

## Classical Sufism

*Tasawuf*, or "Sufism" in English, is the word that has traditionally been used for the spirituality, asceticism, and mysticism of Islam. Although this aspect of the religion may or may not have had a specific name during the first century of Islam, the essence of *tasawuf* can be traced back to the example of the prophet Muhammad, and at least within one century after his death it acquired the name. Its mainstream form that was accepted by scholars throughout the medieval period, referred to as "classical" *tasawuf*, was essentially nothing other than practicing the religion of Islam with excellence. The name was popularized through a movement of ascetics in the eighth century known as "sufis" who, against the spiritual decline that was already setting in at that time, sought to return to a more intense spiritual practice in emulation of prophetic example.

The entire Islamic world, including orthodox scholars, accepted *tasawuuf* as the normative spiritual dimension of the religion at since the 11<sup>th</sup> century. However, through the influence of Wahabbism from the 18th century, Salafism from the 19th century, and Fundamentalism from the late 20th century, *tasawuf* came to be rejected by much of the Islamic world as an innovation. These puritanical movements sought to return to the practice of the Muslim community in the first centuries but they refused to acknowledge the fact that *tasawuf* was popular since the second century after the time of Muhammad. Also they ignorantly assumed that *tasawuf* necessarily consists in the extreme ends of spiritual practice and unorthodox theology that has sometimes been associated with this name throughout its history. As is quite well-known in the West, there were indeed a handful of sufis that had bizarre practices such as whirling, and some were even condemned for unorthodoxy. But the norm for *tasawuf* was orthodoxy and the performance of established practices with the highest degree of piety.

*Tasawuf* is best understood as spiritual "maximalism" that calls one to perfection in the practice of religion. The five most foundational elements of early Sufism are: interiorization of absolute monotheism, perfection of character through self-purification, asceticism (spiritual training through self-denial), perpetual awareness of the divine presence, and the acquisition of deep interior understanding. These elements, all of which are rooted in the tradition of the prophet, came to full theoretical development in the science of classical *tasawuf* by the 11th century.

The confession of faith in absolute monotheism (*tawhid*), "I believe in no god but God" (*la illaha ilallah*), was believed to have the inherent implication that this God is the ground of all existence, the source and sustainer of life, and is the ultimate end for every creature. The existential interiorization of this reality is the foundation of *tasawuf*. It produces the longing for closeness to God to such an extent that "all else is counted as nothing in comparison," to cite a central sufi maxim. Furthermore, the confession *la illah ila allah* was believed to reach its esoteric fulfillment in one who has come to the realization that the divine reality is at the core of one's own being. One of the favorite Hadiths of the sufis was: "God is to be found nowhere save in the heart of the believer." The sufis gave this a metaphysical cast and, following their lead, classical *tasawuf* ended up with a mystical/philosophical notion of *la illah ila allah* as the confession that God is alone is the absolute being and that everything else only has relative existence that is nothing in comparison to God. While some sufis ventured into speculations on monism and emanationism, most remained practical in orientation. The impact of their understanding of *tawhid* was that one must have single-minded devotion directed to God alone, and that to put anything else in its place is idolatrous.

Classical *tasawuf* manuals are in fact most concerned with the quality of character, despite the fact that it has a mystical reputation. A sufi is defined as "one who is of outstanding character," that is, replete with all of the virtues. This comes through self-purification in accordance with the Quran's prescription to "purify yourselves" from moral defilements. *Tasawuf* was regarded as "the science of self-purification" that enables one to annihilate (*fana*) their unspiritual nature by

bringing it into perfect accordance with the will of God in every thought, word, and deed. It is the inner dimension of the outward actions that are performed by all Muslims. Thus classical *tasawuf* was regarded as the essence of authentic religious practice that was commanded by the prophets.

The tradition of *tasawuf* also recommends excelling in the performance of supererogatory ascetical deeds to the point that they become habitual. It is from such deeds that the sufis became popular. They practiced poverty, spent periods of time in seclusion, and fasted far beyond what was required. Scholars often regard this asceticism as the sole focus of the early sufi movement and treat it as a novel emphasis that did not exist before the ninth century. But these elements go back to the tradition (*sunnah*) of Muhammad and thus are supposed to be emulated by devout practitioners. It is reported that Muhammad had such little personal wealth that he only had six coins to his name at the time of his death. Also, he practiced seclusion during long periods of intensely ascetical spiritual retreat throughout his life with almost no possessions in his cell but only a thin mat and barely enough food to survive on. Muhammad even fasted for two days out of every week. These practices were emulated by the earliest sufis and they were sometimes taken to new levels. Some of them sought to wear the poorest material of clothing, secluded themselves for longer periods than the prophet did, and were notorious for continuously fasting. These elements became standardized as ideal, especially during special periods set aside for intense practice. The stories about more extreme practices, however, were not part of the classical *tasawuf* as accepted by scholars.

The most essential *tasawuf* practice is the perpetual remembrance, mindfulness, and awareness (*dikr*) of the divine presence. This is commanded in the Quran. But the sufis practiced it through the *continual recitation* of the name "Allah," the confession of faith, and other phrases as a mechanism to remain focused on the divine presence in each moment. The sufi attempted to literally "live at all times as if one see God before oneself," which is another central maxim. Their practice of *dikr* included formal meditation in which one sits in intense focus on the prayer phrase

with the goal that the name of Allah will be etched in the heart of the practitioner. Sufi associations prescribed different methods of practice that became increasingly specific, and even "scientific," over time.

The orthodox "mysticism" of Islam consists in acquiring the direct knowledge of the divine reality, not in the sense of intellectual ascent to propositions, but experiential *gnosis*. This is found throughout the Quran in the form of intuitive knowing that comes through personal divine guidance, and sufis simply placed emphasis on it. Al-Ghazzali, who provided the theoretical framework for the "science of spirituality," made explicit the concept that this higher knowledge is not arrived at by either faith or reason, but only through direct experience or "tasting" that is possible through the purification of the self/soul. The oft-repeated analogy in *tasawuf* is that one must clean the mirror of the heart so that it can reflect the light of God. The spiritual masters developed classifications of the degrees of knowledge that correspond to stations along the path. Most sufis regarded esoteric knowledge, which was simply a deep awakening to the reality that was pointed to in the Quran, as the goal of their spiritual endeavors. They believed that they were even "united" to God in their knowledge of him. Thus classical *tasawuf* was predominantly a mysticism of knowledge. There was also a strain of love mysticism in which one yearns for God like a lover would for his lost companion. It is this form of Sufism that has almost exclusively been popularized in the West. But the more extravagant forms of mysticism, while certainly present throughout the Islamic world, were not accepted by the scholars and thus were never part of classical *tasawuf*.

Contrary to what is believed in the West and in the Salafi-influenced areas of the Islamic world, *tasawuf* was not something distinct from the mainstream Islamic tradition. In fact the word "Sufism" itself is an invention of modern times. Even the most extreme sufis were devout Muslims. Both self-proclaimed non-Muslim "sufis" in the West and a great portion of Muslims even in America would be surprised to discover that classical *tasawuf*, infamously known as "Sufism," was the universally accepted spiritual tradition of Islam for the greater portion of the religion's history.

