

The Mystical Way of Sufism: An Introduction

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Our time is a witness to man's renewed interest in the wisdom of the Orient. There are many scholars who turn to the classic thought of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Not many, however, are conversant with the mystical philosophy of Sufism. It is the purpose of this paper to introduce the reader to the mystical thought of Sufism. It shall delve into the derivation of the word, the various phases of the Sufi movement, and the essential teachings particularly on the means to attain perfection. It is hoped that this introduction to the Islamic mystical philosophy of Sufism would contribute to a better understanding of the inner life of the vast Muslim populations of Asia and Africa, and open more avenues for an inter-faith dialogue.

I. DERIVATION AND MEANING OF THE NAME

There are a number of explanations as to the derivation of the name *Sufi* which may be referred to, at the outset, as a Mohammedan mystic. There is the theory that the word is derived from *Safā* (purity) and the is one of "the elect who has become purified from all worldly defilements." He is then named Sufi because of the purity (*Safā*) of his heart and the cleanliness of his acts (*āthār*).¹ Bishr ibn

¹ Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, *History of Philosophy: Eastern and Western*, vol. 2 (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1952), 170. See also A. J. Arberry, trans., *The Doctrine of the Sufis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 3.

al-Hārith said: "The *Sufī* is he whose heart is sincere (*safā*) towards God."² But if the derivation of *Sufī* were from *Safā*, the right term would be *Safawī* rather than *Sufī*.

Another theory relates *Sufi* with *Saff* (rank) "as though the *Sufi* were spiritually in the first rank in virtue of his communion with God" and "through the elevation of their desires towards Him, the turning of their hearts unto Him, and the staying of their secret parts before Him."³ But if the name *Sufi* were connected with *Saff* (rank), it would have been *Saffī* and not *Sufī*.

Still another explanation is that the *Sufi* is so-called because of his qualities which resemble those of the people of the Bench (*suffah*), who lived in the time of the Prophet. The title was given to the poor Muslims in the early days of Islam; these people had no house, and therefore used to take shelter in the covered bench outside the mosque built by the Prophet at Medina.⁴ They brought along with them only what is necessary to cover their nakedness and alleviate their hunger. The *Sufi* is, then, one who neither possesses nor is possessed.⁵

Al Qushayri and other Sufis admit that none of the above explanations is etymologically defensible. However, one of the derivations proposed by the Sufis themselves agrees with the principles of etymology. Abū Nasr al-Sarrāj, author of the oldest extant Arabic treatise on sufism, says that the word *Sufi* is derived from wool (*sûf*). The *Sufi* had the habit of wearing wool (*sûf*), "for the woollen raiment is the habit of the prophets and the badge of the saints and elect as appears in many traditions and narratives."⁶

The description of Sufis as people of the Bench and wearing wool reflects the outward aspect of their condition. For they were people who had left this world, departed from their homes, fled from their companions, and wandered about the land. For departing

² Bishr ibn al-Hārith quoted in Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, 170.

³ A. J. Arberry, *op. cit.*, 5. See also Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, 170.

⁴ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 12, 10.

⁵ Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, 170.

⁶ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 12, 10.

from their homes, they were called "strangers"; for their many journeyings they were called "travellers"; for travelling in deserts, and taking refuge in caves at times of necessity, certain people of the country called them "*shikaftîs*", for the word "*shikaft*" in their language means "cavern" or "cave." The Syrians called them "starvers," because they only took as much food as would give them strength in times of necessity. Because they were devoid of possessions they were called "paupers." They did not wear anything soft to touch or beautiful to behold; they were content with rough haircloth and coarse wool. They only clothed themselves to hide their nakedness. Because of their clothes and manner of dressing, they were called *Sufis*.⁷

Those who relate Sufis to the people of the Bench and the First Rank express their secret hearts and inner life: "for when a man abandons this world, and is abstemious therein, and turns aside therefrom, God purifies (*saffā*) his conscience (*sirr*) and illuminates his heart."⁸ The Prophet said that if a man shuns this world and turns to eternity, light enters his heart and God illuminates it, and what is (normally) unseen to him assumes a place in his vision. And, because of the purity of his conscience, his intuition (*fīrāsah*) is true. "Fear the intuition of the believer, for he beholds with the light of God."⁹ And the man whose conscience is pure, whose heart is clean, and whose breast is illuminated, possesses the qualities of a leader and is certainly in the first rank.

The derivation of Sufi from *sûf* (wool) is sound from the etymological point of view, and contains all the meanings it is supposed to express – "withdrawal from the world, inclining the soul away from it, leaving all settled abodes, keeping constantly to travel, denying the carnal soul its pleasures, purifying the conduct, cleansing the conscience, dilation of the breast, and the quality of leadership."¹⁰

Some accept the above derivation, but others challenge it. Joseph von Hammer says that the Sufis are related to the ancient gymnosophists of India and that "the Arabic words *Sûfî* (mystic) and

⁷ A. J. Arberry, *op. cit.*, 5-6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹⁰ Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, 170.

Sāfi (pure) belong to the same root, like the Greek *sophos*.¹¹ However, T. Noldeke, one time professor of Arabic at the University of Strassburg, points out that the word *sophos* is unknown in Aramaic and therefore could not possibly occur in Arabic.¹²

While there is no positive basis for the possible derivation of Sufi from *sophos*, its derivation from *sûf* is confirmed by the authority of Oriental tradition. Noldeke cites passages showing that, in the first two centuries of Islam, the common people who followed an ascetic way of life wore garments of coarse wool. The words *labisa'l-sûf*, "he clad himself in wool" often occur in the early literature and refer to those who renounced the world and lived an ascetic life; at a later period, when asceticism passed into mysticism, *labisa 'l-sûf* generally means "he became a *Sufi*." In Persian, too, the ascetic is often called *pashmîna-pûsh*, i.e., "wearing a woollen garment." The old Muslim ascetics who clothed themselves in wool borrowed this practice from Christian hermits or monks. Such woollen garments are described as *ziyy al-rubbân*, "the dress of the Christian ascetics." A *hadith* put in the mouth of the prophet states that Jesus Himself used to wear them.¹³

According to Imam Qushayri, the word Sufi came into vogue a little before the expiry of the second century Hijri (or A.D. 822). The people of that age adopted the title "Companions" after the death of the Prophet. Those who associated themselves with the "companions" were called in their own times *Tābeyûn* (Followers). And those who sat at the feet of the followers were referred to as "followers of the followers." After this period there was a slackening of religious spirit; people turned to the pleasures of the world rather than to God. But there were some who adored God above all and were wholly consumed by the fire of His love; they detached themselves from the mundane world and devoted themselves solely to God as the only object of their love. These men were later called the Sufis.¹⁴ Abū 'Ali al-Rudhbāri has defined a Sufi thus:

¹¹ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 12, 10.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, 171.

One who wears wool over (his) purity, gives his lust the taste of tyranny, and having overthrown the world, journeys in the pathway of the chosen one (i.e., the Prophet).¹⁵

From the various definitions of Sufism given by the Sufis themselves one will find quite a number of qualities ascribed to them. The gist of all these qualities is expressed in the following description of Sheik-ul-Islam Zakariya Ansari:

Sufism teaches how to purify oneself, improve one's morals, and build up one's inner and outer life in order to attain perpetual bliss. Its subject-matter is the purification of the soul and its end or aim is the attainment of eternal felicity and blessedness.¹⁶

Al Junayd extends the definition by stating that Sufism is...

...a purification of the heart from associating with created beings, separation from natural characteristics, suppression of human qualities, avoiding the temptations of the carnal soul, taking up the qualities of the spirit, attachment to the sciences of reality, using what is more proper to the eternal, counselling all the community, being truly faithful to God, and following the Prophet according to the Law.¹⁷

For many of the great Sufis themselves, "sufism is nothing but the purification of the senses and the will. It is the effacement of one's desires in the will of God... It is, in a word, self-discipline—the avoidance of what is forbidden and the performance of what is ordained."¹⁸ In this sense, Sufism is a purely Islamic discipline imposing duties and obligations on one who desires to build his character and inner life. The prophet Muhammad was sent to "instruct" mankind "in Scripture and wisdom and to sanctify them." The Sufis dutifully keep these "instructions," following what were prescribed of them and discharging what they were called upon to do. Subsequent to that prescription, God says: "... and those who fight strenuously for us we will surely guide them into our way."¹⁹

¹⁵ Ali-al Rudhbari quoted in Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, 171.

¹⁶ Ansari quoted in Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, 171.

¹⁷ Al Junayd quoted in Arberry, *op. cit.*, 10.

¹⁸ Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, 172.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 171-72.

Having considered the derivation and meaning of *Sufi*, we will now trace briefly the historical development of sufism in Islam.

II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUFISM

No one knows who was the first Sufi or who started this movement of Sufism. The latter may be compared to "a great oak tree, standing in the middle of the meadow: no one witnessed its planting, no one beheld its beginning, but now the flourishing tree speaks for itself, is true to origins which it has forgotten, but has taken for granted."²⁰

It is not easy to define the Sufi phenomenon. The Sufis never set out to found a new religion, a *mazhab* or a denomination. They were content to live and work within the framework of the Muslim religion, using texts from the Qur'an just as Christian mystics have used the Bible to illustrate their tenets.²¹

In every period of its history, Sufism is *the product of diverse forces working together* – speculative developments of the Muhammedan monotheistic idea, Christian asceticism and mysticism, gnosticism, Greek and Indian philosophies, as well as social and political realities that drive people toward flight from the world into quietism. Despite the influences, however, "the Sufi phenomenon presents itself as a new, spontaneous and original flowering of a religious feeling and intuition."²² There is no one single author, originator, or prime mover of the movement. The Sufis themselves, however, point to Muhammad himself as the divinely inspired embodiment of the perfect man. In this way they tie up their teachings with Muhammedan orthodoxy.

a) **Pre-History:** An account of the pre-history of Sufism (650-670) in Islam takes us back to the great *ascetic movement* which arose, largely under Christian influence, during the 7th century A.D.²³ It was an orthodox movement characterized by the ascetic's

²⁰ Cyprian Rice, O.P., *The Persian Sufis* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1964), 10.

²¹ Ibid., 9, 27.

²² Ibid., 21.

²³ See *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 8, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: The MacMillan Co., and the Free Press, 1967), 40-43; See also *Encyclopedia of*

overwhelming awareness of human frailty, utter submission to God's will, and intense religious exaltation. There was no organized monastic life, though some ascetics accompanied by friends, wandered to and fro or held prayer-meetings in which they studied the Qur'an and discussed their spiritual experiences. They adhered to the higher aspects of asceticism. Their main goal was to devote themselves in silence and solitude to practices of austerity, fasting, and other forms of ascetical discipline. Their outlook was one of simplicity which accords with the Arabo-Mahometan religion to which they had been brought up.²⁴

b) **First Period (750-1050):** At this time, the name Sufism gained currency. This was a period later characterized by an evolution of the otherworldly bent from the mere practice of asceticism and quietism, to the merging of such practice with pantheistic speculations and mystical meditations.²⁵ These tendencies were not entirely foreign elements flowing into Sufism from the outside and rapidly transforming it into something different. There are germs of Sufi pantheism in the Qur'an.²⁶ In this formative period of Sufism, Rāb'a al-'Adawiya (717-801), a freed slave girl who came to be known in the West as the "Muslim St. Teresa," introduced the vocabulary of love and wine as symbols of the blissful ecstasy of direct mystical apprehension of God. In the same early period as R(bi'a, two Sufis were executed for referring to themselves as identical with the Deity.²⁷

Early in this period, Sufi convents were founded where neophytes and experienced devotees led simple lives reciting mystical religious and philosophical classics, and performing mystic rituals. Membership in a Sufi convent did not require celibacy; some members stayed with their families outside the convent but came to the convent regularly. One of the earliest convents was established at Ramleh (southeast of now Tel Aviv) about 775.²⁸

Religion, vol. 14, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1987), 104-106.

²⁴ Rice, *op. cit.*, 25. See also *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8, 41.

²⁵ Rice, *op. cit.*, 25.

²⁶ Ibid., See also *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 12, 11.

²⁷ *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 8, 41. See also *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14., 106.

²⁸ *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 8, 41.

c) **Second Period (c. 1050-1450):** This period was marked by the development of the maturing mystical tradition of Sufism. In particular, Abû Hâmid al-Ghazâlî (1058-1111) fused mysticism with Muslim traditionalism by de-emphasizing the pantheistic aspects of Sufism. His interpretation of Islam stressed the personal, emotional relationship of the individual to God. He is said to have made Islam a mystical faith.²⁹ Sufism, then, became a vital force, winning over many more people, especially in Western Asia, to orthodox Islam.

This medieval period was also marked by the establishment of the great Sufi orders, of which about one hundred still exist, with an estimated several million adherents.³⁰ One of the influential founders of orders was the Persian poet Jalal al-dîn Muhammad Rûmî. Aside from composing poetry and other works, he instituted devotional dances, particularly those of the whirling dervishes. His disciples were called Mevlevi. From the Middle ages onward, Sufism influenced many poets, especially in Persia, where the most brilliant poetry has been Sufi.³¹

Aside from the members of the orders, wandering Sufi mendicants, or fakirs, have appeared over the centuries. Many were genuinely pious, but there were fraudulent beggars who brought disrepute to Sufism.³²

d) **Third Period (1450-1850):** This is the modern period which is sometimes referred to as the period of the poets (although poets abound in the second period as well). This began with Mawlana Nur ad-Dîn Jâmî (1414-1492), who is acknowledged as the greatest of Persian poets.³³ His *Mathnavi* is considered as the Qur'an of the Persians. Like the Qur'an, many segments of the *Mathnavi* have an internal unity of their own; but these are strung loosely together like a string of pearls of different sizes, shapes, and hues. Themes appear and disappear only to be addressed again from a different

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 42.

³¹ "Sufism," *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia* (Microsoft Corporation, 1997).

³² Ibid.

³³ *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 8, 42. See also *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14, 114.

perspective. It would be an injustice to its author to see the *mathnavi* as a structured whole. Its appeal lies in its fluidity and allusiveness.³⁴

This period is also marked by obscurantism, association of miracle legends with the early Sufi saints, use of charms and amulets, and prevalence of Cabalism in Sufism, not only in Egypt but throughout the Muslim world.³⁵

e) **Fourth Period (since 1850):** In this contemporary period, Muhammad Amin al-Kurdi as-Shafi'i al-Naqshabandi of Iraq (d. 1914) prepared a manual of mystic instructions in Arabic which was widely reprinted. The primary goal of this and other manuals was to serve as guides for the novices on the Sufi path. But these also served the need to legitimize the place of Sufism in the broader spectrum of Islamic religion.³⁶

Earlier Sufis had relied heavily on the personal relationship of *master (sheikh, pir)* with *disciple (murid, talib)* to provide the guidance necessary for spiritual progress. With the increase in the number of disciples and famous sheikhs, written manuals became invaluable companions to personal spiritual direction. The manuals preserved the teachings of many great Sufi guides and made their wisdom available to a large number of disciples. While Sufi manuals never supplanted the master-disciple relationship, they did attain a permanent place of influence and honour among the Muslim mystics.³⁷

A common objective of all Sufi manuals is to analyze in depth the various stages and the states that make up the Sufi path. *Stages* are considered by spiritual writers to be levels of permanent growth in the mystical life; *states* represent the more transient emotional and psychological experiences associated with the various stages.³⁸ The analysis of the stages and states of mystical experience resulted in the creation of a sophisticated technical vocabulary that provided

³⁴ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14, 115.

³⁵ *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 8, 42.

³⁶ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14, 110.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

a basis for discussion among Sufis of every generation. This resulted, as well, in the development of highly refined theories of spiritual psychology.³⁹

In addition to the Sufi manuals, other important forms of mystical literature developed in the classical period. Fables, epigrams, epic poems, poetry, aphorism – all were creative vehicles for mystical expression.⁴⁰

f) **Sufi Brotherhood:** The history of Sufism must take account of Sufi brotherhood or fraternities as a significant social dimension to Islamic mysticism. Many of the early Sufis, though individualists, sought out the counsel of their fellow wayfarers, and recognized companionship as essential for the progress of the spiritual life.⁴¹ The interaction among Sufis soon evolved into the more structured relationship of master and disciple. Some disciples not only visited their masters, but also took up residence with them.

Common to most of the Sufi fraternities were ritual practices called *dhikr* (remembrance) and *samā* (audition). The impetus for the practice of *dhikr* is derived from those Qur'anic verses that enjoin the faithful to remember God often. *Samā* has also been identified with Sufi ritual practice. It involves listening to music, usually with a group. The music is accompanied by Qur'anic chants and/or the singing of mystical experience within the listeners. Those most affected by the *samā* rise up to dance in unison with the music. In the hands of the spiritually adept, *dhikr* and *samā*, can be potent tools in leading one towards heightened levels of religious experience.⁴²

The widespread interest in *dhikr* and *samā* among the Muslim faithful has resulted in increased membership in the Sufi fraternities or orders. These new members are more properly called affiliates. They perhaps take some training from a sheikh, but the principal aim of their contact with the group is attendance at periodic sessions of *dhikr* and *samā*. Otherwise they lead the normal lives of lay men or women.

³⁹ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 112.

⁴¹ Ibid., 116.

⁴² Ibid., 118-19.

Some Sufi orders became associated with different strata of society, geography, region, and guilds. The identification with social groups became so complete that one could be said to be born into a particular fraternity. However, movement from one order to another was still possible.⁴³

In the 19th and 20th centuries, there was a decline of the Sufism of the orders. A number of factors contributed to this decline: the general secularization of world culture, colonialism, and the concomitant criticism of the Islamic religion and society, the response of Islamic modernism, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.⁴⁴ Sufism has become increasingly more identified with popular ritual practice than with formal spiritual training. There continue to arise however, individual masters whose commitment to the path is reminiscent of the great figures of the classical period. Classical Sufi literature survives because it still has the ability to touch the spirit of modern men and women. It is in this continued interaction between *master* (*sheikh*) and *disciple* (*murid*) that hope for the future of Sufism resides.⁴⁵

The Sufi idea of how to achieve perfection will be taken up in the following discussion.

III. THE WAY TO PERFECTION

The Sufi considers himself as a pilgrim or traveller guided on his way by an experienced spiritual man – the *Sheikh* or *Pir u Murshîd* (spiritual director). This path leads him away from the self-indulging carnal self, and from the conscious self-regard which veil the mirror of the soul and shut out the vision of the One True Beloved who ought to fill his consciousness. His goal or destination is defined in various ways: as *gnosis* (*ma'rifat*), *union with God* (*vusûl*, *visâl*, *ittihâd*), or *vision of Him*, in His unveiled eternal beauty and glory, or as utter *consumption in the fire of life*, or simply, as *perfection*.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 121.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 122. See also Andrew Rippen, *Muslims: Their Beliefs and Practices*, vol. 2: *The Contemporary Period* (London: Routledge, 1993), 145; and William C. Chittick, trans., *Faith and Practice in Islam: Three Thirteenth Century Sufi Texts* (Malaysia: S. Abdul Majeed & Co., Publishing Division, 1994).

⁴⁶ Cyprian Rice, *op. cit.*, 31.

The traveller on his way must go through and pass an ordered series of 'stages' to attain the heights of illumination and the summit of union. The *Kitāb ul Luma'* of *Abû Nasr al-Sarrāj*, like the majority of writings on the subject, enumerates seven of these stages: *conversion or repentance; fear of the Lord; renunciation; poverty; endurance; trust in God; and contentment*.⁴⁷

The seven stages (*maqāmāt*) defined by *Abû Nasr al-Sarrāj* require moral and ascetical practices from any sincere seeker of truth and perfection. Although the stages on the way are attained by the personal endeavors of the disciple, the constant need of divine grace is presupposed in each case. They are thus acquired (*kasbi, iktisābi*) and are not characterized, as are the *ahwāl*, by purely supernatural infusion. They are due to *kûshish* (effort) and to *kashish* (supernatural attraction). They are in the line of *mujāhada* (striving) and not of *mushāhada* (contemplation). They represent what the Prophet referred to as the 'major holy war' (*al jihād al akbar*), which are far more important and meritorious than merely fighting the infidel outside.⁴⁸ Their purpose is to dispose the soul to self-denial, self-surrender, and self-transcendence in order to reach the heights of contemplation and attain a vision of the eternal beauty and glory of God.⁴⁹

The Masters of the Sufi way require a rigorous moral and ascetical training for those who aspire for the heights of perfection. The *murīd* (disciple) sets on his way under the guidance of the *Sheikh* or *Pir u Murshid* who is recognized as the one mediator with an otherwise inaccessible divinity. In this regard, the Sufis depart from strict Islamic orthodoxy which does not recognize any mediation between the individual believer and his God. Not even Muhammad or Muhammad least of all claimed any such mediatorial role.⁵⁰

The following discussion of the mystical stages on the way to perfection is based mainly on Persian Sufism. Taken all in all, what goes by the name of "Islamic mysticism" is a Persian product.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 32-33.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 35.

Although the mystical fire enkindled the hearts of non-Persians, Persia itself is the homeland of mysticism in Islam.⁵¹

The Mystical Stages

a) **Repentance or Conversion (*tawba*)**. As a spiritual blessing, this is a gift of grace (*'ata mahz*). But it is attainable by everyone and involves one's co-operation. Realizing that the world is all appearance and sham, the soul turns its back on the vanities of the world, moves away from tempting earthly pleasures, and advances towards perfection in God.⁵²

The penitent strives to overcome his defects and satisfy his great need; left to himself, however, he knows not where to go. So he seeks out a teacher, a *Pir u Murshid*, who will guide him in his quest for perfection. God's grace is there, but only for those who seek it.⁵³

b) **Fear of the Lord (*Wara'*)**. This second stage is called forth by the first. *Wara'* is translated as "fear of the Lord." A similar expression is given by St. Augustine and St. Thomas in their exposition of the gifts of the Holy Ghost. Bishr Hāfi, a well-known ascetical writer, explains it as "avoidance of whatever has the least semblance or suspicion of wrong and a ceaseless watch over the heart." The Sufis contrast the fear of God shown by the *ahl i zāhir*, or externalists, with that felt by the *ahl i dil* or men of enlightenment, or again by the gnostic who enjoys union with God.⁵⁴

c) **Detachment (*Zuhd*)**. Fear of the Lord necessarily leads to *zuhd*, translated as detachment or renouncement of the world in order to be one with God. For the Sufi, attachment to this world is the source of all sins, and quitting it is the source of every good. The detachment is not merely external but a genuine detachment of the heart. The Sufi warns against the danger of hypocrisy, of be-

⁵¹ Ibid., 10. The discussion in this section of the article leans heavily on this work of Cyprian Rice, *The Persian Sufis*.

⁵² Ibid., 39.

⁵³ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 40-41.

coming a worshipper of outward appearances (*zāhid i zāhirparast*). But the *zāhid*, being occupied with God alone, detaches from his detachment, unmindful of the world and all its passing show.⁵⁵

d) **Poverty (*Faqr*).** The stage of poverty (*faqr*) follows logically from those that precede it and may be looked upon as their fuller expression. Voluntary poverty is the Sufi's pride, as it was for Muhammad. The Sufi voluntarily gives up worldly riches and relies on God alone. Genuine inward poverty, however, is not mere absence of riches, but the loss of any desire for them or attachment to them. An empty heart is more important than the empty hand. A man may be a *faqir* at heart even in the midst of affluence and in a position of worldly dignity.⁵⁶

Inward poverty is actually self-renouncement or self-denial, in the sense that the true lover has no thought for himself and considers himself as non-existent: the being of the beloved is all that matters. When the being that would lay claim to ownership of worldly goods is no longer there, poverty is complete. "Where poverty is complete, there is God."⁵⁷

As Sufism became not merely ascetical but more mystical, the purity and fervor of love for God became the guiding motive and poverty was but the sign of the mystic's absorption in his one true beloved. To seek something other than God was a form of godlessness or idolatry.⁵⁸

e) **Patience (*Sabr*).** *Sabr*, translated as patience, steadfastness or perseverance, follows immediately and logically from the stage of poverty. This virtue enables the mystic to bear with his condition of poverty. It is said to be the better part of faith, if not the whole of it. True love of God and faith in His providential ways, make it easy for the the mystic to accept whatever befalls on him as manifestations of God's will. The secret of perfect patience is in this: that the trials and afflictions of life are met, not merely in

⁵⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

God and with God, but actually by means of God Himself. Junayd declared that "the perfection of patience is resignation" (*tawakkul*).⁵⁹

Life may be an "ocean of sorrow" for the mystic; yet he would not exchange his sorrow for all the world's joys, since it makes him painfully aware of his separation from the source of true happiness and peace of his heart. It is an incurable pain, and just like his poverty, this too is his pride.⁶⁰

f) Trust or Self-surrender (Tawakkul). *Tawakkul* is the attitude of one who completely and unreservedly entrusts himself and all his ways and works to God. This attitude springs naturally from the Islamic faith. Islam itself means self-surrender to God and the Muslim is he who has, once and for all, performed this act of submission and surrender. Deeply aware of God's transcendence and man's powerlessness, Muslims rely solely on God to a point where they call into question the efficacy of human effort and the need of *asbāb* (secondary causes).⁶¹

Tawakkul (self-surrender), as a mystical way, is vitally linked with the *ahwāl* which are manifestations of grace. As one approaches the last of the preparatory stages of the way, the mounting current of grace takes charge and carries one all the way towards his goal. The word for grace most commonly used by Muslim theologians is *faid*, which expresses an overflow of beneficence. At this stage, the genuine traveller on the way to truth and perfection aims at losing sight of his own existence and dispossessing himself of his achievements and acquisitions.⁶²

g) Contentment (Ridā). The last of the stages, following logically from *tawakkul* (submission) is *ridā*. This denotes contentment or the state of one who pleases God and is always pleased with Him and His ways. *Ridā* is akin to the Hebrew *ratsa*, or the Latin *beneplacitum* (good pleasure). It is willing acceptance of whatever God sends, confident that "on the path, whatever befalls

⁵⁹ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 47.

⁶² Ibid.

the traveller is a blessing for him.” This condition of the wayfarer is attributed to his being the object of God’s good pleasure. His quiet contentment is the source of his cheerful and optimistic outlook, his freedom from all envy and avarice, his fervor and liberty of heart.⁶³

This stage comes very close to a mystical state or gift of divine grace. One who is in this stage (*maqām*) is conscious of his own activity, whereas in the mystical state (*hāl*), self-consciousness disappears. The school of Iraq holds that *ridā* is a *maqām*. But Hujviri declares that *ridā* begins as a *maqām* and ends as a *hal*; it is in fact the turning point between the stages and the states.⁶⁴

The Mystical States

Maqāmāt are stages which the wayfarer must go through and pass in striving for perfection and disposing himself for the flooding in of mystical graces. As moral and spiritual purifications and rectifications brought about by the disciple’s own efforts, they are “acquired” and not “infused”; the nearest word to this is perhaps *ladunni*. The mystical states – *ahwāl* (pl. of *hāl*) – represent mystical graces, sheer gifts of divine grace and generosity to a soul stripped of all self-seeking and self-regard. What is important here is not so much the earnest striving and pressing forward of the pilgrim himself, but the victorious and irresistible attraction of the divine beloved (*Jānān*) that sweeps the traveller off his feet and carries him along in a state of utter bewilderment (*tahayyur*).⁶⁵

The word *hāl* is not easy to translate. Its derivation implies change, a changing state of soul. The heart (*qalb*) in which these mystic changes take place, is also a changing thing, constantly turned this way and that way by its divine transformer (*muqallib*). Hence, it could easily be referred to as *phase* or *mood*.⁶⁶

Jurjāni uses the word *maqām*, not as a transient stage but as a permanent mystical state. Sufi teachers vary in opinion as to

⁶³ Ibid., 52-53.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

whether a *hāl* could ever be permanent. According to Junayd of Baghdad, who is followed in general by the School of Iraq, the *ahwāl* are essentially transitory. "The states (*ahwal*) are like flashes of lightning. If they last, that must be attributed to a physical abnormality." In another passage, where Junayd seems to derive the word *hāl* from the root *halla*, to come down, he says: "The states (*ahwāl*) resemble what the word itself implies – they come down into the heart and disappear again."⁶⁷

Abû Nasr al-Sarrāj, in his *Kitāb ul Luma'* distinguishes the following ten mystical phases or grace:

(1) **Watching (*Murāqaba*).** *Murāqaba* is defined as "the servant of God's constant realization of the Lord's awareness of all his states." The Sufi authors refer us to the traditional saying of the prophet: "Worship God as if you saw Him. If you do not see Him, He at any rate, sees you."⁶⁸

There are three categories of the *ahl i murāqaba* – those who find themselves in this state: (a) those who instinctively ward off all evil thoughts because of their constant awareness of God's presence; (b) those who have become oblivious of all created things because of intense awareness of God; (c) those who have abandoned themselves and their state to God as their trustee and protector; these, then, forgoing the veil of selfhood, are alone with God alone.⁶⁹

It is the human heart that mirrors the "forms of the Unseen"; so, anyone who aspires for divine knowledge and seeks to be constantly aware of God must never cease polishing his heart.⁷⁰

(2) **Realization of the Nearness of God (*Qurb*).** *Qurb*, the sense of God's nearness, is induced by the practice of *murāqaba* or concentration. This state consists in beholding one's nearness to God and seeking to draw nearer to Him by means of good deeds and constant remembrance (*sihr*). The "people of nearness" (*ahl i qurb*) are grouped into three: (a) men whose nearness to God is prompted

⁶⁷ Ibid., 58

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 58.

by their knowledge that He is all-knowing, close to them and dominates them; (2) men who, whatever they see, see God nearer to it than they themselves; (3) men who go the whole way – they are completely lost (*fāni*) in Him and are no longer conscious of their own state of nearness. (It is this third group that is touched by the mystical attraction).⁷¹

This nearness to God is not one of time and place. "To be nigh unto God is not to go up or down. To be nigh unto God is to escape from this prison of existence... Every place where the Beloved Himself is their companion is above the sky, not below the earth."⁷²

(3) **Love (*Mahabba*)**. Love is consummated in vision or union. As the final goal of the wayfarer, it is also the propelling and sustaining power of his journey in life. All the other stages are preludes or consequences and effects of love.⁷³

For the Sufi, God is the one beloved, the *Jánán*, the supremely beautiful and desirable object of his passionate love, as he strives with unutterable longing to reach Him and lose himself in Him. In reality, it is God who irresistibly draws the soul towards Himself, whether by His own incomparable love or by His scarcely concealed beauty (*Jamál*).⁷⁴

Traces of God, His beauty and love, are to be found in every created being, especially in the human soul, in its loving nature and its attraction to beautiful things. While the wayfarer gets a glimpse of the divine in human beauty and love, he can never stay there; he must always pass beyond to the one who transcends time, place and measurement.⁷⁵

The mystical state of love is the supreme passion arising from the supreme intuition. It is not the result of metaphysical reasoning. It is rightly put among the mystical, infused states. It is acquired at will; but its birth and growth are also the work of divine grace.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 59.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 60.

Bāyazid Bistāmi once said: "I thought I loved Him, but on second thought, I saw that His love preceded mine." This mysterious love is the source and motive of all renuncements, above all the renouncement of self. Again Bāyazid Bistāmi sings: "His love came into my heart and drove out all else, so that it remained single, as He is single."⁷⁶

(4) **Fear of the Lord (*Wara'*)**. Fear, whether filial or reverential, plays a minor role in the spiritual doctrine of the Sufis. It enters far more into the lives and outlook of the early school of Semitic pietists who were more in agreement with the dominant trend of the Qur'an and the Muslim way of life with regard to the role of fear. For the Sufi, fear is a moderator of hope. The consummate mystic is independent of hope and fear alike. He is illumined with regard to his way, its stages and its end or goal.⁷⁷

(5) **Hope in God (*Rijā Fillāh*)**. For the Sufi, worship of God in the hope of His grace and bounty is better than worship of Him in fear of punishment. But hope, as it is in the heart of the adept, is based neither on his own merits nor even on the conviction of the infinite broadness of God's mercy. It is concerned with God Himself and Him alone – hope in God – *rijā fillāh*. In hope, the Sufi asks for nothing but God Himself, cares nothing for paradise, the fard (yih z) hid – the devotee's tomorrow.⁷⁸

(6-8) **Longing (*Shaug*), loving familiarity with God (*Uns*), and trust or confidence in God (*Itminan*)**. These are the 6th, 7th, and 8th of the mystical states enumerated by Sarraj. They are all fruits of loving resignation and are implied in the treatment of the latter.⁷⁹

(9) **Contemplation (*Mushāhada*)**. The ten mystical states are not necessarily arranged in progressive order of importance or sequence in time. But the states of *mushāhada* (contemplation) and

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 61.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 62.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

yaqin (certainty) appropriately form the culmination of the series. For the Sufi teaching is a practical training in the methods and requirements of perfection. But this perfection, the goal of all spiritual wayfarers, is essentially a matter of knowledge. It is not the knowledge acquired by reading books and studying exercise books, by disputation and reasoning, it is direct knowledge of God Himself bestowed on hearts rightly disposed and duly prepared by an act of sheer grace and bounty.⁸⁰

(10) **Certainty (*Yaqin*)**. In the enumeration found in the *Kitāb ul Luma'* of Sarrāj, the state of contemplation is followed by that of *yaqin* or certainty, the state of one who has become firmly rooted in divine contemplation and the process of *fanā*. It may be said to be the goal of all the states or *ahwāl*. In this state, all doubt has vanished and joy takes its place. *Yaqin* is not only the culmination, but "the pith and marrow of all the mystical states." It is defined by Jurjani as "clear vision through the power of faith, not by proof, or demonstration." Even within this state, one can advance from *'ain al yaqin* (the essence of certainty) in *haqq al yaqin* (the reality of certainty).⁸¹

The aforementioned stages on the way to the mystical goal are a means to an end, a training or preparation. The end is certainty in the contemplation of God, the vision of the unveiled divine beauty. All Sufi theologians agree on this – that the purpose of man's creation is for him to know God. Man is the eye with which God surveys Himself. Or he is the mirror which God holds up to Himself. Man is the culmination of the movement out of God into the darkness of multiplicity. But he is also the beginning of the arc of return. He is the *matla' ul fajr*, the dawn of day, a day whose high noon-tide is to be unclouded glory.⁸²

The final discussion in this section touches on three experiences related to the mystical stages and states: homesickness, loss of self, and vision of God.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 65.

⁸² Ibid., 64.

Homesickness

The pilgrim on his way is heart-sick and suffers from homesickness (*firāq*) – he stumbles along, battered by the trials and afflictions of life, and painfully suffering from the intense awareness of his separation from his beloved. But he is urged on by his ceaseless longing, drawn along by the irresistible attraction of the eternal beauty. He is confident that the sight of God is the one thing that can satisfy the infinite yearnings of his finite heart. But where is he to look for Him?⁸³

The pilgrim on the way must lay aside veil after veil of his carnal thoughts and cravings, put aside all desires of this world and the next, and come to rest in the pure, unadulterated ground of his being, the heart or the secret (*sirr* or *khafī*). God made man '*ala suratihi*', in his image. And it is here in his heart that the divine image or the divine Himself – is to be found. His gift of reason (*'aql*) or understanding can extend its reach only to the sphere of created things; it cannot rise to the knowledge of God Himself.⁸⁴

The very root and spiritual core of man's nature lies in his heart (*dil* or *qalb*) and soul (*jān*, *rāh*, or sometimes, *nafs-i-nātiqah*).⁸⁵ "Heart" and "soul" together with expressions like *sirr* and *khafī*, signify the same reality; but heart (*dil* or *qalb*) is often used in matters related to mystical knowledge, and *sirr* and *khafī* (secret) are used to reinforce the sense of an organ exclusively ordered to divine contemplation. The heart is capable of knowing the divine essence itself and, therefore, the true inwardness of things.⁸⁶

Enlightened by faith, the heart becomes the mirror in which all divine knowledge is manifested. Speaking on behalf of God, Muhammad said: "My earth and my heaven cannot contain me but the heart of my believing servant contains me." But the heart rarely attains the purity and clarity needed for mirroring the divine. It is

⁸³ Ibid., 69.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 69-70.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 70.

often veiled and obscured by negligence and inattention; and material and sensual images soil and darken it.⁸⁷

Though capable of divine knowledge, the heart is still a human organ. It is the disputed ground between the opposing forces of God and wisdom on the one hand, and the devil and evil passions on the other. As a human organ, it is also the living link between the spirit (*rûh*) and the animal soul (*nafs*); it receives the effusions of the spirit and, in its turn, exerts an influence on the sphere of the senses and feelings.⁸⁸

The Arabic term for heart – *qalb*, is referred to the root *qalaba*, meaning to turn or turn over. This word well describes the heart, since it is constantly rotating or turning from divine manifestations to created phenomena and vice versa.⁸⁹

To keep the mirror of the heart in a high state of polish is the constant preoccupation of the spiritual man. But, in the last resort, its perfect polish and freedom from rust and dust are a gift of grace.⁹⁰

The function of the heart (*dil*) is to mirror or reflect God and, in Him and through Him, the whole of creation. The steel mirror does not understand or love the object reflected on it; but the heart of man is alive, aware, conscious, and Godlike. If you desire to see God, look into the mirror of your heart, and look in such a way as to forget the mirror through absorption in the object it reflects. In other words, the contemplation of God is not reflection on an idea of the human mind. It is a gift of grace, granted to a heart that turns itself inwards to seek Him and awaits His revelation.⁹¹

The inner experience that bears witness to this divine work in the soul is known under such names as *hāl*, *shirb*, *jazba*, *fanā* – all of these express the sense of delightful yielding to, or passing away into the influx of divinity, a happy forgetfulness of self, a willing

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 74.

self-surrender to the adorable Invader. Yielding to this divine attraction, the mystic is lost (*fāni*) in God, and disappears in Him.⁹²

Lost in God

The term *fanā* expresses a fundamental notion in Persian Sufi mysticism. It may owe its origin to Indian sources, but the Persians themselves are responsible for the subtle enlightening interpretations of *fanā* which abound in their spiritual writings.⁹³

The Arabic word *fanā* (as a verb) means to disappear, vanish, perish, or pass away. The Sufi notion of *fanā*, therefore, suggests that the transient, evanescent side of man must "pass away," in order that something or someone lasting may reign supreme in him.⁹⁴

All Sufis agree that in order to reach God, one must get rid of one's self. The old mystic Abū Saïd said: "Wherever some thought of yourself is, there is hell. Wherever you are not, there is heaven." And he added on another occasion: "The veil between the servant and his Lord is neither heaven nor earth, neither throne nor threshold. The real veil is your egotism, your thinking of yourself. Get rid of that and you reach God."⁹⁵

But to get rid of one's self does not merely involve the suppression, bypassing or transcending of human notions, fancies, desires, or idiosyncracies. It is one's own self that has to be forgotten, renounced, and outpassed. And this can be brought about only by God Himself, by the infusion of His grace that submerges all conscious traces of the individual self. This does not entail the destruction of the human personality. For the human personality must survive to sustain the never ending act of self-transcendence and devotion to the divine. The life of the self is to live in and for another, in a sort of perpetual ecstasy or inebriation, which is supreme liberation and exultation.⁹⁶

⁹² Ibid., 75.

⁹³ Ibid., 76.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 81.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 77.

When consciousness of self returns, a state of soberness (*sahw*) follows the stage of inebriation (*sukr*). The state of bewilderment (*tahayyur*) and the sense of estrangement from the world of limits and multiplicity increase. In the consummate experience of *fanā*, *fanā* itself is no longer adverted to, but the state of *fanā ut fanā*, the disappearance of disappearance. The soul, going all out to God, no longer returns to itself.⁹⁷

Under the influence of grace from God, mystics experience an increasing or total suspension of the multiple and discursive activities of the mind. Those who have received a high mystical grace are reduced to silence. Muhammad ibn Wāsi' said: "As for him who learns to know God, his speech grows rare and his bewilderment grows greater."⁹⁸

In this mystical state of affairs, however, the disciple does not remain utterly inactive. He continues to do his part by detaching himself from created things. The more his heart and mind are purged of everything, the more strongly does man feel the pull or attraction of the divine beloved, the *Jānān*. It is this divine attraction, therefore, and not any human effort as such, that inevitably leads to spiritual deliverance, beatitude and salvation.⁹⁹

Vision of God

For Christians, beatific vision of God is a reward reserved for the next life. The Sufis disagree with this. For them, the word *mushāhada* itself contains the notion of direct vision, *shuhud*. The soul, by its spiritual nature, is invited by God to behold Him and He will grant this favor to all who serve Him sincerely and wholeheartedly.¹⁰⁰

What is necessary for divine revelation is not physical death but a *mystical death*, a *death to self*. The self is a veil that obscures the sight of God. It must disappear if God is to appear. God is all that really exists; the rest are mere appearances on the unchanging

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 79.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 83.

background of his Being. But, God is free to reveal or conceal Himself. If He reveals Himself to His servant, that will be a free gift of His grace. It follows, then, that the preliminary disposition of *fanā* (disappearance of self) is also an effect of grace; it cannot be achieved solely by man's own efforts. But it could never be achieved if not for man's spiritual nature. (This is attested to by the Qur'anic *nafakhnā fihī min rūhinā* (we breathed into him of our Spirit). The spirit in man sets no limit to the scope of his knowledge and spiritual experience.¹⁰¹

The vision of God is a kind of sight peculiar to prophets, saints and mystics. It is granted only as a reward for an obedience and devotion involving the whole being of man – his body, mind, heart and spirit. It is God's gift to a heart in love with Him and constantly seeking Him.¹⁰²

Men may be categorized on the basis of the use they make of their faculties. There are many who choose a life dominated by the use of the reasoning and discursive faculties. Their field of action is confined to the things of sense, and they achieve successes in this realm. They find no time at all for the pursuit of something spiritual and more enduring.¹⁰³

But there are those who subordinate temporal things to the search for spiritual and eternal things. These are the *ahl i dil* (men of heart), God's sincere and trusted friends. They are the recipients of the gifts of the spirit, including mystical knowledge, resignation and unbounded trust in God. Men of this kind do not worship God blindly. Their love of God urges them to ceaselessly seek an increasingly intimate knowledge of Him.¹⁰⁴ The intimate knowledge of God is not arrived at by any process of discursive thought or by the elucidation of rational proofs. God's beauty is disclosed to hearts that love Him by the diffusion in them of His own essential light.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 83.

¹⁰² Ibid., 84.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 85.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

There is no blessing comparable to a vision of God in the heart. Sari Saqati underscores this in the following passage:

"O my God, send me any torment or affliction you will, except that of being deprived of the contemplation of Thy face, for when I behold Thy beauty I am able to bear any suffering, whereas, when I am deprived of it, even Thy kindnesses and mercies are hard for me to bear. The most painful torment of hell is to be shut out from the sight of Thee. In Paradise no bliss is to be compared with the revelation of Thy Face. To be veiled from Thee is no better than ruin and damnation."¹⁰⁶

Thus for the *Sufi*, the pilgrimage in life towards truth and perfection culminates in a *vision of God*. The mystical stages and states on the way are but a training and preparation for the attainment of this end. Any pain or suffering in life, anything at all that comes in the way to our destination, is overcome by the *faith and certainty that the sight of God will bring us eternal bliss*. More than our mind, it is our *heart* that will carry us on the way to the One True Beloved to whom we must surrender and lose our self. It is *our heart's purity and devotion* that will always keep it open to the outpourings of God's grace and His revelation. The *vision of God* is a *gift of grace* to a heart in love with God and ceaselessly searching for an intimate knowledge of His Being.

Conclusion

The foregoing presentation attempted to introduce certain themes essential to the understanding of Islam or Sufi mysticism. The derivation of the term "Sufi" and the phases of the development of Sufism were considered before dealing at length with the mystical stages and states which the Sufi goes through on his way to truth and perfection.

The essential aspects of Sufi mysticism taken up in this article may be given an in-depth treatment in later studies for a more profound understanding of Sufism. Such an understanding is indispensable as a basis for a dialogue between Sufism and other mystical

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 86.

movements from the East or West. This dialogue is important to us who are living in the midst of "global religious pluriformity."¹⁰⁷ And it is our hope that future inter-religious or inter-faith studies "would make possible a welding of religious thought between East and West, a vital, ecumenical combining and understanding, which will prove ultimately to be, in the truest sense, on both sides, a return to origins, to the original unity."¹⁰⁸

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¹⁰⁷ See Ernest D. Piryns, "We Worship Many Gods: Christian Witness in the Midst of Global Religious Pluriformity," *Philippiniana Sacra*, 32 (January-April 1997): 17-26.

¹⁰⁸ Rice, *op. cit.*, 10.