

A Mystic Union: Reaching Sufi Women

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Sufism or Islamic mysticism was incorporated into orthodox Islam during the early Middle Ages. Sufi worldview and values, however, can often differ markedly from the faith of other Muslims. In this article Cynthia Strong explains Sufism's history and attraction and suggests a biblical response.

The rhythmic, mnemonic *dhikr* or chant of Sufi Muslims draws us into a world little known or understood by Westerners. It is a call that differs from the formal Muslim *salat*, or prayer; a call to a spiritual rather than family lineage; a search for salvation that ends in self-extinction rather than paradise. It is a way of self-discipline in the midst of emotion; a poetry that informs the heart rather than the mind; an ecstatic experience and, for many, a spiritual union that results in supernatural powers. For Sufi Muslims, the Five Pillars and the *Shari'ah* law can be dry and lifeless. Longing for a direct experience with God and a spiritual advisor who can guide them through the temptations of this world, Sufis belong to a community that brings unique spiritual dimensions to formal Islam. In its vitality, simplicity, aesthetics and worldwide links, Sufism poses a significant challenge to Christian mission. To address it, we must reflect not only on Sufi history and practice but also understand all we are and have in Christ Jesus. Reaching Sufis may urge us to recover some of the spiritual dynamic inherent in the gospel itself.

A SHORT HISTORY OF SUFISM

Sufism is often described as one of three Sects within Islam along with Sunnis and Shiites. More accurately, Sufism is a mystical spiritual dynamic that can be found everywhere in the Muslim world. The word "Sufi" is thought to come from the Arab word *suf* or "wool" or *safa*, meaning "purity," reminiscent of the clothing and piety of early ascetics (Shah 1933:18). Like other religious movements there were several stages in its development.

Early Sufism had many similarities to Christian monasticism. Following the death of Muhammad, Sufi Muslims opposed the growing wealth and decadence of Abbasid rulers. They renounced material pleasures, practiced asceticism, and even wept out of fear of being rejected by God (Subhan 1938:11). Their simple trust in God for all things, Smith suggests, "very possibly," originated in the Christian gospel (1994:62, 105).

As Islam expanded, Muslims came into contact with conquered cultures and different religious traditions. In the process, Sufism was loosed from its simple Semitic origins and became more philosophically complex, incorporating aspects of Neoplatonism from Greek philosophy as well as Hindu and Persian mysticism (Johns 1961:14). While this made Islam more attractive to Persians, Chinese and East Indians with their vast speculative religions it often violated *tawhid*, or strict Islamic monotheism.

Several changes in Sufi worldview resulted from this encounter. First, as in Hinduism, God became less distinct from His creation. Since ‘only Absolute Reality is absolutely real’ (Glassé 1989:375) the physical world was often seen as God’s emanation rather than an *ex nihilo* creation. The material world was therefore either a source of temptation to be avoided or an illusion without practical significance.

The way of salvation changed as well. The *tariqah*, or Sufi path, gradually incorporated East Asian ascetic practices into the Five Pillars, including spiritual guides and altered states of consciousness (Glassé 1989:374). The goal of Sufis became a Hindu-like *ma’rifa* or self-absorption in God rather than an eternity in paradise. Ascending from one altered state of consciousness to another, the Sufi worked to become the “Perfect Man” who realized the God within (Gibb 1953: 115). Through the work of philosophers like Ibn al‘Arabi (d. 1240) Sufism in the ninth through eleventh centuries shifted from moral self-control to a mystical knowledge that often rejected the need for *Shari’ah* law (1953:115). Because Sufis followed this Gnostic pantheistic theology, used music and delighted in ecstatic experience they were often considered heretical by orthodox Muslims.

In the twelfth century this changed. A successful Persian lawyer named Al-Ghazzali grew weary with the strict requirements of the religious law. Trying to find real knowledge or *‘ilm*, by reason, he was surprised to discover it in mystical experience, “by a flash of light God Sent into my soul” (Glassé 1989:138). Al-Ghazzali recognized that only someone totally devoted to God could fulfill the strict demands of the Qur’an. Thereafter, he replaced pantheistic Sufi teachings with teachings from the Qur’an and Hadith and brought Sufism into conformity with Islamic law. After al-Ghazzali (d. 1111), the Sufi goal was no longer self-absorption in God, but a ethical union of God and human beings in love. Subhan argues that this synthesis brought Islamic Sufism “much closer to the Christian conception” and resulted in its widespread approval and appeal within Islam (1938:26- 28). Despite al-Ghazzali’s work, tensions with heretical versions of Sufism have continued throughout Muslim history Orthodox *shayhs* and *pirs* will subordinate the non-Islamic elements in Sufism to the teachings of the Qur’an and *Sunnah*. Others, however, like the great Sufi poet Rumi, will follow its pantheistic streams of thought (Johns 1961:13).

In the eighteenth century Sufism was again threatened in a confrontation with Wahhabi legalists. Inspired by Ibn Taymiyyah and the conservative Hanbali school of law, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhab rejected Sufism as *bid‘ah* or innovation. He rejected Sufi interpretations of the Qur’an for more literal readings, opposed the intercession of saints, destroyed shrines throughout Saudi Arabia, and condemned the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday (Haj 2002). Even so, Sufism has survived. Denounced by fundamentalist groups like al-Qaeda today Sufism is still viewed by many as the most vibrant and active expression of Muslim faith (Burckhardt 1990:3). In view of these successive waves of opposition, what are the elements that have enabled it to survive?

The Sufi Worldview

The popularity of Sufism can be traced to its promise to provide direct access to God. According to the Muslim doctrine of *tawhid*, the creator is a sovereign and transcendent ruler, holding sway

over a cosmic hierarchy of stars and planets, minerals, plants, animals, angels and good *jinn* (Bahktiar 1996:73). To pray to other beings or seek their help is considered the gravest of sins, *shirk* (al Wahhab 1992:43). The very transcendence of God, however, works against knowing him and experiencing him personally. For many, an intercessor or link with God is needed. Sufis found permission for this link in the Qur'an. Although the Qur'an forbids worshipping other deities (Q 22:12) it appears to leave the possibility of intercession open—to the “one whom God would choose” (Q 20:109, cf. Q 43:86). Sufis believe that this intercessor, this point of contact with God, is the “great Master:” Muhammad himself, whom they believe first taught esoteric Islam to his Companions (Glassé 1989:376).

Muhammad's superiority over other intercessors and right to intercede is drawn partly from the Hadith. In the *Mir'aj*, Muhammad's night journey to heaven, he is said to have traveled to Jerusalem and ascended through seven levels of heaven on a human-faced horse. Passing through 1,000 veils of light and darkness, he was reputedly greeted by all the prophets, entrusted with the secret of creation and empowered to understand all things (Kibbani 1995:87). Sufis believe, as a result, that Muhammad existed before the creation of the world and that God continues to reveal himself through him (Subhan 1938:58).

The primary metaphor for this concept in Sufism is light: “Allah is the light and Muhammad is his light” (Q 24:35). While Wahhabi Muslims may dispute Muhammad's right to intercede and oppose his celebration in stories and songs, his status among the majority of Muslims is unrivaled. This should help us understand the extent of Muslim devotion for Muhammad. In the Philippines when a Muslim patient read a devotional denouncing Muhammad at his hospital bedside all the community's anger was unleashed against the hospital and the missionaries who served there.

In the worldview of Sufis, Muhammad reveals God. But he also, through God, connects devotees with supernatural beings and powers in the universe. One of these powers is *barakah*, a spiritual blessing or influence that Muhammad received from God and thereafter transmitted to his disciples (Glassé 1989:176). The power of *barakah* is crucial in Islam, given the prominence of the evil eye, malevolent *jinn* and other dangers described in the Qur'an and hadith (cf. *Hadith of al-Muwatta* 50.1, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11). The souls of ordinary people are unable to transmit it, however, being impure and undeveloped. *Shaykhs* and *pirs* alone can disseminate this power and protect their followers from its adverse affects (Ewing 1983:255-256). According to Ewing, Sufis envision this power flowing from God through Muhammad to the Kaba in Mecca at the center of the world and from there to other areas of the dar al Islam or House of Islam (1983:254). *Shaykhs* and *pirs*, through their spiritual mastery and closeness to the Prophet, act as conduits of this grace as it flows from God through angelic beings to human beings (Kabbani 1995:20). Whether by uttering a verse of the Qur'an, writing out an amulet or conducting exorcisms that control the *jinn*, the *shaykh* or *pir* is believed to mediate God's grace on earth, channeling the wisdom and blessing of Muhammad and dispensing God's *barakah* to devotees (Ewing 1984:110-112). Finally spiritual guides or *walis*, each a descendent of Muhammad with his own specific territory will pass it on to individual Sufis in their respective groups (Ewing 1983:254). As the conveyor of knowledge about God and the source of his *barakah*, Muhammad is unparalleled in Sufi thought.

Sufism also provides a way of knowing God through its philosophical assumptions. In Islam, human beings are born Muslim and pure. They believe Adam's sin was not the beginning of original sin but simply a mistake forgiven by God. The reason humans sin, they believe, is because they are ignorant of God's law and refuse to submit to it. Recovery comes when a person says the *shahadah* or creed. At that moment, Muslims believe, their sins are forgiven and they recover their original *fitrah* or primordial purity (Bakhtiar 1996:18). Thereafter, if they respond to their lower nature or *nafs* and are led away from rationality and God, they sin. As long as they depend on their rational nature or *aqal* Muslims believe they can know God's laws and discipline themselves to achieve a good character. In short, a person's fleshly energies need to be controlled by a balance of reason and knowledge. Knowledge is provided by the use of reason in studying the Qur'an and the Hadith. Self-discipline comes through diligent practice of the Five Pillars of Islam. The importance of striving against the lower self in Muslim thought is evident in the concept of *jihad*: it is the lesser *jihad* in Islam to fight against God's enemies; the greater *jihad* is to overcome the temptations of their fleshly self, the *nafs* (Subhan 1938:96).

Sufism, thus, provides a connection with God and offers a path of deliverance from the *nafs*. Only through the guidance of *shaykhs* and *pirs*, however, can Sufis find their way to "the Perfect Man." Spiritual leaders are tasked with guiding their devotees along a path of deliverance from the *nafs* by "remembering God" (Q. 18:23). Whether in seclusion, group meditation or the practice of *dhikr*, Sufis "remember God" by reciting the Ninety-Nine Names of God and using the *subha* or rosary. They will also remember him in each act, reciting the *shahadah* (there is no God but God), the *hamdalah* (Praise be to God) and the *tasbih* (God be glorified) as a means of concentration. Even the obligatory daily prayers or *salat* can strengthen self-control. As Siegel explains, "through the five prayers humans can achieve dominance over the animal nature" (2000:115).

For many Sufis, rhythmic chanting also leads to a spiritual encounter. In the *dhikr*, concentration on the names of God results in trance and "in the mature" to a "union with God." Some Sufis report out-of-the-body experiences or "see their soul sitting on the ceiling" (Baktiar 1996:88). One man, after a forty day fast "was given two angels to always be with him and protect him like lions" (Baktiar 1996:89). When guided by a *pir*, Sufis believe their efforts toward self-discipline and the loss of self in trance can tame the "animal energies of lust and power." The devotee longs through *dhikr* to return to his or her original reason and a true love for God (Baktiar 1996:6-13).

Rabi'ah, one of the greatest of female Sufis, illustrates this progression. Born in 717 CE in Bosra, Rabi'ah was a slave who fasted in the daytime and served God through prayers and *dhikr* at night. Freed, she reputedly overcame her *nafs* through spiritual exercises and spent the rest of her life in continuous remembrance of Allah. Modest and humble, she arrived at the place "where she depended only on God" (Smith 1994:22-24).

Worldwide, women like Rabi'ah participate in Sufism in various ways. Among the Somali, women may belong to their own *tariqah*, or Sufi order. Like women in other Sufi orders, they trace their spiritual lineage and *barakah* back to Muhammad's daughter, Fatima. Women in

Turkey may participate from the back of the room as the *shaykh* leads the *dhikr*. Still others will endow a Sufi order as a patron. Most women, however, participate by appealing to saints since the availability of shrines and festivals make large-scale participation possible (Lewis 1984:138). Shiite women will seek the help of departed *imams* while Sunni women will make vows at the shrines of Sunni *shaykhs*. The use of photo cards in place of shrines is also common. In one Middle Eastern country a missionary woman was walking by a neighbor's house when she was asked if she was pregnant. When she said "no" the woman rushed to wave the photo of a Sufi saint across her abdomen believing this would give her the *barakah* she needed. In Pakistan women may ask the *pir* to help with fatigue, to produce an amulet for a sick child, or to give advice if the woman's husband is unfaithful (Ewing 1984:109). Central Asian women will depend on the saints' power to defend them from the evil eye. Increasingly even North American women are turning to Sufism. Drawn by Eastern music and incense to meetings in strip malls, women participate in *dhikr* to rid themselves of selfishness and pride, overcome their dependence on alcoholism and return to their *fitrah* or pure, "primordial nature" (Bakhtiar 1996:18).

RESPONDING TO SUFI WOMEN

To reach Sufi women we must understand their worldview. John Subhan was a member of the Qadari onier before he converted to Christ and wrote an assessment of their beliefs. To help them understand the Christian faith he suggests we first must know the difference between the Sufi concept of God and the Judeo-Christian understanding of God (Subhan 1938:320). In Neoplatonism, like Sufism, there is no sense of a holy God. There is also no trace of God's work to bridge the gulf between God and human beings through a holy sacrifice. The illusion that one can find union with Him through self-purification, thus, is easy to maintain.

Second, we must understand the true power behind the Sufi cult of saints. As we have seen, the doctrine of *tawhid* forbids dependence on anyone else but God (Subhan 1938:320). While Sufis try to circumvent this by tracing the powers of the *pir* back to Muhammad, the result is a naive dependence on human beings and the veiled demonic powers that give them power. We must demonstrate to women how they can trust God alone.

Third, we must show how Jesus is different from other saints. The Bible teaches that God is most fully revealed through His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ (John 1:1-17). Passages in John are difficult to teach, however since Sufis see all mystical impulses as identical. They will separate Jesus from his biblical setting, for instance, and describe him as "the most perfect type of contemplative saint" rather than as our savior (Burkhardt 1990:8). They will see his teaching on forgiveness and his command to turn our cheek as "true spiritual detachment" rather than the work of the Holy Spirit in the redeemed (Burkhardt 1990:8). These descriptions are in Sufi, not biblical, terms. To help them find the biblical understanding of Christ we will need to lay a new groundwork, correlating the life of Christ in the New Testament with its foundation in the Old Testament so it can be properly understood.

Fourth, we must know the stages of the Sufi path. Many of these sound familiar to Christians. Sufis also speak of "repentance" desire a "vision of God," long to "remember God" in every deed

and follow a simple way of life. Their means of salvation, however, is through a loss of self in trance and the nature of their salvation is absorption in God. Since these are vastly different ideas from salvation in the gospel how are we to confront this message?

First, Sufis, like other Muslims, must be presented not with doctrines or beliefs but with a Christian worldview. That is, we must paint for them the picture of a holy creator God searching for his loved ones in a fallen world. As we have seen, God is great in Islam but Muslims essentially achieve salvation through their own efforts, gaining self-discipline through the Five Pillars and relying on Muhammad's intercession and *barakah* (Subhan 1938:77). In Christian belief God is far greater—holy exalted and unreachable by human efforts. The sinful person cannot understand the things of God or submit to his perfect law (Rom. 8:6-8). The Bible teaches that only God's Spirit can illuminate our minds and convict us of sin (Jn 14:26; 1 Cor 2:6-16).

Second, we must explain Christ's power to overcome sin. Rabi'ah recognized that sin harms the soul because it can separate it from the Beloved. She believed, however, that she could overcome her sin through self-discipline. Such overconfidence in the flesh diminishes the awful reality and power of sin. In the Bible, the point is not that envy, selfishness and pride must be overcome, but that a soul completely dead to God and enslaved in sin must be born again (Rom. 6:5-10, John 3:16). Only Christ's victory over death reconciles us with God (Ro 5:10, 2 Cor 5:18). Only by being born again of the Spirit can we have mastery over sin (Rom. 6:11-14). Through Christ, we are not resuscitated; we become a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). The reality of God's presence in each believer also means that we are all, each one, a conduit of God's power and blessing; each believer, while benefiting from the spiritual gifts of others, has direct ties to God in Christ.

Third, we must understand the deception of supernatural powers. Power, as we have seen, is of central concern in Sufism. In the *dhikr*, the Sufi is surrounded by powers they believe are from God. Without biblical criteria to test these spirits, however, the danger of deception is real. When Rabi'ah asked God if he would allow a heart that loved him to burn in hell, an unseen voice answered, "We shall not do this. Do not think of us an evil thought" (Smith 1994:124). Sufis also believe that the final stages of the Sufi path are "beyond Shaitan's (Satan's) reach" (Friedlander 1993:13). The fact that London Sufis can hear "angels in the walls of the Sufi center" and "their father [the shaykh] talking to angels" (Baktiar 1996:84) is reason enough to suspect the involvement of demonic spirits.

The degree of demonic involvement in contemporary Sufism is, in fact, staggering. The book, *The Last Barrier* an American converts to Sufism and is mentored by a Turkish *pir*. At the close of the book, he is taken to Turkey and introduced to the "Perfect Man"—a human form only slightly visible, who emanated "a pure, white light." He was described as a "master"—one with no veil between himself and God (Field 1976:173). Receiving special powers from him, the convert was urged to enlist others in the cause in anticipation of "a new age, beyond all form, dogma and religious bigotry" (Field 1976:167). As is evident, the Sufi emphasis on a spiritual world, cosmic forces and spiritual guides in a non-theistic worldview has many similarities to the New Age. These forces, however, are not spiritually benign. *Shaykhs* and *pirs* in Islam, similar to spiritual

guides in other religions, possess formidable psychic powers. Prayer is thus important to countering the deception of demonic spirits at the root of this movement (Wilson 1995).

Conclusion

The initial Sufi impulse in Islam was similar to the simple faith and asceticism of Christian monks. Its contact with Hellenistic and Indian philosophies, however, replaced it with a different worldview and a different path. Relying on esoteric philosophies and human effort, Sufism is unable to provide either a true knowledge of God or a sanctified spirituality. A “natural spirituality” is all it can provide—one accessible to all people everywhere in meditation, chanting, ecstatic dancing and altered states of consciousness. This will not lead to the truth of the Bible. As Miller states,

Followers of the Narrow Way understand that man’s natural state is fallen—he is not now as he was originally created to be. Thus the only spiritual realm that he can contact by natural means is likewise fallen— and extremely dangerous. To ‘see the Kingdom of God’ he needs a new nature; he ‘must be born again supernaturally by the regenerating work of God’s Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8). (1986)

Since Islam rejects the work of the Holy Spirit and his glorification of Jesus Christ (John 16:14), Miller adds, it is incapable of delivering a truly sanctifying spiritual experience. Islamic spirituality can only put Muslims in touch with unholy spirits and pantheism, inherently incompatible with theism. The rise and popularity, not only of Sufi Islam, but of other mystical movements comes from a longing to surpass legalism. The tragedy is that Sufis can only aspire to a spirituality based on the flesh. In each case, Miller says, “the monotheism which originally upheld them degenerates into pantheism, and pantheism predictably opens the door to a wide range of pagan beliefs and activities” (Miller, 1986).

As we reflect on Sufis and their need for new birth, it is clear that we will not reach them without evidence of the pure spirituality available in the Holy Spirit. The challenge for the Christian is to live so free from sin that the forgeries of Satan will be exposed and to be so in love with God that his glory and truth will be revealed in all we do. Only when we embody a Christ-like spirit will the Sufi counterfeit be revealed for what it is.

For more on this topic, read [A Worldview Approach Among Muslim Women](#) [ISBN 8708-370-1], edited by Cynthia A. Strong and Meg Page.

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