

SUFISM

Preamble.

This talk was given at a meeting of the Ottawa Lay School of Theology. A group of about 60 people, mostly Christian, had studied Christian Theology and the religion of Islam over the course of weekly meetings the previous year, inviting various specialists to provide the focus of discussion. In 2009 the same group wanted to take a second look and to dive more deeply into religious teachings and selected Sufism in Islam as a topic of interest.

I provided a very quick summary of early events in Islam to refresh memories of the previous courses and as a backdrop to an introduction to Sufism as the heart of Islam.

Introduction

Summary

Prophet Muhammad was born 570 CE

First revelation received 610 CE

Preaching & teaching begins about 613 CE

Makkan Arabs strongly oppose Muhammad and his few followers eventually making progress in Makka impossible and they are obliged to flee to Medina 300km north where they are welcomed in 622 CE. (1 Hijra)

Muslims in Medina are obliged to defend themselves against Makkan Arabs and also against some local Jewish tribes.

Eventually, about 10,000 Muslims in Medina are able to negotiate a return to Makka and reestablish themselves and the religion grows rapidly in numbers and influence.

Prophet Muhammad dies 632 CE and there is immediately conflict over who should succeed him. The Prophet had said it should be his cousin and closest associate Ali but Abu Bakr was elected by the majority. The sequence of Caliphs that followed is:-

Abu Bakr d 634 after 2 year reign

Umar held the office for 10 years, followed by

Uthman from the Umayyad clan for 12 years

Ali by popular vote (d.661) ruled 6 years; succeeded by Hasan his son who agreed with Mu'awiya the governor of Syria not to rule

Mu'awiya rules and kills Husayn (son of Ali) at Karbala

Yazid son of Mu'awiya rules

By this time Islam is a religion only in name and is used by rulers to justify excesses in political power and luxurious living.

By 749 Umayyad rule ends and the Abbasids take over instead of the Hashemites who are heirs of the Prophet.

Islam original as taught by Muhammad and practiced by his companions, and those who followed them, is preserved only by a few during these early, chaotic and formative years. At first their practice of Islam was nameless but eventually became organized into groups and were given the name SUFIS.

The emergence of the Sufis is a reaction to the chaos by the rulers who were creating around them a feudal and class system similar to the pre-Islamic days.

Within 100 years of Muhammad's death elaborate mosques were being built and the teaching of the new religion took on a more formalized style. Later, schools of Jurisprudence, Theology and Law were created as the state grew in strength and stretched across many countries. The pinnacle of Sufism was around the 10th century CE. The effort was to revive the spirit of Islam since the formalism of the religion was gaining strength as different schools of teaching came into power.

So, where are we today? Islam still serves the needs of the common people. The 21st century Muslim affirms that there is only one god (ALLAH) and Prophet Muhammad is His messenger, prays five prayers daily, gives a portion of disposable income yearly to serve the poor and needy, fasts in the month of Ramadan and makes the Pilgrimage to Makka once in a lifetime. Study of the Qur'an and the sayings of Muhammad (Hadith) are still perfect guidance. What more is needed? Nothing! If the soul is nourished by these means then the Garden (Paradise) is within reach of all. But, alas we are living in a world of almost unimaginable chaos. How did this happen?

For many, religion is certainly not enough. Sincere Muslims long to draw closer to Allah, many more seek to understand life better and to acquire knowledge of Reality. How can you pray unless the world is excluded and the mind is still and completely focused? The religion of Islam is not transformative until we work hard to change ourselves. God cannot be present unless the "I" (ego) is absent. Rumi hits the mark, listen

*If you could get rid of yourself just once,
The secret of secrets would open to you.
The face of the unknown, hidden beyond the universe,
Would appear on the mirror of your perception.*

Ibn 'Arabi makes the point even more clearly

One dies when, by Allah's will, ones borrowed time ends. One's material being – which is called life - ending at an appointed hour, loses all its character and qualities both good

and bad, and nothing remains. In their place Allah comes to be. One's self becomes Allah's self; one's attributes become Allah's attributes.

That is what the Prophet of Allah (peace and blessings upon him) meant when he said, "Die before dying"

The Sufi effort is aimed to achieve that, or something close to that station, while living naturally and purposefully in this world.

The person seeking this lofty goal of spiritual transformation is in need of a guide who has trodden the path and knows the way forward. Finding the right guide, or spiritual master, is the first step and is the first test of sincerity and longing in the heart of the seeker. The right teacher appears at the right time if the seeker has trust in God and has the right courtesy which is faith and patience.

The Sufi master will be knowledgeable about Islam, the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet which make up the outer aspects of the religion. The same master must also have achieved real enlightenment of the self based on the saying "*Whoever knows himself knows his Lord*", and this is truly an advanced station.

Further, the Sufi master will have been given permission to teach by another experienced teacher, who in turn has been given similar permission and so on back to the Prophet of Islam. The process is very similar to the training and practice followed by those in the medical profession but in this case the sickness is to cure the afflictions of the "heart", the core Being of the seeker.

A doctor cannot practice without a patient, so the Sufi teacher cannot practice without a seeker of the way to spiritual transformation willing to take the recommended medicine. Ultimately, the gift of enlightenment is by the mercy of Allah.

Rumi has said "*Whoever travels without a guide needs two hundred years for a two day journey*"

The traveler on the path of enlightenment will often experience sights and feelings of great delight; these states are always transitory. What is sought and must be achieved is to become firmly established in a station of awareness that is permanent and can never be taken away. An example of such a station is one who is described by Allah as one he loves.

Allah says of a seeker who has traveled the path on this holy quest

"My servant draws near to me in prayer, and when he makes greater effort to remember Me beyond what is religiously required then I love him and when I love a servant, I, the Lord, am his ear so that he hears by Me, I am his eye so he sees by Me, and I am his tongue so that he speaks by Me and I am his hand so he takes by Me and I am the feet that he walks by Me".

The ultimate goal, says Shaykh Fadhlalla, is *“To sit in absolute watchfulness without watching anything”*, the highest point of meditation. The seeker has completed half the journey, the other half is in the hands of Allah.

Rumi recognizes how the ‘self’, ego, I-ness gets in the way of spiritual progress, recall his words

“If you could get rid of yourself just once, the secret of secrets would be open to you. The face of the unknown, hidden beyond the universe, would appear on the mirror of your perception”.

The whirling dervishes (Sufis of the Mevlevi order) demonstrate this center of Being which is the utter stillness at the center of creation. The outer form can be left to roam and to turn while the inner, central core is fixed and still. During the turning attention is directed inwardly to the “heart” and thus to Allah. The right hand is lifted upward to receive and the left hand points downward as in giving.

This is a difficult practice to master but confirms on the whirling dervish great calmness and blessings, the hall-marks of spirituality.

Ali, cousin of the Prophet and son-in-law, is a fully enlightened master who reflects the difficulty of the spiritual path for the seeker of Allah when he says

*“Your remedy is within you, but you do not sense it.
Your sickness is from you, but you do not perceive it.
You presume you are a small entity,
But within you is enfolded the entire universe.
You are indeed the evident book,
By whose alphabet the hidden becomes manifest.
Therefore, you have no need to look beyond yourself,
What you seek is within you.”*

That says it all if you analyze it carefully.

One of the great Sufi masters, Junayd, says

You should understand that the self is like a veil, concealing you from your deepest spiritual desire. You should also understand that you cannot reach God through yourself; you can only reach God through Himself.

This makes clear the need for the seeker to have grounding in a belief system or religion

Sufi practices.

So what do the Sufis do at their meetings? We find that practices vary considerably depending on the environment e.g. mountain, desert or city and the country and ethnic mix of the members. All Sufi practices involve prayers, invocations, recitations and supplications and the form this takes and the timing will depend very much on the intuitive heart of the teacher.

Where it is possible, in a permanent Sufi Order, invocation and remembrance of Allah (dhikr) is done before the first morning prayer of the day i.e. before the first light in the morning sky. The day is then given over to work and other business, interrupted by the noon day prayer and the late afternoon prayer. There is often a preference for a larger meal at midday and a much lighter meal in the evening so that the body is not slowed by digestion during the evening and late night practices. Sweet mint tea is a favorite drink and a vegetarian diet is the norm.

Thursday evening is a favorite time for the whole group to gather for a special session of remembrance of Allah and more intensive practices since Friday is the day of gathering (like Saturday for the Jews and Sunday for the Christians) Note: the day ends at sunset in the liturgical calendar of both Jews and Muslims. Thus sunset on Thursday evening is the beginning of Friday.

Each Sufi order will have developed techniques to enable the seeker on the spiritual way to overcome the Self and remove the barriers separating one from that spontaneous awareness of Being which leads to inner silence. This requires a healthy body which can remain still and comfortable. In this connection we can understand the great Muslim doctor ibn Sina (Avicenna 11th century)

Prayer is divided into two parts: the outward part, which is visible and formal and which relates to the body; and the inward part, which is true prayer and relates to the soul.

From a Sufi point of view the heart of every person contains a blueprint of Reality but we may not realize it because it becomes overshadowed with other notions and becomes less accessible. This innate nature is called *fitra* in Arabic. The extent to which this inner awareness of what is right and natural will be most easily accessible to someone brought up in a healthy environment without overly restrict cultural constraints; a culture at peace of course and not at war! Wise and simple folk have easy access to this knowledge. Those trained in scientific enquiry, analysis and academic pursuits will likely have difficult access. How blessed are the pure in heart!

The purpose of Sufi practice

The chief purpose is to restore wholeness in people. So, the Sufi master will prescribe remedies for each person to suit the individual sickness, in addition to the collective practices. The aim is to concentrate the mind and remove the usual noise and waywardness that is the common state of the mind. This is done by invoking the attributes of Allah by long repetition of the divine names such as the Compassionate, the Patient, the All-Pervading, Love, Peace which are in Arabic *ar-Rahman, as-Sabur, al-Latif, al-Wadud, as-Salam* for example, or short phrases in Arabic such as al-Hayyu al-Qayyum the Living one the Eternal one. Another favorite phrase is *la ilaha illa'llah* there is no deity but God.

These exercises bring about a centrality to the mind and all extraneous thoughts are wiped away. This is best done in the company of a spiritual master and the pupil must have the correct courtesy otherwise the results will have little lasting value.

The Prophet has said “*Remembrance of Allah is cure of the heart*”.

We can be aware of the world and all that is in it, this is the outer remembrance, and one can be aware of ones innate nature which is the remembrance of the Essence of God the Almighty, the Source of all that exists, and this is inner remembrance. On the Sufi path all that is other than Allah is to be dis-remembered, let go. This is getting into deep waters and we have first to learn to paddle so we always begin with remembrance of God.

Shaykh Fadhlalla has spoken of sleep as a good simile of meditation. We daily settle into bed and make ourselves comfortable and become less conscious of thoughts until consciousness ends. The end of thought is the beginning of another form of consciousness we call sleep. Now sleep is like meditation in being experiential and subjective and it has to occur. We should remember that sleep is the brother of death (Hadith) and the soul is in the care of Allah. The soul may be returned to the body to allow it to awaken to physical consciousness again, or the soul may be retained by Allah in sleep and the body dies. The final stage of meditation is beyond these two levels and cannot be described only experienced as a higher level of awareness that is vast, timeless and none dimensional bliss.

Similar to meditation is the Sufi practice of watchfulness, *muraqabah*, which is often practiced in retreat and under the close supervision of the Shaykh. The pupil will become more conscious of his/her own state which leads to ‘openings’ wherein one becomes aware of the vast emptiness and timeless state which has no limitations. Remember the words of Ali “...*but within you is enfolded the entire universe.*”

Retreat is commonly practiced in every Sufi school. In retreat the pupil may spend up to 40 days employing different spiritual practices. The aim is to leave all thought behind, the intellect is often the greatest impediment to spiritual progress, and by concentrated effort experience pure consciousness under the watchful eye of the Sufi master. The entry requirements for the retreat are also quite stringent and the pupil must be in good health in body, mind and heart and be prepared to leave all aspects of creation behind. A break through may occur in less than 40 days; if not then it can be attempted at some later time.

Different Sufi Orders may follow different practices to enable the pupil, *murid*, to advance and the best known of these is probably the Whirling Dervishes of the Mevlevi School which sometimes are made open to the public. Rumi perfected this practice of uniting two opposites of turning outwardly and stillness within. Turning inward means directing thought to the 'heart' and so to Allah. If thought is directed outward the person would quickly become dizzy. It is a difficult practice to master but looks superbly easy when performed by the Sufis and their master.

Chanting, singing praises of Muhammad and of course remembrance of Allah are all aids to opening up the heart of the believer and casting off the anxieties of the world so one can be conscious of the self within.

SUFI STATES

We are all familiar with the laws of duality. The entire life of this world is suspended between opposites. We want health and reject disease, seek wealth and despise poverty; every day is balanced between light and darkness and so on. At a more subtle level witnessing, which means "to be", applies to the inner reality. We are generally conscious of one or another thing, then we are conscious of the observer and this is a step closer to pure consciousness which cannot be described only experienced.

Witnessing becomes the first step toward self knowledge which in turn has a deeper potential to reveal the relation between self and creation. Knowing oneself is to know the entire creation, as Ali said "*You think you are a small germ, but within you is encompassed the entire creation*". The first step is then to simply witness, be watchful and aware of what goes on within oneself. (Eckhart Tolles book is helpful; A New Earth).

When quiet witnessing is achieved and thoughts no longer interfere one can become connected to the inner central core of oneself leading to purification. The one who reaches this station then understands what is going on behind all experiences. Allah says in the Qur'an that humankind will be tested and this applies particularly to those on the path to perfection.

Lastly, there has always been conflict between the Sufi and Orthodox Islam. Historically there are many accounts of Sufis put to death by rulers, or they are exiled, denounced and imprisoned. In more recent times we have seen how Kamil Ataturk (d 1938) tried his best to wipe out the Sufi Orders in Turkey but without lasting success.

The spiritual path requires work on oneself and most people are content to defer the effort this entails. Sufism provides a counter balance between the outer aspects of Islam, such as orthodox rituals and laws, and the inner satisfaction and awakening that comes from the path of spiritual perfection. The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said

“The outer law is my action. The path of purification is my way. And the inner reality is my state”.

That is almost a perfect picture of the Sufi. To quote Shaykh Fadhlallah Haeri,

“...lead a life in accordance with outer Islamic Law and to guide people to achieve the inner spiritual goal of self-fulfillment and contentment through self-enlightenment”.

In the recent past we have seen that many groups interested in Sufism, who had adopted some of its disciplines, doctrines and practices or experiences, have begun to break up and drift apart as could be expected. The so called “new age” movement was not in harmony with main stream Islam and had no protective outer shell to guard the inner movement.

There are very few who seek the treasures Sufism offers and fewer still of the orthodox caught up in the outer aspect of Islam. The treasures are there but the way forward requires a radical shift in belief and in thinking. The rewards are vast and unimaginable waiting to be taken from the source of all gifts, Allah, the Generous.

As Rumi says, so succinctly

*“The Sufi’s book is not of ink and letters,
It is nothing but a heart white as snow”.*

Ibrahim Abdul Malik

Ottawa, February 2009.