

DISTINGUISHING ISLAMIC SUFISM FROM UNIVERSAL SUFISM

Ash-Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri and Habib Quadri

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Abstract

In present times, the word 'Sufism' is very loosely used to define a large cadre of people who have vastly different beliefs from what the core of 'Sufism' essentially stands for. This article aims at demystifying the term 'Sufi' and elaborately distinguishing between Islamic Sufism and mysticism (also being referred to as Sufism by the masses) of most of the philosophical polytheistic faiths. For this purpose, Sufis can be represented in two major categories, namely, Islamic Sufis and Universal Sufis. Islamic Sufis follow the beliefs and tenets of Islam as enshrined in the Quran, Sunnah and Islamic Sharia. Universal Sufis (though might appear to have a Muslim background), mainly teach theories of a form of 'mysticism' which is a culmination of the mystical teachings of many religions excluding Islam.

In this paper, we have distinguished between the two by giving brief information about heads of these orders in the world.

Keywords: Islamic Sufism, Universal Sufism, Mysticism, Un-Islamic Sufi orders

Islamic Sufism

(i) The beliefs of Islamic Sufism

The major sources about the beliefs of Islamic Sufis are the Quran, and the Prophet Mohammad's (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) Sunnah. Islamic Sufis believe in the following principles.

- (a) God, (Allah - عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) is one and the sole creator of the Cosmos.
- (b) The Quran is the word of God.
- (c) The teachings of Prophet Mohammed (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) are truthful, final and binding.
- (d) God has sent Apostles / Prophets on earth for guiding the masses.

(e) Prophet Adam (عليه السلام) is the first and Prophet Mohammed (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) is the last Prophet.

(f) The teaching of Islam is the same, from Adam (صلى الله عليه و آله) to Prophet Mohammad (عليه السلام) which is 'monotheism'.

(g) All Prophets are human (mortal), including Abraham (Ibrahim عليه السلام) and Jesus (Isa عليه السلام).

The Quranic Verses 112:1-4, 21:25, 2:136, all validate and explicitly establish the above-mentioned principles.

(ii) The three states of a Muslim

It is important to have a clear picture of the three states of being a Muslim (as established by the Prophet Mohammed (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم), in order to get a clear understanding of the definition of Islamic Sufism. The following Hadith is crucial in this regard.

It is in Hadith - Abu Huraira (رضي الله تعالى عنه) narrated - One day while the Prophet (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) was sitting in the company of some people, (angel) Jibrael (عليه السلام) came and sat, folding his knees (like a student sits in front of a teacher) and asked, "What is Iman?" Allah's Apostle (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) replied, 'Faith is to believe in Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ), His angels, (the) meeting with Him (on the day of judgment), His Apostles, and to believe in Resurrection.' Then he asked, "What is Islam?" Allah's Apostle (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) replied, "To worship Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) alone and none else, to offer prayers perfectly, to pay the compulsory charity 'Zakat' and to observe fasts during the month of Ramadan." Then he asked,

"What is Ihsan?" Allah's Apostle (صلى الله عليه و آله (وسلم) replied, "To pray as if you see Him, and if you cannot see him then you must consider that He is looking at you." - (*Bukhari – part of the Hadith*).

As per the Hadith given above, there are three states of being Muslims.

(a) The first state is that of being a believer, i.e., when a person recites the Islamic *Shahada* and with belief and conviction in his/her heart.

(b) The second is that of being a Muslim, i.e., when a person, after reciting the *Shahada*, puts his/her words to action and starts to abide by the tenets of Islam.

(c) The third is that of being an Islamic Sufi or a person of Ihsan. An Islamic Sufi's action reflects the utmost sincerity in faith. There is a clear sense of realization of the presence of God playing a part in his/her life.

A believer possesses Iman and a Muslim possesses Iman and Islam. An Islamic Sufi possesses Iman, Islam and Ihsan. Given below are the precise definitions of each.

(a) *Iman* is to Belief in Allah. A Muslim must believe in Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) as the creator of this Cosmos and only He can be worshiped. Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) is free from the considerations of body, form, shape, etc. Everything in this cosmos is His creation. Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) creations are appearing in the cosmos in specific shapes / forms / characteristics as per their facts. In addition, he must believe in Allah's angels, His Prophets, in His books, the day of Judgment, in destiny and fate, and that all virtue and evil is from Allah.

(b) *Islam* is to worship Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) alone and none else, to offer 5 times prayers perfectly, to pay the compulsory charity 'Zakat' to observe fasts during the month of Ramadan and perform Hajj once in a lifetime (provided you have the means). Thus, Islam is related with the deeds.

(c) *Ihsan* is to realize the presence of Allah in our daily lives. The state of Ihsan is known as Islamic Sufism. The Shuyookh of Ihsan or Sufi Shuyookh teach their pupils how to see/realize Allah in their

lives in order to be good human beings for the sake of themselves and the society in general.

(iii) Know yourself to know God

Islamic Sufis have a belief that the one who knows himself / (herself), knows God (من عرف نفسه فقد عرف ربه). (Based on a famous Arabic proverb).

The 'knowing' of ourselves can quite simply be described as the noticing / observing of our indigence / dependence on God. If we forget about our servanthood (to God) and start believing that the divinity is associated with anything but God, then that is equivalent to forgetting ourselves; as doing so, would be forgetting the role of God in the universe, and in turn, forgetting our own selves.

This philosophy has strong roots in the Quran (59:19, 9:67, 41:53). Thus, the knowledge of one's self, his / her Creator and the working of this Cosmos is embedded in the very fabric of Islamic Sufism.

Islamic Sufism is taught by the Sufi Shuyookh of Ihsan. As per the Quran (10:62-64), the Shuyookh of Ihsan can be defined as the 'friends of God'.

In observation of issues of Islamic Jurisprudence, Muslims follow certain teachers who are known as Imams, like (i) Abu Hanifa (699-767) CE, (ii) Malik (711-795) CE, (iii) Shafii, (767-820) CE (iv) and Ibn Hanbal (780-855) CE. Their followers are known as Hanafi, Shafii, Maliki and Hanbali. These Imams have deduced the rulings of Islamic Jurisprudence as per their research and it is consensus of all Muslims that if you follow any of these Imams, you are following the Islamic Sharia even though there are slight differences in their opinions related to certain actions. There is no difference of opinion among these Imams as far as Islamic faith is concerned.

In a similar way, Muslims follow certain Sufi Shuyookh of Ihsan in matters of Ihsan. (i) Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jeelani (1077-1166) CE, Khwaja Moinuddin Chishtee (1136-1230) CE, Shaikh Abul Hasan Shadhili (1196-1258) CE, and (iv) Khwaja Bahauddin Naqshband (1318-1389) CE,

and others are followed in matters of related with Ihsan. The followers of these Shuyookh are known as Qadri, Chishtee, Shadhili and Naqshbandis, etc. These Shuyookh teach their followers (i) how to repent for the past deeds, (ii) How to observe abstinence (Taqwa), (iii) how to keep away from evil and wasteful thoughts, (iv) How to do Zikr of Allah's epithets (Names) to purify the Nafs, (v) what is meant by nearness to Allah and (vi) how to feel the presence of Allah and that He is seeing us all the time. The Shuyookh teach collectively and individually as per the capacity of their students' comprehension. When you join these Salasil by taking baya, they give you a document known as 'Shajra' in which the names of the teachers of these shuyookh is mentioned reaching to Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم).

Universal Sufism

(i) The beliefs of Universal Sufism

Universal Sufism (also known as Perennial Sufism, Universalism, Traditionalism, Ammanism, etc.,) is based on the philosophy that all religions are truthful, i.e., you can be a follower of any faith and still attain salvation in the hereafter. It has its roots in Platonism which was condemned by Imam Ghazali during his lifetime (1058–1111 CE). In the Indian subcontinent, this ideology is also referred to as '*Sulah-e-Kull*'.

Universal Sufis have a significant influence over many current Sufi orders of the world due to the blurred lines and the lack of clarity between Islamic Sufis and perennialism. Universal Sufis believe that Sufism is a religion independent of Islam. They also claim Sufism predates Islam.

(ii) Universal Sufi Organizations

There are 3 types of Universal Sufi Organizations and Orders in the world as follows.

(a) Non-Muslim Sufi organizations and Orders

There are many Non-Muslim Sufi Organizations and Orders in the world. Prominent among them are (i) *Sufi Order International*, (ii) *Sufi Ruhaniat International*, (iii) *Mevlevi Order of America*, (iv)

The Golden Sufi Center, (v) *Sufi Foundation of America*, (vi) *Sufism Reoriented*, whose leader is *Meher Baba*, (vii) *Niematullahi Sufi order*, etc.

(b) Quasi-Muslim Sufi Organizations and Orders

There are some Quasi-Muslim Sufi Organizations and Orders in the world. In these types of organizations, the shuyookh claim themselves to be Muslims, however, the practices of Islam are not made a condition for the followers for following the Sufi path. Their followers belong to all faiths and are called (Universal) *Sufis*. The behavior of the leaders of such organizations can be confusing as they identify themselves as Muslims when it befits their practices and ignore when it befits the practices of other faiths. Prominent among Quasi-Muslim Sufi Organizations are (i) *Baba Mohiuddin Fellowship*, and (ii) *The Threshold Society of Mevlvi Order*, etc.

(c) Pseudo-Muslim Sufi Organizations and Orders

The pseudo-Muslim Sufi Organizations' characteristics are as follows.

- a. All these organizations and scholars claim that they are genuine Islamic Ahle Sunnah Organizations.
- b. The scholars and Shuyookh of these Organizations have been known to provide contradictory statements regarding their beliefs. For instance, they claim that the Christians, Jews and Muslims are all true believers. However, they also say that Christians and Jews are not true believers.

Some of the prominent scholars that fall under this category are *Abdullah bin Bayyah*, *Taher Ul Qadri*, *Habib Ali Al-Jifri*, *Hamza Yusuf Hanson*, *Abdul Hakim Murad*, *Nuh Ha Mim Keller*, etc., all of whom are signatories of the Amman Message.

(iii) The Amman Message

Amman Message was initiated in 2004 by King Abdullah II of Jordan. For this purpose, a Conference was convened by him in Amman, Jordan, in July 2005 in which 200 scholars, from varying Muslim sects, were invited. It was reported that over 200 Conference attendees endorsed King's initiated Document known as the '*Amman Message*', in which all Sects, like the Salafis, Deobandis, Ikhwan, Shias, Ibadis, Kharijis and hundreds of their sub groups, were declared as Islamic and their followers as true Muslims.

Later, in the same year 2005, the King issued another declaration the '*Amman Interfaith Message*' in which the Christians and the Jews were also declared as '*believers*' on par with the Muslims. A special meeting of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) was conducted from 7th to 8th December 2005, in Makka, Saudi Arabia to endorse Amman Message initiative.

(iv) The Study Quran

Following the Amman Message Declaration in 2005, work began on the 'Study Quran', the primary focus of which was to promote the beliefs that are shared by the signatories of the Amman Message. After a decade's work, the 'Study Quran' was published by HarperCollins publishers, New York, in 2015.

The 'Study Quran' is published in line with the Christian Bible and the Jewish Torah/Talmud. It does not contain verses of Quran in Arabic. One must read only English version (Ammani interpretation) of the Quranic verses.

An Ammani / Perennialist team of scholars headed by Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Iranian born Shia scholar, currently based in the United States, was chosen for this purpose.

On April 28, 2015, 'The National', UAE Newspaper reported that Ammani Scholars declared Islamic Laws as outdated.

Abdullah bin Bayya, is the President of an Ammani 'Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies' (منتدى تعزيز السلم في المجتمعات المسلمة) based

in Abu Dhabi, UAE. He called for reassessment of outdated Islamic laws in order to change the fundamentals of Islamic science as its rulings are no longer applicable in modern society. The forum also claimed that only a select few scholars (who have signed and who support Amman Message) are authorized to change the fundamental laws of Islam.

Ammani Scholars use what's known as the '*The Common Ground*' logic, which goes directly against the core teachings of Islam.

According to the Ammani Common Ground logic, everyone who believes in the existence of one God, irrespective of his/her actual perception and understanding, is a "*believer*". Under this logic, the followers of Bábism, Bahá'í Faith, Cao Dai (Caodaism), Cheondoism, Christianity, Deism, Eckankar, Hinduism Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Judaism, Mandaeism, Rastafari, Seicho no Ie, Sikhism, Tengrism, Tenriism, Yazidism, Zoroastrianism, etc., are all believers.

(v) Timeline of Ammanism

(a) In 2004, Ammanis declared people belonging to 72 deviant Sects as true Muslims.

(b) In 2005, Ammanis declared Christians and Jews as 'Believers', just like Muslims'.

(c) In 2010, Ammanis declared Buddhists as 'Believers' and Buddhism as a true religion with their following declaration.

(d) In February 2008, a Hindu-Jewish Religious Leadership Summit was held in Israel in which it was declared that there is a 'Common Ground' (believe in one God) between Jews and Hindus, therefore, Hindus are covered in the people who believe in one God. The Summit also clarified that Hindus' worship of their innumerable Devatas by making their idols, is not idol worship.

Since Ammanis consider Jews as 'believers' on the basis of common ground logic (believe in one God) and the Jews consider Hindus as 'believers' on the same 'common ground logic', Hindus are

also treated by Ammanis as 'believers' on par with other 'believers' like Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, etc.

(e) In December 2016, Ammanis declared Qadiyanis / Ahmadis as Muslims and invited them to the Ammani' Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies' (منتدى تعزيز السلم في المجتمعات المسلمة) Conference held in Abu Dhabi in December 2016.

Conclusion

It is observed that there is a clear distinction in the beliefs and practices of Islamic Sufis and Universal Sufis. Universal Sufism holds the contention that Sufism predates Islam, ergo it can be treated as a separate religion with its own set of beliefs. Islamic Sufism holds the contention that Sufism is the Islamic concepts of Ihsan as taught by the Prophet Mohammed (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) and its roots are firmly embedded in the teachings of Islam that go all the way back to Adam (عليه السلام).

Universal Sufism focuses on mysticism and 'Godmen' like figures. It shares many commonalities with polytheistic beliefs and practices. On the other hand, Islamic Sufism is a strict adherent of the Islamic Shariah, and all its practices are in line with (and according to) the Quran and the Sunnah.

To say that the Sufism practiced by the Shuyookh of Ihsan is like Universal Sufism would be a clear misunderstanding of facts. On the other hand, to say that some of the practices or beliefs of Universal Sufism have been derived from Islamic Sufism is true to a certain extent. However, the journey and ultimate destinations of both these school of thoughts are vastly different from each other.

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