

SUFI CONTRIBUTION TO EDUCATION*

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I would like to confine myself to one of the traditional systems of Muslim education known as “Sufi education”. The question now is: What is meant by Sufism?

What is Sufism?

In Islam, Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) or Islamic mysticism simply means the science of morality. I quote here the words of Ibn al-Qayyim: “All who spoke about this science (in Islam) determined that Sufism is a synonym of morality (*khuluq*).”

Many of the early writers on Sufism maintain that it also means the “purity of the soul” (*ṣafā*). The term “Sufi” was first applied to Muslim ascetics who clothed themselves in coarse garments of wool (*ṣūf*). From it comes the form *taṣawwuf* for ‘mysticism’. Later on many Sufis have tried to show the unnecessary relation between Sufism as a practical discipline based on the insights of the illuminated followers of the Sufi Way and the wearing of coarse garments of wool.

I define the word ‘Sufi’ in wide terms by applying it to anyone who believes that it is possible to have direct experience of God. It could be defined specifically as the spiritual Path (*ṭarīqah*) aimed at the realization of moral perfection and intuitive knowledge of God.

The Sufi Path is based upon the Muslim creed, jurisprudence (revealed Law) and ethics. The aspirant travelling the Path begins with the *tawḥīd* (Unity) and the application of the revealed Law. The Path essentially becomes a practical method to guide an aspirant by tracing a way of thought, feeling and action.

“Sufism is Politeness,” says Abu Hafs Al-Haddad, one of the early Sufis, “every duration (*waqt*), state (*ḥāl*) and stage (*maqām*) (of the Way) has its necessary quality of politeness.”

Sufism as a form of education

We may consider Sufism as a form of private religious education. At first a *ṭarīqah* meant simply the gradual method of contemplative and soul-releasing mysticism. During the third century of the Hegira, circles of disciples began to gather around an acknowledged master of the Way, seeking training through association or companionship. The foundation of the Sufi orders (from the sixth century of the Hegira) is the system of master and disciple (in Arabic, *murshid* and *murīd*). Each

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Sufi order became a religious fraternity with its own regulations, prayers, litanies and frequent meetings. It was natural that the aspirants in a Sufi order accepted the authority and guidance of their Sheikhs who traversed the stages of the Sufi Path.

The Sufi orders in Islam have always acted and still act as free schools for learning and ethical guidance. Sufis were able to introduce an elaborate Muslim philosophy of education. We have to draw attention here to the efforts of the famous Sufi Al-Ghazali, known in the Medieval West as Algazel, who wrote his epistle “Oh! Lad” (*Ayyuha al-walad*) to denote the relationship between theoretical learning and virtuous action. The fundamentals of Sufi education can be set forth as follows:

(a) Every man has inherent within him the possibility of release from the self and the acquisition of knowledge of God, but this is latent and dormant and cannot be released except with certain illuminations gifted by God. “Observe your duty to Allah. Allah is teaching you. And Allah is the knower of all things” (Qur’ān, 2:282). Consider the following from the Christian heritage: “The Kingdom of Heaven is within you”, “Seek and ye shall find”, “Knock and it shall be opened unto you.”

(b) Sufi education commences with “the purification of the soul”, known in Western mystical literature as “Via Purgativa”. It is mentioned in the Qur’ān that the human soul tends by nature to evil: “Lo! The (human) soul enjoineeth unto evil” (Qur’ān, 12:53). Man is responsible for whatever he makes of himself. “He is indeed successful who causeth it (the soul) to grow. And he is indeed a failure who stunteth it” (Qur’ān, 91:9-10).

(c) The action of voluntary change is needed: “Lo! Allah changeth not the condition of a folk until they (first) change that which is in their hearts” (Qur’ān, 13:2). The aspirant has to follow the Path, which is a succession of ‘stages’ (*maqāmāt*, sing. *maqām*) in integral association with psychological experiences called ‘states’ (*aḥwāl*, sing. *ḥāl*). This way of ascent has to begin with repentance (*tawbah*) and ends with the mystical intuitive knowledge of God (*kashf*) or unveiling. Many stages exist between repentance and unveiling, like devotion or renunciation (*zuhd*), forbearance (*ṣabr*), contentment (*ridā*), gratitude (*shukr*), trust in God (*tawakkul*) and love of God (*maḥabbat allāh*). The states are like annihilation (fading away or passing away) (*fanā*) and abiding (in God) (*baqā*), contraction (*qabḍ*) and expansion (*bast*), fear (*khawf*) and hope (*rajā*) etc. “States are gifts whilst stages are acquisitions”. Sufis regard the two aspects of the Path as being expressed in the Qur’ānic promise: “Those who endeavour in Us, them We shall direct in our Ways” (Qur’ān, 29:69). The association of those states and stages comprise the *sulūk* or the “Scala Perfectionis”.

(d) ‘Taste’ is one of the characteristics of Sufi education. Sufis do not deny or neglect the role of reason and discursive knowledge. They differentiate between two domains of knowledge: discursive and intuitive. They maintain that while dealing with this material world we have to use our senses and intellect and that this is necessary. But when we deal with feelings generated by our religious experience, like the ‘states’ and the ‘stages’ of the Sufi Path, we have to use the heart (*qalb*) as the proper tool.

Al-Ghazali writes on his realization that what is most peculiar about Sufism “cannot be learned but can only be attained by direct experience, ecstasy and inward transformation.” The drunken man, he says, knows nothing about the definition, causes and “conditions of drunkenness, yet he is drunk. Teaching about the transmutation of self (*fanā*) will not help anyone to attain it.”

We have always to bear in mind that Sufism is a way before it becomes a theosophy. The famous Sufi Ibnul ‘Arabi of Murcia, wrote, “God is known only by means of God.” The scholastic theologian says, “I know God by that which He created”, and takes as his guide something that has no relation to the object of thought. He who knows God by means of phenomena knows as much as these phenomena give to him.

(e) Sufi education lays stress on the system and relationship between the master and the disciple. All Sufis affirm that the reverence of the Sheikh is the very door to all knowledge: it is the reverence of the master who has attained the higher truth and become a capable spiritual leader.

Al-Suhrawardy Al-Bagdady, one of the famous writers on Sufism, says, “the relation between the aspirant and his master is like the relation between the son and his father. The aspirant has to reveal all his inner feelings (or fears) to his Sheikh, otherwise he may suffer from a complex (*‘uqdah*). Such complexes can be solved and vanished only when he converses with his Sheikh.” Sufis are very much concerned with the psychology of religious education and they sometimes describe their science as “the science of psychology” (*‘ilm al-nafs*), or as “the science of the diseases of the soul” (*‘ilm afat al-nafs*) and sometimes as “the medicine of the human hearts” (*tibb al-qulūb*).

(f) One of the bases of Sufi education is that Sharī‘ah (revealed Law) is the source of *taṣawwuf* or *ḥaqīqah* (Reality). Sharī‘ah is the milk, whilst *ḥaqīqah* is the butter. You can never obtain *ḥaqīqah* without applying first the Sharī‘ah. *Ḥaqīqah* implies also that you should be sincere in all your deeds and actions. This sincerity is the essence of all human actions. I quote here from Ibn ‘Ata Allah of Alexandria: “All deeds seem to be mere forms, the essence of them is sincerity” (*ikhlaṣ*).

Al-Qushairy, one of the early Sufi writers, defines in his epistle the relation between Sharī‘ah and *ḥaqīqah* (Reality) as follows:

The Sharī‘ah is concerned with the observance of the outward manifestations of religion (i.e. rites, acts of devotion and duties); whilst *ḥaqīqah* is concerned with the inward vision of divine power ...

Every rite not informed by the spirit of Reality is valueless, and every spirit of Reality not restrained by the Law is incomplete. The Law exists for the service of God, whilst the Reality concerns witnessing and understanding the order He has decreed. The one is the outer, the other the inner ...

I heard the learned Abu ‘Ali ad-Daqqaq say, “The phrase, ‘Thee we serve’ (Qur’ān, 1: 5) is for sustaining the Law, ‘Thy help we ask’

(Qur'ān, 1: 5) is for affirming the Reality. Know that the Law is the Reality because God ordained it, and the Reality is also the Law because it is knowledge of God likewise ordained by Him.”

These words of Al-Qushairy denote clearly the necessity of the reverence of the laws when we seek to attain higher truth.

Conclusion

Many Sufi ideas about the bases of education are still valid in our times. For example, the idea about the inherent possibilities in the human soul implement self-confidence. We notice that Sufism is mainly concerned with the inner dimensions of man, asserting the human values that Islam upholds. We are faced now both in the East and in the West by many nihilistic philosophies and material ideologies which affect the conduct of the youth and lead them to rejectionism.

One of the most important Sufi contributions to education is the doctrine dealing with the relationship between a master and a disciple. Sufis always affirm that respect for the teacher is the very door to all knowledge.

In addition to this, Sufis always lay stress on the idea of ‘taste’ not only in the field of arts, literature and music, but also in the field of religious experience. It is the taste that makes life meaningful, and gives discrimination between right and wrong. It leads to the affirmative knowledge of God ordained by the Sharī‘ah.

Sufis describe for us how we can fill the gap between theories and virtual actions and how to be sincere in our actions, whether religious or secular.