

AN INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM FOR JEWS

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Session 9: Sufism: The Mystical Face of Islam

Hadith

Muhammad said, 'I am the city of knowledge, and Ali is its gate'.

Qur'an 2: 115

To God belong the East and the West. Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God. God is All-Encompassing, Knowing.

Qur'an 24: 35 (the 'Light Verse', *ayat an-nur*)

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. His Light is like this: there is a niche, and in it a lamp, the lamp inside a glass, a glass like a glittering star fuelled from a blessed olive tree from neither east nor west, whose oil almost gives light even when no fire touches it---light upon light---God guides whoever He will to His Light; God draws such comparisons for people; God has full knowledge of everything.

Rabia (717-801 CE), prayer, trans. from C. Upton, *Doorkeeper of the Heart: Versions of Rabia*, 2004

If I adore You out of fear of Hell, burn me in Hell!
If I adore You out of desire for Paradise,
Lock me out of Paradise.
But if I adore You for Yourself alone,
Do not deny to me Your eternal beauty.

Oushayri (d. 1074), *Epistle on Sufism* (extracts on the stages of the journey to God)

Mujahada (struggle): 'Striving is essentially weaning the soul of its habitual practices and compelling it to oppose its passions at all times.'

Zuhd (ascetic renunciation): 'The spiritual pilgrim must put aside even permissible pleasures in order to pursue the path single-mindedly.'

Samt (silence): 'There are two types of silence: outer silence and silence of the heart and mind. The heart of one who trusts completely in God is silent, not demanding any means for living.'

Dhikr (remembrance): 'No one reaches God save by continual remembrance of Him. There are two kinds of remembrance: that of the tongue and that of the heart. The servant attains perpetual remembrance of the heart by making vocal remembrance.'

Mahabba (love): 'Love is a state experienced in the heart, too subtle for words. This state brings him to glorify God and to try to gain His pleasure. He has little patience in separation from Him, feels an urgent longing for Him, finds no comfort in anything other than Him, and experiences intimacy in his heart by making continual remembrance of Him.'

Shawq (yearning, passionate longing): 'Longing is the state of commotion in the heart, hoping to meet the Beloved.'

Fana (annihilation): Some understand this as annihilation of the individual will before God; others as the annihilation of the self and consequent total union with God (*tawhid*).

Jalal ad-Din Balkhi Rumi (1207-1273)

When al-Hallaj said ‘I am God’ and carried it through, he vanquished all the blind (sceptics).
When a man’s ‘I’ is negated and eliminated from existence, then what remains? Consider, O denier!

Major Sufi *tariqas* (‘orders’)

Name	Founder	Area	Special features
Qadiriyya	‘Abd el-Qadir al-Ghilani, 1077-1166	Widespread	Was involved in resistance to French rule in Algeria
Suhrawardiyya	‘Abd el-Qahir al-Suhrawardi, 1097–1168	Pakistan	Strict control of master over disciple, poetry important
Rifa’iyya	Ahmad al Rifa’i, d. 1182	Middle East, Turkey, Balkans	Strange practices such as eating snakes, body piercing, and ‘howling’ <i>dhikr</i>
Naqshbandiyya	Baha al-Din Naqshband (d. 1389)	Widespread, esp. in India, Turkey, and Central Asia	Strict observance of <i>shari’a</i> , silent <i>dhikr</i> , engagement in the world
Meveleviyya (Mawlawiyya)	Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273)	Turkey	‘Whirling dervishes’; influential in Ottoman empire
Bektashiyya	Bektash Wali, d. 1271	Turkey, Balkans	Shi’ite and Christian elements; associated with Ottoman army; gender equality
Chishtiyya	Abu Is’haq Shami, d. 940	India	Emphasizes love, tolerance, openness

Some basic terms

pir, shaikh, murshid - a Sufi master

murid - a Sufi disciple

tariqa (pl. *turuq*) - a Sufi order

wird (pl. *awrad*) - Sufi rituals

dhikr (sometimes written *zikr*) - ‘remembrance’ (of God), often by chanting God’s name

qawwali - Indian/Pakistani Sufi devotional songs

dervish - member of a Sufi order

faqir - ‘poor’, Sufi ascetic who lives by receiving charity

Qur’an 13: 28

Those who believe and whose hearts are set at rest by the remembrance of Allah; now surely by Allah’s remembrance are the hearts set at rest.

Youtube videos of *dhikr* and Sufi devotional singing

1. Recitation of ‘There is no god but God’:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psN1gCbTgLc>

2. Mevlevi dancing *dhikr* (*sema*), with opening footage of Rumi's tomb and shrine in Konya, Turkey: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdZozFCIbqc>

3. Popular Sufi culture: an Egyptian Sufi singer and audience: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpQl00V7O_g

4. Modern, non-traditional *qawwali* singing, with a female singer (Abi Sampa, from London and of Indian origin); the translated lyrics in the description: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WyZZBpxcLMw>

Jalal ad-Din Balkhi Rumi (1207-1273)

Why should I seek? I am the same as
He. His essence speaks through me.
I have been looking for myself!

What can I do, Muslims? I do not know myself.
I am neither Christian nor Jew, neither Magian nor Muslim,
I am not from east or west, not from land or sea,
not from the shafts of nature nor from the spheres of the firmament,
not of the earth, not of water, not of air, not of fire.
I am not from the highest heaven, not from this world,
not from existence, not from being.
I am not from India, not from China, not from Bulgar, not from Saqsin,
not from the realm of the two Iraqs, not from the land of Khurasan.
I am not from the world, not from beyond,
not from heaven and not from hell.
I am not from Adam, not from Eve, not from paradise and not from Ridwan.
My place is placeless, my trace is traceless,
no body, no soul, I am from the soul of souls.
I have chased out duality, lived the two worlds as one.
One I seek, one I know, one I see, one I call.
He is the first, he is the last, he is the outer, he is the inner.
Beyond *He* and *He is* I know no other.
I am drunk from the cup of love, the two worlds have escaped me.

How can a man praise God, the lord of all?
Be like mere dust, contemptible and small!
What can men learn about God's being one?
To burn themselves in Him just like the sun!
If like the day you wish to shine so bright,
Burn up your being, for that's like the night—

Like copper burn yourself with alchemy
In that One who gives being generously!
You've clung fast to the self of 'I' and 'you'
Although all wretchedness stems from these two.
(Translation: Jawid Mojaddedi)

Further reading

Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

Rumi, *The Masnavi* (4 vols.), translated by Jawid Mojaddedi (Oxford World Classics, 2008)

Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: 1975)

Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis: The Defence, Rethinking, and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999).

Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (Oxford University Press, 2016).