

The Way of the Sufi

by William C. Chittick

My title suggests three questions: "What is a Sufi?", "What is his way?" and "Where does his way take him?" Naturally, many answers can be and have been proposed for these questions. Phenomena going by the name of Sufism have appeared throughout most of Islamic history in a wide variety of locations, in each case with important characteristics setting the particular instance apart from many of the others. Wherever Sufism has been found, these questions have been asked and answered. In suggesting my own answer, I will look at Sufism more as a permanent dimension of the Islamic religion than as a collection of diverse movements, personalities and ideas. Hence, I will try to focus on what appears to be universal in Sufism, rather than the particular instances.

Before I enter directly into my topic, a few words need to be said about the relatively widespread interest in Sufism that can be observed today outside the limited field of academics and orientalists. It is not uncommon to meet Westerners who are familiar with certain Sufi teachings and practices or who say that they themselves are Sufis. What is significant for our purposes is that in many of these cases, such individuals are ignorant of, or would even deny, any

essential relationship between Sufism and Islam. There are books that enthusiastically acclaim Sufism as an exalted wellspring of spirituality and beauty, while considered Islam, if it is mentioned at all, in terms of the stereotypes that have haunted the West since the Middle Ages.

The commonly encountered western view of Sufism as a spiritual or mystical movement divorced from Islam or even opposed to Islam has been fortified by the reaction of certain modern Muslims against Sufism. As H.A.R. Gibb has pointed out, they look upon Sufism either as a "survival of superstitions" and "cultural backwardness" or as a deviation from "true Islam." Gibb is sufficiently sensitive to Sufism's nature to perceive that such attitudes are bent on "eliminating the expression of authentic religious experience" from the Islamic world (Gibb 1962, p. 218).

In short, many people, both Muslims and non-Muslims, consider Sufism as something alien to Islam, however these terms are defined. But the representatives of the classical Sufi tradition maintain that Sufism is in fact the heart and marrow of the Islamic religion. My first task here is to try to shed some light on their point of view. What, in the perspective of these Sufis, is Sufism?

Hundreds of definitions have been offered in the classical texts for the term 'Sufism' itself, usually with the freshness and spontaneity characteristic of Sufi writings (Nurbakhsh 1981, pp. 16-41). Though it would be possible to begin with one or more of these, it may be more useful simply to suggest that Gibb is on the right track when he implies that Sufism is equivalent to "authentic religious experience." To put it more plainly, Sufism is the animating spirit of the Islamic tradition. Wherever 'Sufism' flourishes, Islam is alive to its own spiritual and moral ideals, but to the extent that Sufism has been eclipsed, Islam becomes desiccated and sterile, if it survives at all. This is not to deny that Sufism has been on occasion identified historically with movements and figures that have themselves become desiccated and sterile. But the essential nature of Sufism, a nature that allows of no desiccation, is a religious experience that cannot be constrained by specific and determinate forms.

The identification of Sufism with the animating spirit of Islam is prefigured in a famous *hadith* found in the *Ṣaḥiḥs* of both Bukhārī and Muslim (see Robson 1963-65, pp. 5-6): The Prophet and a number of his Companions were sitting together when a man

appeared and asked the Prophet several questions. When the man departed, the Prophet told the Companions that this had been the angel Gabriel, who had come to teach them their religion (*din*). As outlined by Gabriel's questions and the Prophet's answers, the religion of Islam can be understood to have three basic dimensions:

The first dimension is 'submission to God' (*eslām*), which is "to bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His messenger, to perform the ritual prayers, to pay the alms tax, to fast during Ramadan, and to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca if you can find the means to do so."

The second dimension is 'faith' (*imān*), which is "to have faith in God, His angels, His scriptures, His messengers, and the Last Day, and to have faith in the measuring out of both good and evil."

The third dimension is 'virtue' or 'perfection' (*ehsān*), which is "to worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you."¹

The first two elements in this definition, 'submission to God' and 'faith', are familiar to all students of Islam, since they correspond to the 'five pillars' and the 'three principles' of the religion. What needs to be stressed is that the third element, 'perfection' is equally important to the structure of Islam, even though it is not discussed by the jurists (*foqahā*) or the theologians (*motakallemun*). The field of vision of the jurists is limited to the *shari'at*, which defines the five pillars and the other practices that Muslims need to perform. For their part, the theologians are primarily concerned with the defense of Islamic dogma, which establishes and explains the meaning of the three principles. From the point of view of the Sufi authorities, the experts in the outward domain (*zāher*) have no competence to pronounce upon Islam's innermost dimension (*bāṭen*).

In this brief outline of the basics of Islam provided by the Prophet, it is important to notice the primary place accorded to the dual *shahāda* or 'testimony of faith', which is to bear witness that "There is no god but God"

and that "Muhammad is His messenger." The *shahāda* provides the key to understanding the Islamic perspective in all domains. In the above definitions, it is listed as the initial element of submission to God: First Muslims acknowledge God's reality and lordship, then they acknowledge that God has revealed Islam to them through Muhammad. Then only do the injunctions of the *shahāda* become incumbent upon them.

The *shahāda* also defines the content of faith, whose first and primary element is faith in God. The nature of the God in whom Muslims have faith is set down by the *shahāda*, while the other objects of faith derive their reality and nature from God.

Finally, perfection is also frequently described in terms of this fundamental declaration of God's Unity, as will be explained below.

As Islam gradually assumed its characteristic historical form through various institutions, its three dimensions came to be reflected within society as relatively distinct, though thoroughly interrelated, aspects of Islamic civilization. Submission to God came to be embodied institutionally in the *shari'at* and jurisprudence, while faith developed into those schools that deal with the doctrinal and dogmatic elements in Islamic teachings, such as *kalām* ('dogmatic theology'), theoretical Sufism and philosophy. As for perfection, it has remained an intangible inward dimension of Islamic experience and practice, always closely connected with 'sincerity' (*ekhlās*), which is considered a fundamental prerequisite for traversing the path to God. On the individual level, this third dimension of Islam is to be found in the heart of all Muslims who practice their religion for God's sake alone, while in the social sphere it is embodied in the life of the Sufis, who developed into a special group of Muslims with their own particular institutions.

From this point of view Sufism can be called an invisible spiritual presence that animates all authentic expressions of Islam, including submission to God and faith. Its institutional forms serve to demonstrate that

the dimension of perfection remained an ideal of fundamental importance to Islamic society as a whole. Nevertheless, the relative inaccessibility of human perfection means that every individual or institution historically connected with the name Sufism cannot necessarily be held up as an expression of Sufism's true nature. The Sufis themselves have always been aware of the danger of degeneration and ossification inherent in attempting to adapt social institutions to ideals that can be fully actualized only in rare individuals.

In terms more familiar within a Christian context, one could say that Sufism is concerned primarily with Islam's spirit, while the *shari'at* focuses primarily on its 'letter'. However, Islam does not take the well-known Christian position that "the letter kills" – after all, even Christianity had to develop its own 'letter' to survive as a civilization. Islam views the letter as an absolutely necessary framework for the nurture of the spirit. In the Islamic view – and the Sufi view is no different – the *shari'at* has no ultimate value without the spirit that gives it life, while the spirit's flower flourishes only in the *shari'at*'s soil. To use another metaphor, Islam's body and soul are inseparable. Where many Muslims would disagree is in the identification of Islam's spirit with Sufism. But this disagreement has to do with the definition of words and differing assessments of who exactly these 'Sufis' have been. No one can deny that Islam has an animating spirit that is not exhausted by the *shari'at*.

The theoreticians of Sufism frequently explain Sufism's role within the context of *tawḥid*, the declaration of God's oneness that is defined by the first *shahāda*. By creating the universe, God causes multiplicity to appear from unity. He displays the potentialities of existence implied by His own names and attributes (*al-asmā wa'l-ṣefāt*) in the form of the infinite existent things. The creatures of the world, which the Koran often calls the 'signs' (*āyāt*) of God, make manifest in certain respects, the nature of their Creator. The tremendous diversity of creation affirms the infinity of God's

creative power. All opposition and strife express His unlimited perfection and allude to the fact that God, who alone is Oneness and Peace, is the 'coincidence of opposites' (*jam' al-ahdād*).

Many Sufis reduce the basic archetypes for all plurality to two fundamental divine attributes: beauty and majesty, or mercy and wrath, or gentleness and severity. A famous *hadith qodsi* tells us that God's mercy precedes His wrath, which is to say that His essential nature is mercy and gentleness, while wrath and severity pertain to certain created things. God says in the Koran, "My Mercy embraces all things" (7:156), but nowhere does the Koran imply that His wrath embraces all things.

The relationship between mercy and wrath as they become manifest within the created universe can be understood in terms of yin-yang polarity. Just as there is no pure yin and no pure yang (as represented by the black dot in the white half of the yin-yang symbol, and the white dot in the black half), so also there is no such thing as pure mercy or pure wrath within this world. Wherever mercy displays its signs, there will also be signs of wrath, and vice versa. But the domain of wrath does not extend beyond the intermediate world, which means that purely spiritual beings are not affected by it. In our world, certain things display the attribute of wrath rather directly, while others are more clearly dominated by mercy. In general, that which pertains to the 'outward' and the material tends to be dominated by wrath, whereas the closer one moves toward the spiritual world, the closer one approaches to pure mercy. As Rumi puts it, "This world is the house of God's severity," which is to say that the other world is the house of His gentleness and mercy (Rumi 1925-40, Book vi, vs. 1891).

Given the fact that God's wrath is closely connected to the manifest domain, the *shari'at*, which concerns the more outward affairs of life, has a special connection with God's wrath. However, this wrath derives from mercy and leads back to it. In other

words, the rather stern and forbidding face of the *shari'at*, which demands that people follow its commandments or taste the chastisement of hell, displays God's majesty and severity, even if the promise of paradise expresses His mercy.

Once we see the parallel between the *shari'at* and the divine majesty and wrath, it is easy to discern a relationship between the spiritual perfection that is sought by the Sufis and mercy. Here the element of love, so important in Sufi texts, also enters the picture. The relationship between mercy and love is especially obvious on the level of Sufi expressions of Islamic theology, since mercy is frequently said to be the cause of the world's existence. God's mercy brings about creation, because the creatures possess nothing of their own but indigence and need: "O people, you are the ones that have need of God; He is the Sufficient-unto-Himself, the All-laudable" (Koran 35:15). According to Ebno'l-'Arabi and his followers, the divine mercy that "embraces all things" is existence itself. Bringing the things into existence is an act of gentleness, kindness, and love. The same point is made in the famous *hadith qodsi* constantly quoted in Sufi texts: "I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the creatures."

If God's love for the universe is the cause of its existence, so also human love for God – which grows up out of God's love for human beings – closes the gap between God and creation that appeared as a result of the creative act. And human love makes itself known through sincerity of devotion to the One. The greater a person's love, the greater his perfection. Hence 'love' is synonymous with the *ehsān* that makes up the spiritual essence of Islam.

Sincerity and perfection mean dedication to God alone, such that all acts and thoughts, without exception, occur only for His sake. As long as people continue to see 'others' (*aghyār*) and take them into account, they are still veiled from their Lord. "There is no god but God" means that nothing but God is truly real, that all others are ultimately illusory.

In summary, Islam can be seen to consist of three dimensions: submission to God, faith, and spiritual perfection. In other terms, Islam is made up of the *shari'at*, doctrinal teachings, and Sufism. This scheme may help to explain why certain Westerners can be simultaneously attracted by Sufism and repelled by Islam, which they normally identify with the *shari'at*. They are repelled by the fact that the revealed Law and many of the more external aspects of Islamic life and civilization display the sternness and severity of the divine majesty and wrath. In contrast, Sufism – whose characteristic expressions are found in poetry, music, beauty, and love – illustrates the dimension of divine beauty and mercy. When Gibb writes that "the aesthetic element in Sufism plays a part which can hardly be overemphasized in its later expression" (Gibb 1962, p. 211), he is alluding to the close connection between beauty and spirituality that is a hallmark of all authentic Sufism.

When westerners take their first look at Islamic civilization, they often feel as if they have been taken into a desert and set down outside the austere walls of a city that smells of death. In contrast, when they are drawn to Sufism, they experience the delightful gardens that lie behind the walls surrounding so many traditional Muslim houses. In a living Islamic community, the walls protect the garden from the desert winds and the eyes of strangers, while the garden and the human warmth and love found inside the walls are the reason for the walls' existence. Inward and outward Islam, or Sufism and the *shari'at*, are two sides of a single reality. To use traditional imagery, the *shari'at* is the shell while Sufism is the kernel; neither can survive without the other. To isolate either of them from the other is to falsify both.

With these introductory remarks behind us, we can turn to our central topic. From what has already been said, it should be clear that the Sufi way is built firmly upon two foundations: *eslām* or submission to God (the practice of the *shari'at*) and *imān* or faith (assent in the heart to the basic Islamic teachings concerning God, prophecy, and the Last Day). Once a

person has gained sufficient grounding in these two dimensions, the specifically Sufi side of Islamic life and practice – sincerity, love, and spiritual perfection – can develop.

Briefly, one can say that the Sufi path is the attempt to achieve *ehsān* or spiritual perfection. It is to try “to worship God as if you see Him.” Eventually, sincerity and love may take the seeker to the place where the “as if” ceases to apply. In other words, the seeker of God will worship Him while seeing Him, in the mode of one of the supreme models of the Sufi life, the Prophet’s son-in-law ‘Ali, who said, “I would not worship a Lord whom I do not see.”

Sufi theory derives from the vision of reality revealed in the Koran and the *hadith* and commented upon by generations of sages and Sufi masters. It provides a map of the cosmos in order that human beings can understand their situation in respect to God. It explains both what human beings are in fact, and what they should be. Then it sets down a practice that can lead people from where they are now to the ultimate goal, or from imperfection to perfection. The whole of Sufi theory and practice can be summarized in three stages: discernment, naughting the self, and union with the Self.

The fundamental declaration of Muslim faith, the first *shahāda* – “(There is) no god but God” – distinguishes between the Real and the unreal, the Absolute and the relative, God and “what is other than God” (*mā sewā Allāh* = the cosmos, *al-‘ālam*). Traditionally the *shahādat* is said to be divided into two parts, the negation (‘no god’) and the affirmation (‘but God’). The first part negates the reality of this world, while the second affirms the reality of God. The *shahāda* means that there is “no creator but God,” “none merciful but God,” “none possessing knowledge but God,” “no light but God,” and so on in accordance with all the divine names and attributes. Thus, it means that there is “no reality but God” and that all “others” derive whatever reality they might possess from Him.

Innumerable Koranic verses and

hadiths reiterate the fundamental discernment contained in the *shahāda*, or certain of its implications. For example, the Koran says that “Everything is perishing except His Face” (28:88). As one of the Sufi Masters points out:

God did not say, “will perish,” for He wanted it known that the existence of all things is perishing in His Being *today*. Only those still veiled [from the reality of things] postpone the observance of this until tomorrow (Kashāni 1946, p. 89).

God’s overwhelming reality is such that nothing can stand up to Him. His unique possession of all that is real and all that provides existence and qualities to ‘others’ means that others are literally nonexistent. This is how the Sufis interpret the saying of the Prophet, “God was, and nothing was with Him.” Jonayd added, “And God is now as He was.” Ebno’l-‘Arabi then remarked that there was really no need for Jonayd to add this clarification, since, when referring to God, the verb “was” (*kān*) denotes all tenses (see Jāmi 1977, p. 93). With God, ‘was’, ‘is’, and ‘will be’ all have the same meaning.

The primary discernment between the Real and the unreal is followed by a secondary discernment – prefigured by the second *shahāda* – among the realities of this world. Since “Mohammed is the messenger of God,” he is a clear manifestation of the One Reality and is thus distinguished from other phenomena. Revelation in general and the Koran in particular are guiding lights in the midst of the darkness of unreal things.

On closer analysis, it becomes obvious that this distinction between revelation and non-revelation is much more subtle than at first might appear. If the Koran is the Book of God displaying His ‘signs’ (as its verses are called), so also the cosmos is God’s Book. Hence the phenomena of nature are also ‘signs’ of God. The world and everything within it can thus be viewed from two points of view: In one respect, they are ‘other than God’ and hence unreal; in another respect they are ‘signs’ of God and hence real to

some degree. Here then we have a further discernment of fundamental importance – between phenomena as ‘signs’ and as ‘veils’.

Sufis explain the distinction between signs and veils employing many sets of terms. According to one formulation, each existent thing can be said to have two faces. Or rather, the single reality of each thing – its ‘face’ – can be viewed from two different perspectives. These two faces are the eastern face and the western face. If we look at the western face of things, we will not find the Sun of reality, since it has set. But if we look at the eastern face, we will see the Sun in all its blazing glory. The vast majority of mankind see only the western face. Hence they have no awareness of God’s Self-manifestation in all things. For them, the Koranic verse, “Wherever you look, there is the Face of God” (2:115) is a dead letter. In contrast, the prophets and the great Sufis see the eastern face. They witness God through all things.² For them everything is truly and actually a ‘sign’ of God.

The unique position of human beings within the cosmos gives them the possibility of choosing between the Real and the unreal, or the eastern face and the western face. Islamic anthropology is based on a picture of the human being as the one creature who has accepted the responsibility of freely choosing God over the world, the Real over the unreal, the east over the west. In the Koran, human acceptance of this responsibility is referred to as the ‘Trust’ which was offered to the heavens, the mountains, and the earth, but they all refused. “And the human being carried it; surely he is sinful, very foolish” (33:72), inasmuch as he fails to live up to the responsibility of being human. In practice, carrying the Trust means that people must follow the guidance of the prophets. More specifically, to be Muslims and Sufis they must submit to God by acknowledging the truth of the *shahāda*, have faith in Him and in the perfectibility of human nature as taught in the Koran, and live the spiritual virtues that are embodied in Muhammad and the great exemplars of the tradition.

In short, the initial discernment between God and the world leads to two secondary discernments, both expressed at least implicitly in the statement, "Muhammad is the messenger of God." People need to discern between revelation and human knowledge and between the eastern and the western side of each phenomenon, or between the sign and the veil. But these discernments remain purely theoretical and ineffectual as long as they are not put into practice. The foundation of this practice is to observe the *shari'at*, whose function is precisely to provide the concrete means whereby discernment can be applied to the realities of everyday life. The religious teachings and institutions provide the practical means to choose the right face of things over their western face.

In questions of discernment, the difference between the general Islamic point of view and the specifically Sufi perspective does not lie in the principles involved, but rather in a certain self-consciousness about applying these principles. The Sufis do not consider it sufficient for a person to have 'faith' (*imān*) and then to 'submit himself to the *shari'at*' (*islām*) if he also has the capability for deepening his understanding and purifying his heart (*ihlām*). In order to attain to human perfection, it is not enough to follow religion blindly (*taqlid*). Rather, one must achieve a total awareness of the principles and the spirit that animate the religion, or, as the Sufis express it, one must attain to the Truth itself (*ḥaqq*). The *shahāda* becomes a concrete expression of the Truth, a sword that cuts the illusory away from the Real. The standards set down by the *shari'at* perform the same function, but here the Sufi does not accept them "because he must," but because he is clearly aware of the role they play in allowing human beings to act in accordance with the Truth and to avoid error.

Since Sufis constantly attempt to keep the spirit of Islam alive, they turn their primary attention toward the inward meaning rather than the outward form and toward the essential rather than the accidental, although

they never deny the rights of the religion's formal dimensions. If a certain tendency toward antinomianism has sometimes appeared within the Sufi orders, this is usually a reaction against the overemphasis of jurists and politicians upon the outward forms of Islam. The doctors of the *shari'at* all too often forget that the *shari'at* does not exist for its own sake, but only to preserve and maintain the inward garden of Islamic spirituality. For their part, Sufis have on occasion lost touch with the spirit of Islam, and then, in the name of a spirit no longer lived, they have denigrated the role of the *shari'at*. But wherever authentic Sufism has been practiced throughout the ages, careful observation of the *shari'at* has gone hand in hand with the sincerity and love that are the heart and soul of Islam.

Sufi practice, like the faith that is rooted in the *shahāda*, combines two complementary perspectives: negation and affirmation, "no god" and "but God." The 'god' or false reality that needs to be negated is our own self, our own face turned toward the west and wandering in exile from its original home. As long as the individual ego remains the focus of self-consciousness, people will never be able to see the Sun. Instead they will perceive a multitude of shadows, false realities, and 'idols'. In Rumi's words, "The mother of all idols is your own self" (Rumi 1925-40, Book i, vs. 772). Only through negation of the individual self can idol-worship be erased and the one Reality, which is the divine Self, affirmed.

The actual 'path' that the true Sufi follows is a process of inward transformation whereby the powers of the soul are turned toward God. As already indicated, such inward attentiveness and activity – or sincerity of intention – depend upon various outward supports, provided first of all by the *shari'at*. But Sufism adds to the strictly *shari'ite* practices many forms of devotion and spiritual exercises. The most important of the Sufi exercises, around which the others are ranged as so many auxiliary means, is the 'remembrance' (*dhekr*) of God, which the Koran commands the faith-

ful to practice in several verses. Remembrance was taught by the Prophet to many of his close Companions in the specific forms that make up the kernel of Sufi discipline.

The 'normal' human situation is one of forgetfulness and negligence. The least precondition for human perfection is to recognize one's own imperfection and to remember the perfection of the one Reality. But in order to remember the Real, the seeker must forget the unreal, which is his own self.

In the Koran and in Islamic usage in general, the command to remember God also means to mention God, so the actual means of remembering Him is the mention of His name, which is considered inseparable from the object named. Through a gradual process of transformation, the revealed name fills up the mind and consciousness, leaving no room for individual selfhood. The content of our consciousness determines our own nature. As Rumi put it in his famous lines:

*You are your thought, brother,
the rest of you is bones and fiber.
If you think of roses,
you are a rosegarden,
but if you think of thorns,
you are fire's fuel.*

(Rumi 1925-40, Book ii, vs. 277-278).

The final goal of the Sufi path is union with God, or the full realization of human perfection, or actualization of the divine form in which human beings were created. Once perfection is achieved, the separation between the divine and the human envisaged in the original discernment has been overcome, at least from a certain point of view. Here the west has disappeared because the Sun has risen in the east.

Having traversed the way, the Sufi can say with Ḥallāj, "I am the Real." This will be no baseless claim, for he will simply be seeing the reality of his own situation. Or rather, his words will represent the Sun of the East announcing Its presence. This is the realization of the original discernment, the fact that "God is, and nothing is with Him." Illusory selfhood has been negated and none but God remains. As

Rumi puts it,

When Ḥallāj's love for God reached its utmost limit, he became his own enemy and naughted himself. He said, "I am the Real," that is, "I have been annihilated; the Real remains, nothing else." This is extreme humility and the utmost limit of servanthood. It means, "He alone is." To make a false claim and to be proud is to say, "Thou art God and I am the servant." For in this way you are affirming your own existence, and duality is the necessary result. If you say, "He is the Real," that too is duality, for there cannot be a 'He' without an 'I'. Hence the Real said, "I am the Real." Other than He nothing else existed. Ḥallāj had been annihilated, so those were the words of the Real (Rumi 1969, p. 193).



Notes

1. For a detailed analysis of Islam in terms of these three dimensions, see Chittick (1992).
2. On the eastern and western faces of phenomena, see Lāhijī (1958), p. 136.

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The Name of the Friend

by Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh

*Say always the name of the Friend, slowly, slowly;
with this alchemy change the copper of the heart into gold
slowly, slowly.*

*Drink from the wine of union in the tavern of Unity
so that 'I' and 'you' will be taken from your mind
slowly, slowly.*

*Stamp your foot on the head of existence, empty your hands of both worlds,
and you will become a confidant of God's secret
slowly, slowly.*

Seek a road from that king who has the 'bounty of Allah',
and sooner or later he will separate you from yourself
slowly, slowly.*

*In love's district impatience brings loss, since difficulties
will be made easy by surrender and contentment
slowly, slowly.*

*There are thousands of tests in store for a sincere lover,
until he can come to know Love's secret
slowly, slowly.*

*The knower of God who strives truly will travel the stations of the way;
he will travel the road of baqa' after the road of fana'
slowly, slowly.*

*In the school of lovers, silence is better than speech.
O Nurbakhsh, this statement was made clear
slowly, slowly.*

* Nimatullah

