostic world civilization.

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