

Sufism - a self-proclaimed elite, unauthorized religious innovation, rebellious resistance, or secret knowledge of power?

An Attempt by **Gernot Galib Stanfel**

There are many theories about the origin of the word "Sufi," but none of them is truly conclusive. It ranges from "Suf" - the Arabic word for "wool," referring to the simple clothing of the early Sufis, to the built-in seating areas of houses during the lifetime of Prophet Mohammed, where those who wanted to be particularly close to the Prophet waited to learn from him. Assumptions about the origin of the word also trace back to particularly revered places dedicated to God, marked with stones in the biblical Jewish context, as well as their guardians.

"Sufis," individuals who follow this path, are often referred to as "Islamic mystics." Historically, attitudes toward them have been ambivalent at various times. Even today, there is often an intra-Islamic view that, while sympathizing with Sufis to some extent, one must also be "cautious" about them. This has led, especially in the non-Muslim, Latin-Christian-influenced cultural space and its subsequent worldviews, to portraying Sufis as the "other Muslims," or even as disguised "anti-Muslims" secretly preserving ancient esoteric knowledge. Ironically, this view was later adopted by modernistic Islamic movements to campaign against these supposedly "backward" or "unlawfully renewing," ultimately "un-Islamic" groups.

Among those not favorably disposed towards Islam, including those with different religious backgrounds, the stereotype of "liberal" Sufism vs. "rigid" or "radical" Islam is often invoked. According to this narrative, "ancient" Sufism is merely a user of "Mohammedan" Islam to clandestinely pass on "secret Gnostic knowledge," akin to one possible derivation of the word "Sufi" from Gnostic "Sophists," cleverly camouflaged through the ages. This thinking, heavily influenced by the secret resistance against an all-dominating Catholic Christianity in the 18th century, led to occultism and the promotion of a "secret world knowledge of the initiated." It always had the assumed "key to true power" in mind, conspiratorially withheld from the "common people." This perspective ultimately warped into the spiritual babble of the Nazis, which, alongside mainly Hindu and Buddhist ideas, exploited perverted Islamic spiritual thinking. They invoked the final global conflict between this imagined secret spiritual knowledge and the Jewish Kabbalistic, leading to the Armageddon battle outside the gates of the Old City of Jerusalem, a prerequisite for the eventual Kingdom of God.

The allure of "secret knowledge," satisfying the "secret power" derived from Egyptian figures like Seth, Isis, the imaginary Hermes Trismegistus, etc., is the opposite of what Sufism truly is: the lived essence of Islam, absolute humble devotion with all the possibilities available to humans, to the One, to Allah, beginning with the first human and Prophet Adam, precisely proclaimed and described by His last Prophet Mohammed through the divine revelation of the Quran.

Sufis, Sufists, Sufism, Sufism, or whatever one may call it, is not a unified organization but a diverse dimension of Islam that, depending on the circumstances of time and culture, appeared through individual independent persons or in organized order-like structures, was involved in political events, or lived as complete religious and societal outsiders. So diverse were the ways these approaches were lived, so diverse is their perceptible surroundings in the form of literature, music, architecture, clothing, food, way of life, etc. The language in which they are perceptible is also connected to the respective culture and environment. The reference point is always Islam, with its sources through the Prophet Mohammed, with its deep significance as devotion to Allah and the currently derived necessity of lifestyle, teaching the approach of experience, knowledge transfer, and the preservation of the core

values of this way of life across generations. According to the Quran, this primordial religion of humanity was also conveyed to every once-existing people by a respective Prophet, whose names we no longer know today. Therefore, it is not surprising but almost expected that there may be overlaps among all existing or past religions and spiritual traditions. And that these similarities are found mainly among people delving into the depths of faith is also not surprising.

The often-cited "Mevlana" Mohammed Jalaluddin "Rumi" (Mevlana and Rumi were not his names but titles) was not the proclaimer of secret countertheses of Islam but one of the strongest embodiments of its essence. He was not a "resistant freethinker" but a deeply educated Islamic scholar who practiced the transition from learning through deep understanding to vibrant implementation. The incomprehension of those who could not follow him naturally brought skepticism and rejection, as it does today. This happens not because they were and are "from the other side" but because they could not and cannot take the step into the depths and thus stand before a self-erected wall. However, this is not a matter of "spirituality of the ancient secret" vs. "new religion" but of "lived inner" vs. "stuck in the structural external" of the same faith. It is a barrier that each individual can overcome, but it is not based on content. The fact that the experienced and acquired knowledge may indeed initially prove to be "secret" to a certain extent is not an inherent intention of the matter itself but a logical consequence of the inability to exchange experiences with those who do not share them. This, in turn, leads to the fact that even believers of the same religion, Islam, cannot approach this experienced knowledge without undergoing certain processes. This is further amplified by the inevitable occurrence of abuse or confusion of role and person in certain rituals or communities in the context of Sufis, which is often portrayed as unjustifiably exemplary from the outside. What may appear from the outside as an elitist group is, therefore, nothing more than a group with more experience, which is not denied to anyone but cannot be understood without experiencing it. However, this principle is not confined to this area alone but is a fundamental factor in every facet of life and not an elitist demarcation planned by anyone. The potential conflict arises where the experience and the resulting knowledge are judged by someone who does so according to criteria that have arisen without this experience. But even this is not limited to this area alone. Given this perspective of experienced knowledge, these experiences can only be limitedly standardized, which is self-evident. This also leads to a tolerant approach to the individual, his or her current level of knowledge, and the resulting actions. Standardization is important at the level of social coexistence but not at the level of knowledge. That this attitude, explicitly demonstrated by Prophet Mohammed, stands in opposition to a violent practice abusing faith is logical but not a reaction to this abuse but a continuation of what is being abused and often a protection against abuse.

If European Catholic-dominated society necessarily had to confront free thinking, also in a religious sense, against the structures of the politically ruling religion and borrowed, among other things, from Islamic Sufism, as did Francis of Assisi, to escape the control of the Church up to its schism, free thinking in Islam was part of it from the beginning, as there was never this kind of absolute doctrinal religious dominance but always the diversity of interpretation and thus the individual approach was a formative part of the whole. The religiously Christian structure imposed from above in Latin Europe developed absolute control, escaped only in secret and individually. In contrast, the dominant power over individuals in the initially seamlessly ancient Islamic-influenced world developed social controls within individual groups, families, geographical regions, and interpretations. However, this partially emerged dominance of group control through traditionally established consensus does not correspond to the actual Islamic faith. In any case, a spiritually more emphasized group was always a part of the whole, even if partially rejected. In summary, it can be said here: "Rebellion" had to be directed against the religion or subsequently the state due to the circumstances in the Latin-Western context, while in the Islamic context, it was directed against families in the broader sense, the social group, the religious interpretation group, etc. However, both fundamentally have different objectives and means, so what

is seen as "rebellious" in one context is nothing unusual in the other context and vice versa, and must be interpreted accordingly.

Hence, it was not "Sunni young men Sufis and Shiite young men Assassins" who were "creating a Kingdom of God" (a purely Christian-defined ideal), as claimed. In all Islamic directions, except for Wahhabi and Salafist reform Islam, there are Sufi traditions. That they also became politically active were circumstances of the time and external events but never their fundamental intellectual idea. Also, in the Islamic worldview, there is no utopian future reign of God in a corresponding otherworldly realm, but the temporally limited world in the known three dimensions and the eternal otherworldly world, which existed before and will continue after this one, connected to the earthly one by the Creator and ultimately the goal and measure of actions here.

As diverse as Sufism and its traditions have been lived over time, it is astonishingly limited in describing literature. There are countless books in the form of poetry, stories, as well as classical works from Sufi traditions, as well as books from recent decades by authors with interpretations of the theme that cannot be limited. The latter are often representatives of the aforementioned theses of an "actually non-Islamic secret primal knowledge," often resembling a syncretistic worldview. From the Islamic theological side, there are, for the reasons mentioned above, historically mostly rejecting to cautiously skeptical works on the subject, with a pleasingly more factual and comprehensive approach observed in recent times.

It would be essential to develop the non-Muslim external perspective on the subject of Sufism in a way that does not interpret one's own needs or influences into these topics but tries to see them from the respective self-definition. The same applies to an unbiased intra-Islamic approach to this topic. An approach on an equal footing, from any side, would likely open up many new perspectives and understanding approaches.

"What is Sufism?" He said: "To rejoice in the face of sorrow in the heart." (Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi: Matnawi, Volume 3, Verse 3261)

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