

COMMON DREAMS

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Saara Sabbagh

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World*

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The Revival of Sufism in the Contemporary World

Sufism, like Islam has unfortunately taken a serious beating, and has almost become unrecognizable for the past one hundred or so years. It is grossly misunderstood by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Many Muslims are unfamiliar with it or may even perceive it is a deviant branch outside the fold of Orthodox Islam. Whilst non-Muslims that are attracted to the beauty of its art, poetry, culture, austerity and are mesmerized by its radiant light, but may be oblivious to the esoteric reality of its origin which is deeply rooted in the worship, knowledge and love of God exemplified by the Prophetic model.

Every religious tradition has an outward and inward reality. Whilst the exoteric deals with the laws of physical practice, of rituals, rights and obligations – the inward spiritual dimension of a religious tradition focuses on one's relationship with God. Islam is no different. The law pertaining to the exterior known as Shariah, provides guidance applicable to governance, economics, environment, family, religious observance and everything else that relates to the outward practices. The inward science is called Sufism or Tazkiya where the focus is entirely on the state of one's spiritual condition, purification of the heart, disciplining the ego and ultimately becoming one with The Divine.

Sufism was not a formalized branch of knowledge during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (peace & blessings be upon him) - but neither was the study of Tajweed (recitation of Quran) or Fiqh (jurisprudence) or Aqida (creed). The Prophetic model was a living example of The Way which embodied the

outward and inward reality, both Shariah and Tazkiya.

His companions had a deep, holistic understanding of the Prophetic message, they emulated, embodied and exemplified the light of Prophetic character in all their affairs. Religion was not compartmentalized – it was not the outer and inner, there was not a separation of knowledge and form. Practicing the path of Peace was a holistic approach that centered around Divine Unity and imbued consciousness and mercy to all – believer and non believer alike, the environment and animal kingdom, the living and inanimate.

As a result, the early Muslims reached a level of God consciousness never witnessed by any other community in the history of Islam. They remain till this day as beacons of light and hope for the human condition, for they themselves were not prophets or saints, in fact we see quite the opposite. We see men and women that were uneducated and governed by tribal law – where blood was shed in defense of honor, where ignorance prevailed and injustice rampant.

This was known as the period of Jahiliya (ignorance) and yet it was this same community of people that became transformed by the guidance of the Prophetic light, touched by the living example of The Way, they were thus able to reach their human potential and actualize their spiritual awakening. It is this model of spiritual unveiling and human consciousness that manifested itself into justice, mercy and civil society that remains as the ideal model of human transformation for Muslims throughout time.

The community around the Prophet (peace & blessings be upon him) understood that religion without spirituality was dominated by ego, and that the outer form was merely a manifestation of one's inner reality with God. They were a

people that were completely preoccupied with purifying their hearts from anything else than The Divine reality. They understood that the heart carries diseases as does the body – yet more insidious and unrecognizable. They spent a life time rectifying their own state through worship, service and beautification of character. They understood and embodied the Prophetic message of “God does not look at your appearance or your wealth, but rather He looks at your hearts and actions.” This was not taught in any formal manner, but rather inculcated in their very being through the transformative love they had for the Prophetic Way.

However, with the expansion of the Muslim Empire and an increase in wealth, it was only a matter of time that the formulisation and canonisation of the religion was necessary to its survival. Within the first century, scholars in the field of Jurisprudence began emerging in which the outer practices of Islam were codified in what is recognised as the four Schools of Thought within Sunni Islam. A most valuable and arduous venture that became the foundation of Muslim daily practice. With time however, focus on the outer practices inevitably led to an emphasis on the external. Piety was soon equated with the outward form.

The concern of the mystic was the preservation of the spiritual tradition which they believed was slowly but surely being eroded due to worldly temptations of prestige, wealth and power. They soon found themselves withdrawing from the mainstream community and embarked on a life of asceticism (zuhd) that rejected the world of comfort for a self imposed simple life of abstinence and renunciation. The ascetics emphasized God consciousness (taqwa) and renunciation of the world. They formed their own identity, devoid of worldly attachment, devoting their days to worship and the cultivation of spiritual excellence (ihsan).

This group of people were soon given the title of “Sufi’s” – an honorable description that reflected their state with God. The term Sufi and Tasawuf is often linked to the Arabic word ‘safa’ which means purity. The Sufi therefore is on a journey of internal purification, a path of cleansing oneself from the ego so that The Divine Presence is unveiled and witnessed. This process was also called Tazkiya.

‘Soof’ is also the Arabic word for wool, the coarse and raw attire worn by the spiritual ascetics that denoted the renunciation of worldly comforts and pleasures. Unlike the soft silks and brocades of the time that represented luxury and excess, wool became the symbol of saints and mystics.

Sufism throughout history has had various phases. Between the tenth and twelfth centuries, Sufism became a widely respected discipline. Many great scholars and spiritual masters taught during this period, establishing the Sufi practices and terminology. Several orders known as Tariqas which literally means ‘the way’ were founded.

By the end of the thirteenth century, Sufism had become a well-defined science of spiritual awakening. Through experimentation and investigation, Spiritual guides had developed transferable techniques for self-refinement, the efficacy of which was confirmed by numerous aspirants. The Sufi orders had become the basis for a widespread mystical movement, lending new life to humanity’s age-old spiritual quest.

Sufism is said to be the cultivation of excellence in the individual who reflects the Divine Names and Attributes. In Sufism, one who has perfected human excellence is called a Wali (saint), a word that literally means ‘sincere friend’. The saints, each according to his or her own capacity have drunk from the fountain of Truth, for they are known only by God. According to the Prophetic

saying, God says “My friends (saints) are under My banner, no one knows them but Me.”

Stories of the Muslim saints and mystics remain with us as a reminder of human aspiration, of ordinary people, that become awliya (friends of God) and were transformed into extraordinary beings. We are inspired by the purity of their intention, their sincerity, their commitment and their love for The Divine. Rabi’ah Al-Adawiyah is one of the most renowned saints who lived a life of austerity and celibacy. Her anecdotes reveal an unknown reality, almost fairytale like, or perhaps it is our obstructed hearts that cannot comprehend such devotion. God says in the Quran “It is not the eyes that are blinded but the hearts that are in their breasts” (22:46)

Prayers of Rabiah:

O God, whatsoever You have apportioned to me of worldly matters, give them to my enemy. And whatever You have apportioned to me in the world to come, give that to Your friends – for You suffice me.

O God, if I am worshipping You out of fear of Hell, then burn me in it. If I am worshipping You out of hope for Paradise, then exclude me from it – for I worship You for You – so do not deprive me of Your everlasting Beauty.

Jalaludin Rumi is universally known for his deep and profound poetry. His work speaks of a yearning love and unity with The Divine. His well known work titled The Reed Flute’s Song tells the human story of the pangs of separation.

Listen to the story told by the reed, of being separated.

“Since I was cut from the reedbed,

I have made this crying sound.

Anyone apart from someone he loves
understands what I say.

Anyone pulled from a source
longs to go back.

At any gathering I am there,
mingling in the laughing and grieving.”

Like the prayer beads, one finishes where they began - the pain of lamentation of the reed is the human separation from The Source of all Love.

Today we see Rumi’s wisdom being reduced to Valentine Day cards and decorative wall hangings. Whilst Sufism is dabbled and experimented with like a fad diet as ‘spirituality’ is becoming more widely embraced and ‘organised religion’ is shunned as something unnecessary and irrelevant in the contemporary world. Muslims today would argue the opposite is the case. Never has there been a need for the revival of Islamic Sufism more than in today’s destructive ego dominated world. The vileness, bloodshed and injustice we are surrounded with is but a result of the depth of unconsciousness that humanity has steeped into. We are witnessing yet another Jahiliya period in human history – one that will require a revival of the heart of humanity.

It is with this intention that Sufi teachings are gaining attraction once again, predominantly in the Western World where it is uncorrupted by political Islam and cultural interpretations. Al-Ghazali, referred to by some historians as the single most influential Muslim after the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in Islamic civilization was a notable theologian, jurist,

philosopher and mystic in the 11th Century who mastered both the inward and outward sciences. His work is studied worldwide by aspiring Western Muslims in institutions such as Zaytuna College in the US and Cambridge Muslim College in the UK, Seekers Guidance in Canada and even The Al-Ghazali Centre in Sydney. An awakening within the Muslim world based on traditional Islam has been slowly taking place for over twenty years.

The irony of the current global political discourse asserting that the religion of Islam is fundamentally flawed and is in need of reformation, lacks any depth of understanding of this historical tradition. Muslim scholars would argue it is in fact the lack of Islamic knowledge and spiritual cultivation within the Muslim world that has led us to this darkness we are experiencing today. The rise of political Islam, colonization and occupation of Muslim land, and the destruction of traditional scholarship are amongst the contributing factors of the deterioration of this tradition. Therefore the problem facing the Muslim world is not what is commonly assumed – that being the rise of terrorism. That is a but a by product of the diseased internal state the Muslim world, and humanity at large is in. This unsound state has given rise for the cancer to fester and spread uncontrollably. The antidote according to the Islamic tradition is to remedy the actual problem – the heart. We cannot remove the human heart, therefore the only antidote is to rectify it. The way of the Sufi offers a path of an awakening of human consciousness that connect with The Divine Reality. It unites humanity as our essence is One and not separation. It is a path of love... as Rumi says “God has been in love with love since the beginning of time, and only love will suffice Him.”

To the spiritual seeker the weeping reed is our state. Our trauma began at birth and we continue to experience separation anxiety until we find our way back Home to The Divine Presence. The Prophetic Way is our guide and the company of the Gnostics are who we seek hoping to benefit from their state, their spiritual openings and intimate conversations with The Divine. And yet with all of this avid preparation of the Seeker... it is thrown out the window when we hear the intimate voice of God saying to us “O seeker, know that the path to Truth is already within you... there is no arriving or leaving... What is there other than God?”