

TASAWWUF:
Its meaning and significance
(with special reference to the Chistiyyah Order).

Shaykh Siraj Hendricks

Tasawwuf has been variously defined by various scholars. In his book "awaarif al Ma'aarif" (the Fragrances of Inner Knowledge), Suhrawardi mentions that more than a thousand definitions exist for Tasawwuf. However, a cursory study of some of these definitions will reveal that they differ mostly in their wording and their emphases. For the purposes of this essay I will provide three definitions.

Shaykh Abu Bakr ash-Shibli has defined Tasawwuf as follows:

"Its beginning is the knowledge (Ma'rifa) of Allah and its end is His unification (Tauheed)."

Junayd al-Baghdadi defines it as "... being dead to one's self and alive in Allah".

And Shaykh ul-Islam Zakariyya Ansari has said:

"Sufism teaches one to purify one's self, 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."

These three definitions - the first pertaining to the intellect ('aql), the second to a state of being (hal), and the third to ethics (akhlaq) - cover the major concerns of the Sufi quest.

The first definition therefore, sets out the ultimate nature of things viz. That everything subsists through and by the Will of Allah. The second emphasises the importance of renouncing the ego or lower self. Arrogance, conceit, and self-centredness are considered amongst the greatest veils between man and Allah.

It is this state of being or condition (hal) which Rabia al-Adawiyya gave expression to when she said: "If I seek repentance of myself then I shall have need of repentance again". Rabia counted the mere acknowledgement of the individual ego amongst the greatest of sins. The third definition has in mind the development of the human personality along the best of moral values. This process is made possible through the twin processes of purification (Tazkiyyah) and adornment (Tahliyya). That is, purifying the self from all blameworthy qualities, and adorning it with all praiseworthy qualities.

Origin of the term "Sufi"

Lexicographers have identified a number of source words from which the term *Sufi* is derived. The most widely accepted word from which Sufi is derived is "*suf*" meaning wool. The earlier ascetics often donned woollen garments to express their inner detachment from the world and their rejection of the excessive materialism of the earlier Islamic dynasties, particularly the Umayyad dynasty.

Other terms that suggest themselves as source words are the following:

Safa, meaning purification.

Safwe, which means those who are selected.

Suffa, meaning a bench or low veranda. During the time of the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) a number of Companions disengaged themselves from normal worldly activities and devoted themselves to an ascetic way of life. They came to be known as the Ashaab us-Suffa or "Companions of the Bench". They spent the greater part of their lives in acts of devotion on a low veranda in the vicinity of the Prophet's (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) mosque.

Saff, meaning rank, line, or row. The first row in congregational prayers in Islam has been accorded a special status for it symbolises those who are in the first rank of spirituality.

From the etymological point of view the only term that qualifies as a source word is "*Sufi*". Nevertheless the other terms are normally included in discussions on the origin of the term "Sufi" for the simple reason that all of them convey one or another of the manifold dimensions of the *Sufi Way*.

The Sources of Tasawwuf

Earlier orientalist studies have been at pains to show the non-Islamic origins of Tasawwuf. Islam, according to these studies, have emerged from the dry wastelands of Arabia, could never contain within itself the seeds of such a profoundly inspiring wisdom. The beautific vision of the Sufis simply could not have its roots in the desert. This was one of the prejudices which blinded many western orientalists to the vision and insights contained within the Qur'an itself and within the Prophetic Traditions. The Qur'anic origins, however, have been conclusively proven.

Amongst the many Qur'anic verses which the Sufis turn to in support of their position are those contained in Surah Waqiah. In these verses Allah classifies people into three categories:

The people of the left-hand (Ashaab al-Mash-amah).

The people of the right-hand (Ashaab al-Maymanah).

Those who are near to Allah (Muqarraboon); alternatively referred to as the "Foremost".

The first group are those who have rejected faith. The second group are the righteous ones who are consistent in the fulfilment of their duties towards Allah. They are described as "a multitude of those of old and a multitude of those of later times (Waaqiah :39-40). And finally their are the Muqarraboon. They are a special group of believers who have attained the highest rank in spiritual development. They are often described as the elect of the elect (Khawaas ul-Khaswaas) whose intensity of faith (iman) has bestowed upon them the special privilege of enjoying nearness to Allah.

They are described in this Surah as being "a multitude of those of old and a few of later times" (Waaqiah : 13-14). It is the attainment of this high level of faith and spiritual development that describes the aspirations of the Sufi.

This idea of nearness to Allah is similarly expressed in a Sacred Tradition;

"My servant continually seeks to draw near to Me through supererogatory acts until I love him. And when I love him I become the ears with which he hears, the eyes with which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the feet with which he walks" (Bukhari).

When the ideas of the nearness of Allah and His love are combined with the aspect of His beauty as expressed by the Prophetic Tradition:

"Indeed Allah is beautiful and loves beauty" (Muslim), then prayers of the previously quoted Sufi Saint, Rabia al-Adawiyyah can more readily be comprehended,

"O Allah if I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship you in hope of Paradise exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship You for Your own sake, grudge me not Your everlasting beauty".

It is within the context of this spiritual longing that we come to appreciate the intensity of the devotional acts in which the Sufi engages.

Later development in Tasawwuf

During the formative period of Tasawwuf the Sufis were not strictly identifiable in terms of specific orders. Students would gather around a Shaykh - known for the depth of both his knowledge and his piety - where they would often devote themselves to years of learning.

Amongst the outstanding Sufi masters of this period were Hasan al-Basri (d.728), Ibrahim ibn Adham (d.777), Rabia al-Adawiyyah (d.801), Fudayl ibn 'Iyaad (d.803), Ma'ruf al-Karkhi (d.815), Abu 'Abdullah al-Muhaasibi (d.857), Sar as-Saqati (d.867), Abu Yazid al-Bistaami (d.874), and Abul Qasim al-Junayd al-Baghdadi (d.910).

The shaykh - murid relationship entailed three important features. The first is the Ilbaas ul-Khirka. This entailed the donning of a patched frock that indicated the aspirant's initiation into Tasawwuf. The second is known as the Talqin udh-Dhirk which was the shaykh's instruction to the murid with regard to the type and nature of the dhikr (invocation) to be practiced. The third is the subha which referred to the nature and quality of the murid's companionship with the shaykh. These features formed an integral part of the Sufi Way right from the outset. In fact most of these practises are traceable to the Sunnah of the Prophet (may the peace and blessings be upon him). The teachings of the Sufi masters, along with the different dhikr forms, were handed down from shaykh to murid in a continuous chain of transmission called a silsila. It is through these silsilas - accompanied by the ijaaza system - that the teachings of the Sufi masters were protected as part of our spiritual heritage. The Ijaaza simply refers to the right, or licence, granted to the student by the shaykh with a view to furthering the shaykh's teachings.

It was, however, only during the 12th and 13th centuries that the Tariqah orders were formalised and officially adopted particular names by which they came to be identified. This does not mean though, that certain groups were not identified previously with certain great masters. On the contrary, Hujwiri (d.1077) in his classic work the *Kash al Maljub* already refers to the followers of some of the great masters by the names of these masters. The followers of Abdullaah al-Muhaasibi, for example, he calls the Muhaasibis, those of al-Junayd the Junaydis and so forth.

Nevertheless, the institutionalisation of the Orders really only started with the followers of Sayyid 'Abdul Qadir al-Jilani (d.1166). Later on a number of other Orders developed along similar lines such as the Suhrawardiyyah, the Shadhiliyyah, the Naqshbandiyyah, etc.

Despite this proliferation of Sufi Orders, the Sufi path has been identified by most scholars as a threefold process:

The Shari'ah - that is to acquaint oneself with and to meticulously follow the legal rulings of the Shari'ah.

The Tariqah - to engage in various spiritual exercises (such as dhikr) recommended by the Prophet (may the peace and blessing be upon him) and the established adepts of Tasawwuf.

The Haqiqah, that is the attainment of a spiritual consciousness or inner enlightenment that witnesses that all things ultimately come from and belong to Allah.

Shari'ah and Tasawwuf

During the first few centuries of Islam the Islamic world spawned a bewildering number of theological, philosophical, and legal schools of thought. All these tendencies seemed to be straining in mutually exclusive directions, to the point where the initial fabric of tolerance which had existed amongst Muslims was in danger of being torn apart. The increasing tensions, too, between the Jurists and the Sufis further exacerbated the situation. It was left to the celebrated scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazaali (1058-1111) to restore a more balanced perspective to the situation. Amongst the great contributions left behind by Imam al-Ghazaali was his ability, and his success, in harmonising between the legal (or exoteric) and the sufic (or esoteric) strands of Islam. A rejection of either would have left Islam as nothing more than a caricature of itself.

The Chistiyyah Order

The contribution of the Sufi Orders to Islamic culture and civilisation - particularly in the fields of architecture, the arts, and literature - has been immense. The Chistiyyah is one such order.

This order attained its fame under the leadership of the influential Indian Sufi Muhammad Mu'in al-Din Chisti (1142-1236). The order traces its roots to Hasan al-Basri. It is often alleged that Khwaja Mu'in at-Din Chisti is the founder of the order. This is a mistaken notion. The order was originally founded in Afghanistan in a town called Chisti.

The teachings of Mu'in at-Din Chisti were further expounded and elaborated upon by his famous student Shaykh Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki (1236). Shaykh Qutbuddin was succeeded by an equally famous master Shaykh Farid al-Din Ganj-i Shakar (d.1265). It was left to Shaykh Farid's student, Khawaja Nizam al-din Awliyya (d.1325) to consolidate the Chistiyyah order in India, particularly in the North. In addition to being a great mystic, he also excelled as a theologian. Many acknowledged him as the spiritual leader of his age.

It is to this great tradition that Shah Ghulam Muhammad (Sufi Sahib r.a) belongs. Born in 1850 in Bombay, India he rapidly developed into one of the outstanding scholars of his time. Recognising his qualities, his teacher Habib 'Ali Shah (r.a) of the Chisti order instructed him to travel to South Africa. Under his inspiring leadership thirteen different Islamic institutions were founded in South Africa, the majority of these being in the Natal area.

Almost 200 years after his great counterpart Shaykh Yusuf of Macassar (r.a) came to the Cape, Sufi Sahib arrived with the same spiritual message; renewing and reaffirming the Tasawwuf origins of Islam in South Africa. Tasawwuf itself, however, had undergone a degree of decay at the hands of certain orders. In response to this a number of revivalist movements such as the Darqawiyah, the Tijaaniyyah, and the Sanusiyyah, arose in the late 18th and early 19th centuries to redress the decadence. Sufi Sahib too, had witnessed this decay and set himself the task of addressing the ignorance and deviance he met in the Natal region.

Another master of the Chistiyyah line was Iman Abd al-Latif Qazi (r.a). He too hailed from the Indian sub-continent. After spending some time in Natal engaged in and devoted his mission of spreading Islam, he came to Cape Town under the instructions of Sufi Sahib. In Athlone he established the Habbibiyah Mosque and Madrassah complex on land previously acquired by Sufi Sahib.

Conclusion

Tasawwuf is no other than the inner, spiritual dimension of Islam. The Tariqah - as method - is the attempt to both preserve and penetrate that dimension. The Shari'ah is the divinely ordained mould within which that spirituality takes on its distinctive "shape". These three aspects of Islam are inseparable parts of an organic whole.

Imam Malik (RA) put it well when he said:

"He who learns jurisprudence and neglects Tasawwuf becomes a reprobate; and he who learns Tasawwuf and neglects jurisprudence becomes an apostate. But he who combines both will reach the Truth".

As for the many paths which have developed over the centuries the classical Sufi saying sums it up:

"Tawhid is one, but the paths to Allah equal the number of people since the time of Adam".

These "different ways have always been viewed as a mercy by the Ummah.