

# HOW PHILOSOPHICAL, THEOSOPHICAL AND Gnostic SUFISM ARE DIFFERENT FROM ISLAMIC SUFISM: AN ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

The origins of philosophies related to Platonism, Theosophy and Gnosticism have been discussed in this article. How these philosophies affected the thought process of people in the world from ancient times to the Middle ages. Since Islamic Sufism is different from these philosophies, an attempt has been made to elaborate the differences between these philosophies. This article is an important addition to our research related philosophy and religions.

*Key words:* Philosophical Sufism, Theosophy, Theosophical Sufism, Gnosticism, Gnostic Sufism, Islamic Sufism

Hellenism or Hellenistic philosophies were developed between (323-31) BC. Hellenistic beliefs played a major part in the formation of certain sects in Islam who later began to refer to themselves as (Hellenistic) Sufis.

The Hellenistic Sufis are of 3 types, those who practice (i) *Philosophical Sufism*, (ii) *Theosophical Sufism*, and (iii) *Gnostic Sufism*.

Each category of Sufism mentioned above can be further broken down into two sub-categories, (a) *those who claim Sufism is an independent religion that predates Islam*, and (b) *those who synchronize Hellenistic philosophies with the teachings of Islam* by interpreting Quranic and Prophetic injunctions, subjecting them to Hellenistic philosophies to portray Hellenistic Islam as real Islam.

## Philosophical Sufism

*Al-Kindi (801-873) CE* was an Arab philosopher from Kufa, Iraq, who translated most of the Greek philosophical works into Arabic. Scholars agree that under the influence of those translations, *Abu Nasr Al-Farabi (872-950) CE* of Persian descent, who lived in Baghdad, was the first Muslim scholar who embraced Neoplatonism. And

through him, Neoplatonism made an entry into the Muslim philosophy. He tried to reconcile the opinions of Plato and Aristotle into Islamic scholarship, treating Plato as a mystical figure. In his writings, he created an '*Imam*' (like Plato's King maker) whose understanding of truth is intuitive and his knowledge was practical. He led people through his writings to realize that he was the Imam whose understanding of truth is intuitive, and his knowledge was practical. Some of his musical compositions later became part of the recitations in some Sufi orders in Turkey and Indian Sub-continent.

*Avicenna (Ibn Sina) (981–1037) CE*, born in Bukhara, was a follower of Al-Farabi. He embraced certain concepts of Aristotle, Plato, and Neoplatonism in his philosophical writings. Some people say that he was a rationalist who had nothing to do with mysticism, while others say that Avicenna had embraced mysticism as is reflected in some of his later works.

Another important philosopher who followed ancient Greek philosophies was, *Shahabuddin Yahya Ibn Habash Suhrawardi (1154-1191) CE*. He was a Persian philosopher and the founder of the Iranian philosophy of Illumination (فلسفه اشراق) based on Zoroastrian and Platonic ideas. In his famous book '*The Philosophy of Illumination*' (فلسفه اشراق), he describes himself as a reviver of the ancient tradition of Persian wisdom. He claims the 'light' (illumination) of his knowledge is divine and metaphysical. In other words he is portraying himself as divine/godman.

**Author's Note:** Habash Suhanwardi is not to be confused with Shaikh Shahabuddin Abu Hafs Umar Suhrawardi (1145-1234) CE, the Shaikh of Suhurwardiyya Sufi order, who wrote his magnum opus in Islamic Sufism (التصوف الإسلامي) titled 'Awarif al-Ma'arif'. Habash Suhrawardi's

'Philosophy of illumination' (فلسفه اشراق) is different from Islamic Sufism (التصوف الإسلامي) followed by Shaikh Umar Suhrawardi.

Habash Suhrawardi's philosophy revolves around the principle of divine unity hidden in Zoroastrianism, in ancient Hellenic and Hermetic philosophers, and in Hindu and Egyptian traditions. He claimed, '*Divine Secret Wisdom*' (الحكمة اللدنية) is universal, and predates Islam, which passed directly from Hermes (Herald of gods in ancient Greek religion and mythology) to Egypt and Persia. The Egyptian branch eventually extended to Greece. From Greece, it poured its *beneficent light* into Islamic civilization.

## Theosophical Sufism

*Theosophy* is a philosophy that supports the argument that the knowledge of God can be achieved through direct intuition, spiritual ecstasy and special individual relationship with God. You can be the follower of any religion. The knowledge of God can be achieved even without following a religion because theosophical philosophy, in itself, is a religion. Based on this philosophy, a 'theosophists society' was established in the USA in 1875. The founder of this philosophy was Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891).

We have categorized theosophical Sufism into two types, namely (i) related to non-Muslims, and (ii) related to certain Muslim sects.

### (i) Theosophical Sufism related to Non-Muslims

The theosophy related to non-Muslims is subdivided as follows.

#### (a) Christian theosophy

Christian theosophy focuses on the attainment of direct, unmediated knowledge of the nature of divinity and the origin and purpose of the universe.

#### (b) Jewish theosophy

Jewish Theosophy seeks to understand and describe the divine realm.

#### (c) Neo-theosophy

Neo-theosophy is a term used by the followers of Blavatsky, to denominate the system of theosophical ideas expounded by Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater of theosophical society, who took charge of the theosophical society after the death of Blavatsky. The objectives of Neo-theosophy were (i) to form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color, (ii) to encourage the study of philosophy, science and comparative religion and (iii) to investigate laws of Nature and the powers hidden in human beings.

Neo-theosophical writers hold that there is a deeper spiritual reality and that direct contact with that reality can be established through intuition, meditation, revelation, or some other state transcending normal human consciousness.

### (ii) Theosophical Sufism related to certain Muslim sects

The theosophy related to certain Muslim sects is known as '*Transcendent (divine) theosophy*', which was developed by Persian Shia philosopher, Mulla Sadra.

Sadrudin Muhammad bin Ibrahim bin Yahya Qawami Shirazi, popularly known as Mulla Sadra (1571-1640) CE, an Iranian Shia philosopher, was heir to philosophers like Al-Farabi, Ibn Sena and Habash Suhrawardi. He was dedicated to the traditional forms of logical arguments that are based on mental understanding, rather than beliefs which come from religious (Islamic) faith and tradition. His use of the Quranic verses and prophetic traditions were mainly confined to secondary or supportive arguments for his beliefs. In other words, he used to interpret the Quranic verses and Ahadith to fit his theosophical ideas. He claimed that mystical inspiration, intellectual intuition, and revelation to prophets, are related to the same source, therefore, the prophetic revelations can be interpreted and subjected to intellectual intuitions and inspirations of philosophers / sages. He considered philosophy as more than a reasoning inquiry. It is a mode of 'being' and a way of life whose goal is wisdom and the cultivation of a holy life in which the sage

(philosopher / scholar) strikes a resemblance to the divine lord (Plato's Theaetetus). This is the Neoplatonic definition of philosophy that reconciles Plato and Aristotle. Mulla Sadra claimed that, in philosophy, the human acquires a resemblance to the Creator and creates a rational order to the cosmos. This is exactly like Plato's 'demiurge', who knows the essences and forms of things that exist in the Cosmos and can ascribe a rational order to the Universe.

Since early 19th century, Mulla Sadra's philosophy has become the dominant philosophical paradigm in Shia and Ammani sects among Muslims.

Theosophical Sufism was revived in early 21<sup>st</sup> century (in 2004-05) when Amman Message was developed by King Abdullah II of Jordan, in coordination with the Salafi Royal family of Saudi Arabia. Amman Message was attested by hundreds of Ammani Scholars in the world. Shaikh Nazim Haqqani, Dr. Taher-ul-Qadri, etc., are famous Scholars in this regard.

Modern theosophists (also known as) Ammanis claim that all world religions contain similar inner teaching in their sacred texts. They claim that all religions are truthful and followers of all religions, including Jews, Christians, Buddhists, etc., and people belonging to all sects within Muslims, are believers who will get salvation in Hereafter. They claim whoever believes in one God, irrespective of his perception, or attachment of divinity with other than God, is a believer. With this logic the Makkan pagans are also believers as they believed in Allah (Quran 10-31). Ammanis consider, belief in Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) is optional; meaning, you can believe in him or do not believe in him, you remain a believer.

Ammanis started compilation of an Ammani Quran in 2005 after the declaration of Amman Message. A team of perennial scholars headed by Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Iranian born Shia scholar based in the United States, was chosen to compile this Quran.

After 10 years work, the new Ammani Quran titled 'The Study Quran' was published in line with Christian Bible and Jewish Torah/Talmud. It does not contain verses of Quran in Arabic. One must read only English version of Ammani interpretation of Quranic verses.

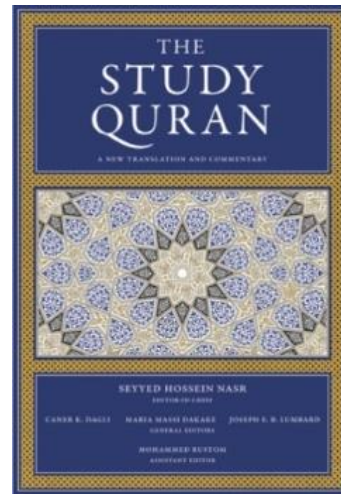


Figure 1: The Study Quran

*Perennialism* or Perennial philosophy has its roots in *Platonism* which was condemned by Al-Ghazali (1058–1111) during his lifetime. Perennialism is also known as '*Universalism*' and '*Traditionalism*'. This is based on the philosophy that all religions are truthful, and followers of every religion will attain salvation. In Indian sub-Continent, this school of thought is known as '*Sulah-e-Kullî*'.

### Gnostic Sufism

Gnostic Sufism can be categorized into two types, namely (i) Non-Muslim Gnostic Sufism, and (ii) the Gnosticism Sufism of certain Muslim Sects.

#### (i) Non-Muslim Gnosticism

Scholars agree that Gnosticism was originated in 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE in the Jewish and certain early Christian sects. It is reported that during this time, many gnostic schools/groups were identified as '*Jewish-Christians*' by the orthodox pastors and priests of the church. Gnostic groups emphasized personal spiritual knowledge (gnosis) over orthodox teachings, traditions, and religious authority. They believed in a supreme hidden

God and a blind 'Demiurge' who is responsible for creating the material universe. This 'Demiurge' has trapped the divine spark in matter. Thus, they considered material existence as evil and the only way to salvation was direct knowledge of the supreme divine by way of mystical or esoteric insight. This is the reason, Gnostic texts deal with illusion and enlightenment. In the Gnostic-Christian tradition, Christ is seen as a 'divine being' which has taken human form in order to lead humanity back to the enlightenment.

It is important to mention about an issue related to Christian Gnosticism here as it has been a subject of debate for a long time among Christian sects and between Christians and Muslims.

Orthodox Christians, who believe in trinity, three gods, the heavenly father god, the son of god (Jesus Christ) and the holy ghost, all divine, do not subscribe to Christian Gnostics for two primary reasons, (i) Gnostics emphasize personal intuition (spiritual knowledge) over orthodox traditions and church authority in Christianity, (ii) the Christian-Gnostics believe that Jesus did not die on the cross, rather his look alike died on the cross and Jesus went to heaven, unharmed. This is against the Christian orthodox believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross, then resurrected and ascended to heaven.

The Quran condemned the Christian Orthodox belief in Trinity. Quran testified that (Isa عليه السلام) did not die on the cross but was taken to the other world alive.

#### (ii) The Gnostic Sufism of certain Muslim Sects

Ibn al-Muqaffa (d 756 CE), a Persian author and thinker, depicted the Islamic God as a demonic entity who *'fights with humans and boasts about His victories, sitting on a throne, from which He can also descend'*. He argued that it would be impossible that both light and darkness were created from one source because they are regarded as two different eternal principles.

Muslim theologians countered this accusation by the example of a repenting sinner, who says, '*I*

*sinned, and I repent'*, which proves that evil and good can come out from the same source.

Gnostic Sufis belonging to certain Muslim sects believe that Satan is more powerful than anyone else, thus he rules the material world in a manner that resembles the Christian-Gnostic 'Demiurge'. They claimed that in Quran, like in Gnostic Cosmology, there is a distinction between this world and the afterlife. They regard Iblis (Satan) as the owner of this world. Humans must avoid the treasures of this world, since they all belong to Satan.

In the Isma'ili Shia work 'Ummul Kitab', Satan's (Azazil's) role resembles the Christian-Gnostic demiurge. Like the demiurge, he is endowed with the ability to create his own world and is capable of imprisoning humans in the material world. However, his power is limited and depends on the higher God. Ismaili philosophy was criticized by Al-Ghazali who said Ismailis are adherents of a dualistic and philosophical Gnostic religion.

As per Islamic teaching, unlike most Gnostic sects, not rejection of this world as evil, but performing good deeds leads one to heaven. In Islamic belief of one God, there is no room for a lower God like 'Demiurge'. In Islam, both good and evil come from one God, a position especially opposed by the followers of Manichaeans (philosophical dualism).

#### A cross comparison with Islamic Sufism

A question can be raised as to why certain Muslim scholars were attracted to ancient Greek philosophies and formed sects within Muslims?

The logical answer to the above question is, these philosophers were not trained in Islamic Sufism and were not part of any genuine Islamic Sufi order. All these scholars made the mistake of independent reading and forming wrongful opinions during Islamic history. The Salafi scholar Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), is a glaring example in this context who is considered as the founder of Salafi/Wahhabi sect among Muslims. The followers of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703-1792) are known as Salafis, Deobandis and their likeminded groups. They misinterpret

certain Quranic verses and Ahadith and claim God to have a planetary-size physical body, who is sitting over the skies and knows about his creatures/humans only by his knowledge as he cannot come near them.

Muslims believe that all Quranic verses whose textual meanings indicate creature like attributes for Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) are allegorical which should be understood in their proper perspective so that the basic Islamic faith remains intact. Since Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) is free from creature like attributes, then the meanings of these verses depict His omnipotence, magnanimity, and His presence throughout the skies and the material world.

Some Muslim Kings tried to mix other religious theories into Islamic teaching like Emperor Akbar of the Mughal Empire in India with his *Deen-e-Ilahi* faith. But they were refuted by the Islamic scholars of their times.

Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina were the first to attempt the synchronization of Hellenistic theories with Islamic teachings. Later, the learned students of Islamic Sufism took up pen for writing books on these subjects so that people are made aware of Islamic Sufism (Ihsan). Among these scholars, Al-Ghazali is the most prominent.

### Hellenistic Sufi beliefs that were refuted by Islamic Sufi scholars

The major Hellenistic Sufi beliefs are listed below. All of these beliefs have been condemned and refuted by Islamic Sufi scholars (Shuyookh of Ihsan) throughout the history of Islam.

- (i) Islamic Sufism is the same as Mystic theories of other religions.
- (ii) Sufism predates Islam and is an independent religion and all Islamic Sufis are included in it.
- (iii) The faith of all religions is truthful. Follow any religion with sincerity, you will get salvation in Hereafter.
- (iv) Belief in one God is enough for anyone to be a believer even if he associates divine beings with him or associates such as a spouse, children or family.

(v) God has a physical planetary size body and he cannot come near his creatures. God can lie and to lie is within his powers. However, he chooses not to lie.

(vi) There is no need to have belief in Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم). Only belief in one God is enough for Salvation.

(vii) You can be a Muslim and at the same time you can visit Christian Churches, Hindu / Buddhist / Sikh Temples, Jewish Synagogues, etc., and participate in their prayers.

(viii) Incarnation and transmigration of soul is possible.

(ix) There is no Life after death or resurrection and Judgement day.

(x) Oral recitation of Islamic testimony without believing or understanding the real meanings is enough for salvation in Hereafter.

### Conclusion

Islamic beliefs are clear, well scripted and amply explained in the Quran and Prophet's (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) traditions. These beliefs have been defended by Islamic Sufis and Sahih-ul-Aqeedah Islamic scholars throughout the history of Islam. The people who have been misled from the theories of non-Islamic philosophers / sages / gurus are those who have opted for independent study of these scholars without attempting to train themselves under the guidance of Islamic Sufis of Ihsan. They have misled themselves and through their writings many others have been misled in the Islamic world and formed sects within Muslims. It is important that people know these facts to remain on the right path of Islam.

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