

Sufism: modern fantasies?

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Sabieh Anwar

The fruits of Sufism are too often cut adrift from their Islamic roots, becoming something to consume but failing to transform

Ali Hujwari (d1077) in his excellent treatise on sufism *Kashf-ul-mahjoob* ('The divulgence of the secret') remarks on the danger of being misled by labels. Sufism or mysticism is one such label: it may mean a movement, an institution, or perhaps another aspect of religious psychology. In the same spirit, Hujwari remarks, "In the time of the companions of the Prophet (pbuh) and their immediate successors this name did not exist, but its reality was in everyone. Now the name exists, without the reality." Is Sufism just another "unfortunate name" for a greatly varied discourse? Has its meaning changed over time? Is it a denomination, a science, or a set of morals? Finally, how best to recognise it – as a fact-denying, life-shuddering asceticism, or nothing simpler and more beautiful than the inner dimension of Islam?



The new Sufism is cannabis for escapist minds, and offers refuge in a synthetic tranquility



Writing about Sufism is difficult for the same reasons. It is like writing about a diffuse, shapeless and essentially subjective area of a uniquely human sensation. It touches upon religion, civilisation and virtually the whole of life itself. Understanding the full force of mysticism, let alone explaining it, is nothing short of impossible. As such mysticism is an experience, and, to make speaking of this even more problematic, the nature of this experience teaches silence.

This "silence" is commonplace among mystics. "To explain something you would need words that are more subtle than what is to be expressed – and what is more subtle than love? How would one then explain love?" Thus the mystic Sumnun Baghdadi (ca 900) put it, as

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quoted by Hujweri in his book. The experienced mystic therefore speaks less and the speechless “common folk” are expected to only gaze at the miracles of this silence. Betraying this principle can sometimes lead to the dungeon (Mujaddid Alif Thani, d 1624), the executioner (Shahab Suhurwardi, d 1191), or to the gibbet (Mansur Hallaj, d 922).

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It seems as though we are lost in a dense forest teeming with exotic plants, covered in a canopy of overgrowth with divine sunlight shimmering in between the branches, yet all we can hear is the rustling of leaves. Where do we go from here? Is silence all we can treat our ears to? Is that all an engineer like myself, whose heart has never been touched by the tips of an angel’s wing, can say about this complicated science of the senses? If this were the case, this would be the end of this story, the shortest I ever wrote. But I have slightly more to say. That is because I feel and observe, and the more I feel and observe, the more I am bewildered.

My bewilderment comes from the diversity ingrained in the *modern* Sufi way. Let me give you an example of this diversity: Sometimes I find some of my best friends wavering into the dark alleys of pretentious but hollow mysticism, distancing themselves from the humdrum of a challenging life. Sometimes, on the media, between the headlines, I can also find the biggest perpetrators of injustice preaching tolerance and submission and guiding us to the way of the recluse, all under the guise of Sufism. Alongside these negative experiences, I also have the positive ones. For example, I must also admit that my brief encounters with a true sheikh are more valuable to me than treasures. His bright perpetually smiling face and sparkling eyes surely speak of his inner purity. Being engrossed in daily businesses, he still clings heartfast to his inner goals. Such practitioners of the mystic fraternity run huge philanthropic projects, help the poor and the needy, and do not look down upon mortal sinners. Love is their preaching but not their only expertise. Besides being masters of the inner sciences (*tariqah*) they are also versed in the knowledge of worship and human action (*shariah*). Such men of astounding character are a unique synthesis of the three realms of the intellectual, spiritual and the ritual.

This diverse purport of mysticism, as practiced today, leads me to two observations. First, Sufism can also be taken out of religious context and reduced to a fashion or a mere fantasy for the disenchanting. Second, Sufism can also become an incentive against action. The inaction of individuals can lead to their communities becoming submissive. Is there a need to reactivate and reinvigorate the true activist spirit of a humanist Islamist Sufism? – If debate is allowed for

reviving a sacred Islam, then why not Sufism itself?

First, modern Sufism is Sufism decontextualised. This is the shadowy glitter that attracts educated yet lost young people. These youth are generally disillusioned and visionless, and modern Sufism takes them to a distant oasis of mirages. Their thoughts are scattered like bits of broken glass; modern Sufism picks up these shards and assembles them into nothing more than a mirror. Minds are bent upon questioning, but modern Sufism throws them into further confusion. The new Sufism is cannabis for escapist minds, and offers refuge in a synthetic tranquillity.

Among some, this phantasmagoria becomes a fashion. Pop music fused with the tunes of Sufi voices can intoxicate the masses. Even as the melodies of Christian Gnostics are unsung and unheard, Rumi's (d 1273) words enjoy a reincarnation in the West. As poetry becomes an expensive luxury for spiritually poor societies, collections of Rumi's verse shatter the half-million sales mark. The Muslim mystic from Iran and Afghanistan, fleeing to seek refuge from an imperialist Genghis and the warmongering of the Crusades, becomes representative of an Islam that Americans can love.

Is it acceptable to be thus burnt by a mysticism based in religion without ever entering the fire? Followers of this fashionable mysticism attempt to drown while wearing their lifejackets. This attitude, this buffet mysticism teleports a Muslim saint like Rumi out of his cultural and deeply religious context. But do we forget that Rumi's *Mathnavi* was so impregnated with religious fervour, that the later Sufi poet Jami (d 1492) called it the "Quran of the Persian language"?

The second observation, which I find more important and is not unconnected to the first, is about a resurgence of interest in the mystic way by imperial powers. There was a time when mystic fraternities in Algeria, Central Asia, Sudan, Libya and the subcontinent were the breeding grounds for anti-colonialist movements. Hence the Algerian Abd-al-Qadir (d 1883) and the Daghestani Imam Shamil (d 1871) fought the French and the Russians respectively. While the desert or mountain-dwelling Sufis were considered uncivilised by the colonisers, there was a blossoming of understanding between the allied powers and the Wahhabi-inspired Arab royalties after World War I. But more recently, the scenario has reversed. Now the imperialist West has few problems with accommodating Sufism, yet it is suspicious of the reactionary streaks of Wahhabi Islam. An unchallenging doctrine is what suits injustice best. In this respect, inaction is an imperialist's best friend and sponsored Sufism can always be a means to preach a

tolerance that suits one party only.

So every modern spiritual experiment comes with a word of caution: to appreciate the fine difference between the abstract and the mythical, the prophetic and the mystical. Sufism can become a potent force if it doesn't celebrate inaction and mindless compromise, but instead makes the possible happen and protects the wronged from the wrongdoers, upholding dignity, freedom and humane justice, at the level of the individual or of whole nations.

What all this boils down to is that in modern times the internal can no longer function without the external. The esoteric and the exoteric must be wedded together in companionship. The heart and the intellect must infuse into one whole. The mystic experiment must pass beyond its intrinsic inertness by making itself felt by way of action and activism, rather than mere experience.

The difference between the "mystic" and the "prophetic" experiences is best exemplified in the Prophet's (pbuh) Ascension, or *mairaj*. On that very night his mystic experience was of the highest calibre: seeing the Divine Presence unveiled. But this beatific effulgence was important for the Prophet (pbuh) in another respect as well. The union did not teach him dissolution; rather it consolidated his mission. In his subsequent life, in addition to spiritually and morally cleansing the hearts of his peoples, the Prophet (pbuh) was to prepare the most disciplined nation of its times. Iqbal (d 1938) teaches us the same moral from the Ascension, that although the unitive experience is transient, it "leaves a deep sense of authority as it has passed away". Mysticism can thus be used as a locked treasure to conquer matter as well as the spirit. Compared to this, what use is mysticism that enraptures and intoxicates the soul but doesn't affirm and consolidate it? The prophetic experience teaches us to not be satisfied with inner transformation. It is in the same vein, that we can understand Iqbal when he writes the following verse to the Sufi of his times.

Your vision sees only a world of miracles,

My vision however sees a spectacle of obstacles.

Agreed, the world of imagination is full of fancy,

But fancier is my stage of life and many deaths.

It is longing for your transforming gaze,

Enter, step foot into my world of possibility.

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