

# What is Sūfism?

## 1.0 Where does the term originate from?

The exact origins of the word *Sūfī* and why the discipline is so-called have been discussed in detail by the Muslim scholars for centuries. Here we will explore just some of these opinions and evaluate the validity of each.

### 1.1. Sūfism comes from *Safā* (صفاء), which means ‘purity’.

In a Hadīth recorded by al-Dār al-Qutnī, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was reported to have said:

‘The earth’s purity (*Safā*) has gone and only impurity remains. Death, today, is a blessing for every Muslim.’<sup>1</sup>

Some scholars, such as Bishr al-Hārith, believe that the origins of the term *Sūfī* can be ascribed to this Hadīth. On this basis, the word *Sūfī* has derived from ‘*Safā*’ which means cleanliness. The aim of the *Sūfī* is to attain cleanliness, of mind, spirit and body.

The drawback to this interpretation is that linguistically, صفاء does not stem from the same word from which we take the term صوفي.

### 1.2. Sūfism comes from *Sūf* (صوف), which means ‘wool’.

The majority of scholars<sup>2</sup> believe the word derives from the Arabic word ‘*Sūf*’ which means wool. The *Sūfīs* were known for their simplicity and wore simple clothing. This opinion is makes sense from a linguistic point of view too; the word *Sūfī* derives from ف-و-ص and so does the word for wool in Arabic.

There are countless Ahādīth that indicate the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) and his Companions would wear wool. For instance:

•Abū Mūsā (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) would wear wool, ride donkeys and respond to the invitation of the weak.

•Al-Hasan al-Basrī once remarked: ‘I met seventy Badarīs<sup>3</sup>, their clothing was nothing but wool.’

In other words, wearing wool is a sign of humility and simplicity.

### 1.3. Sūfism takes its name from the *As’hāb al-Suffa*.

A third explanation is that the term derives from the word ‘*Suffa*’, or the bench. This relates to the bench that existed in the Prophet’s mosque. This area was occupied by the simple, poor and ascetic followers of the Prophet, like Abū Huraira (may Allāh be pleased with him). From a lingual perspective, this opinion does not make sense because the root word for Sūfism is ف-و-ص whereas the root word for bench is

<sup>1</sup> *Sufi Book of Spiritual Ascent (al-Risala al-Qushairiyya)* Abu al-Qasim al-Qushairi. Translated by Rabia Harris. ABC International Publishing, Chicago 1997. p. 279.

<sup>2</sup> This includes Tusi, Suharwardi, Kalabazi, Abu Nu’aim, Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn al-Jawzi and Abdul Halim Mahmud.

<sup>3</sup> In other words, the Companions who participated in the Battle of Badr.

ص – ف – ف. However, in terms of meaning, this interpretation does carry some weight. The Companions of the Bench spent most of their time in the mosque in the company of the pious, something which all Sūfīs aspire to and practice.

#### **1.4. Sūfism comes from the word for ‘line’.**

Some ascribe the term to the word *Saff*, which means line or row. The advocates of this position assert that Sūfīs line themselves in the presence of Allāh Almighty with discipline and equality, rather like Muslims do in congregational prayer.

#### **1.5. Other minority opinions.**

i. There are a handful of scholars who believe that the term Sūfī does not in fact have its origins in the Arabic Language. Rather the term evolved from the Sophists. These were philosophers who existed in Ancient Greece, in the time of Aristotle. Because of their love of wisdom (which is the literal meaning of *philosophy*) and desire to seek the truth, the term was later adjusted and applied to the Muslim ascetics.

ii. Abū Nu’aim in *Hilya al-Awliyā* and Tūsī write that before Islam, there was a certain period when there was no-one to circulate the Ka’ba. A man called Sūfa (صوفاء) came from a far-off land and would perform Tawāf. If this opinion is accepted, then it shows that this term was known before the appearance of Islam.

iii. Another minority opinion is that Sūfism comes from the word *Sufāna* (صوفانة), a plant that grows in the desert. In the same way this plant suffices on the smallest of provisions, so does the Sūfī in this world.

#### **1.6. Summary.**

From a grammatical perspective, the opinion that the term came from the word for wool is the strongest. Perhaps the weakest opinion is that it came from the Sophists. This is because though the Sophists were known to be keen philosophers, they often debated and philosophized without purpose and direction. As Plato comments in *The Republic*, they were happy to play the role of the ‘devil’s advocate’ rather than aim to derive some good from their endeavours.

Nevertheless, all opinions certainly are useful in helping us to understand what Sūfism is. Undoubtedly, Sūfism does entail purity and the need for simplicity, as reflected in wearing wool. There is an ideal role model in the Companions of the Bench for the Sūfī greats and Sūfism does preach equality and discipline. Also, the Sūfīs are known to engage in philosophy and certainly love wisdom.

#### **1.7 Defining Sūfism**

Offering a terminological definition of Sūfism is just as difficult. In short, we can say that the discipline:

- strives for human perfection, by following the model of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).
- makes the soul the focus of attention.
- belittles the worth of this world.

- encourages love and affection between all humans.
- encourages spiritual contemplation over the works of Allāh.

## **2.0 Sūfism in Islam.**

### **2.1 References to Sūfī teachings in the Qur’ān**

The word ‘Sūfī’ or ‘Tassawuf’ is not mentioned anywhere in the Qur’ān, though indirectly, countless verses refer to its teachings and ideals.<sup>4</sup>

Here are just some of the verses which refer to what can be termed ‘Sūfī’ teachings:

a. ‘The believers are only those who, when Allāh is mentioned, feel a fear in their hearts and when His verses are recited unto them, the verses increase their faith; and they put their trust in their Lord (alone).’ (Qur’ān, 8:2).

b. ‘Those who remember Allāh standing, sitting and lying down on their sides, and think deeply about the creation of the heavens and earth (saying): ‘Our Lord! You have not created all this without purpose. Glory be to you! So save us from the torment of the fire.’ (Qur’ān, 3:191).

c. ‘Those who believe and whose hearts find rest in the remembrance of Allāh; verily, in the remembrance of Allāh do hearts find rest’ (13: 28).

d. In the Qur’ān, Allāh praises the Companions of the Bench:

‘And do not turn those away who invoke their Lord, morning and face seeking His face. (6:52).

e. Moreover, Sūfīs gave great weight to concepts such as dependence (*Tawakkul*), patience (*Sabr*), striving with the soul (*Mujāhada al-Nafs*), piety (*Taqwa*), *Zuhd* (renunciation), *Mahabba* (love), remembrance (*Zikr*) and *Du’ā* (supplication). All of these ideas and concepts originate from the Holy Qur’ān directly.<sup>5</sup>

### **2.2 References to Sūfī teachings in the Sunna.**

For the Sūfīs, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) is the perfect role model and teacher. In fact, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him)

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this has given some weak-Muslims an opportunity to undermine its importance, and even suggest that there is no place for Sūfism in Islam. To answer such an objection is simple; we all know as Muslims that perhaps the most important belief in Islam is Tawhīd, or the oneness of Allāh Almighty. In fact, this forms the basis and foundation of Islam. But there is no mention of the word Tawhīd in the Qur’ān at all. Just because this word has not been mentioned in the Qur’ān, no one can claim that this implies it is not important, or that Tawhīd is not a part of Islam. The word Tawhīd is simply not mentioned by word; but in meaning, the entire Qur’ān is a direct or indirect reference to the Tawhīd of Allāh. In exactly the same way, Tassawuf does not appear in word in the Qur’ān, but Islam teaches it in many areas of our lives.

<sup>5</sup> In the *al-Risāla* of Imam Qushairī, we find detailed discussions on themes such as repentance (*Tawba*), Fear (*Khawf*), Hope (*Rajā*), Humility (*Khushū’*), Envy (*Hasad*), thankfulness (*Shukr*), satisfaction (*Ridā*), servanthood (*Ubūdiyya*), steadfastness (*Istiḳāma*), sincerity (*Ikhḷās*), shame (*Hayā*), sainthood (*Wilāya*) and so on. All of these concepts are derived from the Qur’ān.

was himself a great advocate of the fundamentals of Sūfism. What follows is merely a small glimpse into this fact:

a. The Prophet's meditation in Cave Hirā.

Prior to the first divine revelation, the Prophet would go to Cave Hirā alone just on the outskirts of Makka. The purpose behind this was to meditate and achieve inner peace. Adherents of Sūfism argue that this clearly suggests that the Prophet himself supported the principles of Sūfism.

This meditation and reflection continued after the public announcement of *Nabuwwa* too. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) often sat for seclusion (I'tikāf) in the month of Ramadhān.

b. The Prophet's definition of *Ihsān*.

In the famous 'Jibrīl Hadīth', the Archangel Gabriel appeared in the form of a man to ask the Prophet some questions about the religion. The third question asked by Jibrīl (peace be upon him) was 'What is *Ihsān*?' The Prophet replied:

'That you worship Allāh as if you are observing Him. If you cannot [imagine that], then He is observing you.'

Sūfīs argue that this notion of *Ihsān* underlines the whole essence of Sūfism; that a person constantly feels the divine presence.

c. The Prophet's view of this world.

Abdullāh (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) once slept on a mat (made of dried palm leaves). When he woke, the marks of the mat could be seen on his sides. We said: 'O Messenger of Allāh! Shall we not prepare a bed for you?' He replied:

'What have I with this world? I am not in this world except like a traveller who rests under the shadows of the tree, he then proceeds and leaves the tree behind.'<sup>6</sup>

According to the Prophet, this world is merely a tree which provides temporary shade. It is not the ends but the means to our ultimate destination, Paradise.

d. The path of poverty.

Abu Amāma (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports from the Messenger of Allāh that:

'My Lord offered to turn the valleys of Makka into gold for me. I replied: 'No, my Lord! Rather I will feel content one day and feel hungry the next. [He said this three times and then said] When I am hungry I will show humility to You (O Allāh) and will remember You. And when I am content (after finding food) I will thank You and praise You.'<sup>7</sup>

e. Constant Zikr and worship.

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<sup>6</sup> *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*. Book of Zuhd. Hadīth no. 2299.

<sup>7</sup> *Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal*.

Abu Huraira (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

‘By Allāh! I seek forgiveness from Allāh and I repent to Him more than seventy times a day.’<sup>8</sup>

### **3.0 The development of Sūfism.**

The previous section has shown that Sūfism took its roots directly from the teachings of the Qur’ān and Sunna. Here, we shall briefly outline a chronological account of the stages the discipline went through.

#### **3.1. The stage of growth; the first and second century.**

If Sūfism can be defined as perfect adherence to the faith, an allegiance to Sharī’ah and a rejection of worldly desires, then it certainly had its roots in the first and second Islamic century. In early Islam, the teachings of the Qur’ān and the flawless example of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) formed the basis of Sūfī teachings. After the Prophet, the Companions (may Allāh be pleased with them) showed unparalleled piety and sincerity. Some would fast by day and pray by night whereas others would devote their time and energy purely for their religion. In everything but name, the early Muslims were Sūfīs.

It could be asked that if the Companions were known to be ascetic by nature, why were they not called ‘Sūfīs’? The answer to this is that we call and refer to them with the highest title possible. And for these Muslims, this is no higher title than ‘Sahāba’, the honour of the Prophet’s companionship.

#### **3.2. The development of Sūfism: the third and fourth century.**

For the first time, Sūfism took on the shape of a formal discipline. During this period, the scholars began to write and formulate independent works on Fiqh, Aqīdah, Tafsīr and Hadīth, and Sūfism went through this same process. The term began to be used to describe people of ascetic nature and scholars began to write independent treatises on the discipline for the first time. The pioneering works on Sūfism were by al-Muhāsabi (d. 243)<sup>9</sup>, al-Kharrāz (d. 279), al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 320) and al-Junaid (d. 297). Concepts such as *Ma’rifah* (gnosis) and *Hubb Ilāhī* (love of God) began to be used. This period also marked an interest in related fields; the study of the human soul, Ilm Kalām and philosophy. This coincided with the Muslim scholars’ efforts in translating important works from the Greek and other non-Muslims. Sūfī Sheikhs appeared with their Murīds and the various Turuqs began to form.

#### **3.3. The fifth century.**

Sūfism as a discipline received more attention during this period, from both supporters and critics. The *Risāla* of Imam al-Qushairī (d. 465) appeared, which became an important milestone in Sūfī literature. Imam Ghazālī’s works – most notably his *Ihyā* – gained unparalleled fame and attention.

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<sup>8</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Book of Supplications.

<sup>9</sup> The book was called *al-Wisāyah*.

## **4.0 The relevance of Sūfism today.**

### **4.1. An antidote to materialism.**

In a materialistic world, where our wants seem never-ending and the attractions ever-appealing, Sūfism is an answer to those who realize real content cannot be achieved through material and worldly goods. They teach that real content is the contentment of the heart, something that can only be attained through meditation and the remembrance of Allāh Almighty. The Qur'ān affirms this in several places, most notably in the verse, 'Behold! In the remembrance of Allāh lies the content of hearts.'

### **4.2. An antidote to extremism and terrorism.**

During a time when many see Islam as a violent religion, Sūfism is important in the manner it portrays Islam as a religion of peace and serenity. As Abdul Hakim Murad, a lecturer at the University of Cambridge said: 'There is no such thing as a Sūfi Terrorist.' Sūfīs by nature are morally-upright individuals who would never attempt to cause harm to others. Sūfism preaches the unity of the human race rather than its division –all are the 'Children of Adam', regardless of one's racial, religious and social background.

### **4.3. Human betterment.**

In the sayings and actions of the great Sūfīs lie a mine of precious advice and *Nasīha*...

- Imam Abu Bakr al-Warrāq remarked that most of what our time is spent in are four: (a) the extra over the obligatory (b) the outer form over the inner state (c) other people over oneself (d) speaking over action.
- Hazrat Dāta Ghanj Baksh Hujwiri (d. 466) remarked that there are two things which we should forget immediately; when we perform a favour towards someone and when someone hurts us.

## **5.0. The critics of Sūfism.**

Not everyone agrees with the influence of Sūfism in Islam. There are some observers who argue that because many equate Sūfism with music, drums, 'Whirling Dervishes' and (sometimes) the free-mixing of males and females, it has no place or justification in Islam. In fact Wahhabism rose in the Saudi Peninsula precisely as a puritan reaction to the loose and apathetic views and practices of the Sūfīs there.

Ibn al-Jawzī (d.597) and Sheikh Ibn Taymiyya (d.728) were two known critics of Sūfism. Ibn al-Jawzī was critical of Sūfīs in his book *Talbīs Iblīs*. In short, his criticism was as follows:

1. He did not agree with the Sūfī's concept of *Hulūl*.
2. He criticised the Sūfī view of *Tawakkul* because it leads to apathy.
3. He was against the introduction of music, dancing and *Wajad*.
4. He believed the Sūfī way lead to seclusion rather than social inclusion.

However, it must be noted that Ibn al-Jawzī was against the *Sūfīs* and not *Sūfism*. As an aid to implementing Islam, he did not criticise the essence of this discipline. Rather, his writings were aimed at the later Sūfīs who had changed and altered the

very fundamentals of Sūfism. Otherwise there are places in his works where he praises the early Sūfīs like Junaid Baghdādī. He writes:

‘Sūfism is a path which began with total *Zuhd* (renunciation) but was then eased to allow music and dancing. The disciples of the hereafter inclined to it because they saw *Zuhd* in it; the disciples of the world inclined to it because they saw leisure in it.’<sup>10</sup>

Elsewhere, his writings are clear in supporting Sūfism when it complies with the Qur’ān and Sunna:

‘The term ‘Sūfī’ appeared before the second century...according to the early Sūfīs, the term was used to denote nurture the soul, to perform Jihad against the self, to repel lowly traits and to adopt excellent ones such as *Zuhd*, tolerance, patience, sincerity, truthfulness...This was the early foundation of the discipline; adherence to the Straight Path (*Sirāt Mustaqīm*).’<sup>11</sup>

Hence the essence of Sūfism and the moderate Sūfīs were not the targets. In short, Sūfism is immune from criticism when it is fully sanctioned by the teachings of the Qur’ān and Sunna. It has been subject to criticism, even from the Sūfīs themselves, when it leads to extremist views and when it borrows concepts and ideas from other religions. In all matters, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) preached moderation and this applied to ascetic teachings too.

## **6.0. Conclusion.**

From the very beginning of Islam until today, Sūfism has played a pivotal part in the social, religious and even political outlook of the Muslim Umma.

Undoubtedly, the discipline provides us with a unique and priceless view of the perfect teachings of our religion. We are required to perform Salāh, give Zakāh and fast in the month of Ramadhān; the Sūfī greats have taught us *why* we perform these acts and how it leads to human betterment. Imam Ghazālī’s *Ihyā* takes the acts such as ablution, Salāh and fasts and offers another dimension into the spiritual significance of these acts. This prevents our religion being portrayed as a one-dimensional list of do’s and don’ts.

Historically, the role of the Sūfīs in preaching and spreading Islam cannot be underestimated, particularly in the Indian Sub-Continent. The likes of Hazrat Data Ghanj Baksh converted people in their tens and thousands with their radiant characters and pious outlook.

From Muslims and non-Muslims alike, Sūfism is strong enough to withstand criticism. If people have used to the discipline to preach their extremist and baseless views, then the Muslims are at fault, not Sūfism. In short, Sūfism without Islam is not Sūfism. An impostor Sūfī is easy to spot; his actions, views and opinions will not comply with the teachings of the Qur’ān and Sunna.

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<sup>10</sup> In *Fi Riyadh al-Tasawwuf al-Islami*. Page 240. Professor Jamal Sa’d Mahmud Jum’a. Al-Azhar Publications, Cairo, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Page 242. *Ibid*.

In this day and age, the importance of Sūfism is increasing and not diminishing. The perils and hurdles of modern life have created comfort for people but not necessarily happiness. Sūfism fills this gap. The popularity of Sūfī greats like Rūmī in the west undoubtedly proves this point.

### **7.0. Further Reading.**

1. *Sufi Book of Spiritual Ascent (al-Risala al-Qushairiyya)* Abu al-Qasim al-Qushairi. Translated by Rabia Harris. ABC International Publishing, Chicago 1997. ISBN No. 1871031532.

2. *Ihya 'Ulum al-Din*. Imam al-Ghazali (d. 505)  
On the Islamic Texts Society webpage ([www.its.org.uk/alghazali.html](http://www.its.org.uk/alghazali.html)), there are nine translations of various chapters of the *Ihya*, including *The Remembrance of Death & the Afterlife*, *Letter to a Disciple*, *The Ninety-Nine Names of Allah*, *Disciplining the Soul and on Breaking the Two Desires*, *The Manners related to Eating, Patience and Thankfulness*, *Poverty and Abstinence* and *Intention, Sincerity and Truthfulness*.

3. *Kashf al-Mahjub*. Hazrat Data Ganj Baksh Hujweiri. Translated by R.A. Nicholson. ISBN no. 1163918059.

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