

THE ROLE OF SUFISM IN THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN WORLD RELIGIONS*

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Özet

Dünya Dinleri Arasındaki Diyalogda Sufizmin Rolü

Dinî toleransa, belki de her devirden daha çok muhtaç olunan bir devirde yaşadığımız, herkesin ittifak ettiği bir husustur. Biz burada, ‘insanın, sınırlarını yırtması, ve Aşkın Varlık’la buluşmak istemesi’ diye tarif edebileceğimiz sufizmin bu konuda katkıları olabilir mi? Olursa nasıl?, gibi soruların yanıtını detaya inmeden aramaya çalışacağız. Çeşitli devirlerde yaşamış, ve çeşitli dinlere mensub mistiklerin hayatlarını okuyan kimse, bunların ‘Aşkın Varlık’ anlayışları arasında o kadar çok benzerlik görür ki bunların birbirlerini gördüklerini ve fikir alışverişi yaptıklarını düşünür. Zira, primitif dinler dahil her dinde, ‘Gerçek Varlık’ aşkı vardır. Hatta, ‘derinlik azaldıkça yoğunluk artar’ prensibi gereği, daha da yoğunlaşarak. Bu durum, mistisizmin, potansiyel olarak ‘dinler arası diyalogda rol oynamaya’ elverişli olduğunu göstermeye yeter sanırız.

İslam tasavvufunda, bilhassa felsefî tasavvufun temsilcileri diye niteleyebileceğimiz Beyazîd Bistamî, Hallac-ı Mansur, İbn Arabî ve Mevlana gibi sufiler, ‘gayeye giden yolların farklı olmasına karşın gayenin tek olduğunu’ anlamış ve anlatmaya çalışmışlardır. Biz bunları, ‘din için yapılan savaşları azaltmaya çalışmak’ olarak ele alabiliriz. Ancak burada dikkat edilmesi gereken şey, onların, dinleri birleştirmek gibi bir düşüncelerinin kesinlikle olmadığı, ve hepsinin samimi birer müslüman olduklarıdır.

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It is becoming increasingly apparent that whether we have been, at war or peace with neighbouring countries, it is religious fanaticism that prevents real peace and understanding from happening between countries. It is clear, now more than ever, that fanatics are everywhere, be they nominally Muslims, Jews, Christians or other faiths. It was this fanaticism that launched the Crusades. It is this fanaticism that prevents any lasting peace between Arabs and Jews and has made conflict in Ireland last for centuries. Among the many possible things men can do to heal these wounds, I think, is training the soul with some Mystic or Sufi teachings. Sufism is Islam's tolerant and universal philosophy. Its message of peace with and for all, has endeared it to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.¹ Sufism describes the perfect man as "praised in all religions".² Also, during the *dhikr*³ ceremonies, Sufis use God's universal name, "Hû" (He), rather than his other specific names.⁴ According to Sadreddin Konawî,⁵ this carries an implication to the *kudsî hadîth* (divine tradition, so-called because in it God speaks directly.) "I am as my servant thinks that I am."⁶ This universal view, common to all forms of mysticism, can play an important role in the dialogue between world religions.

Mysticism, as part of any religion, believes that man is capable of reaching or uniting with "the Absolute Being" or "the metaphysical world" using the capacities given to him. Mystic movements have many common approaches and methods in trying to reach this goal. All mystics, although living in different times and places, express these same feelings. There is no doubt that the great religions differ from each other in fundamental respects. But, they are not nearly so far apart as they may seem.⁷ In addition, much effort and erudition have been expended to show how one religion has been influenced by another.⁸

The term "Sufism" (*tasawwuf*) can only be applied to a specific kind of mysticism developed by Muslims. There are more than 2,000 definitions of the word.⁹ There is no doubt that the word comes from the Arabic *sûf* (wool) and refers to the woollen garments (equivalent to the monk's hair shirt) worn by early Muslim ascetics (*zuhhâd*) to symbolize their lack of concern for worldly things. The word "Sufi" is also considered by some to be derived from the

¹ A.S. Ahmad, *Islam Today. A Short Introduction to the Muslim World*, London and Newyork, 1999, p.49.

² See A.C., Hucviri, *Keşfu'l-Mahcub. Hakikat Bilgisi*, tr.: S. Uludağ, Istanbul, 1982, p.194.

³ Mention of the name of Allah.

⁴ According to Islam, Allah has ninety-nine names which contain a special quality.

⁵ N. Keklik, *Sadreddin Konevi'nin Felsefesinde Allah, Kainat ve İnsan*, Istanbul, 1967, p.4ff.

⁶ For the *hadîth*, see *Sahih al-Bukharî*, *Tewhîd*, 15, 35; *Sahih al-Muslim*, *Tevbe*, 1; etc.

⁷ A.J. Arberry, *Sufism, An Account of the Mystics of Islam*, London, 1956 (fp 1950), p.7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁹ A.M. Zarrûk, *Kawā'idu't-Tasawwuf*, Beirut, 1412/1992, p.7.

word (*sûf*) meaning “pure”.¹⁰ To analyse the mystical experience itself is next to impossible, since words can never plumb the depths of this experience. Even the finest psychological analysis is limited; words remain on the shore, as the Sufis would say.¹¹

Sufism traces its origins back to the Prophet of Islam and takes inspiration from the divine word as revealed through him in the Koran. The Koran, the life of the Prophet and *hadîths* played an important role from the earliest period of Sufism. In later years Sufis managed to derive their principles from these sources.

In Islamic societies, there were two main sources of influence: the *ulemâ* (Islamic scholars) and the sheikhs (Sufi leaders).¹² However, the sheikhs were, and are, more influential over the masses than the *ulemâ* for several reasons. Among the most important of these reasons is the following: in order to gain the genuine loyalty of the people, the sheikhs tolerated for people’s former religious beliefs: thus, the masses were able to express their wishes in this free environment.¹³ The Islam of the *ulemâ* was too difficult and demanding for the illiterate masses. In the religion of the *ulemâ*, there was no room for *semâ*,¹⁴ music and free *dhikr*, mystery or the veneration of saints.¹⁵ Their prayer consisted of a few simple pious formulas that did not necessitate much effort to

¹⁰ For different meanings of the term see A. al-Kuṣṣayrî, *Al-Risāla*, eds M. Zerîk and A.A. Baltađji, Beirut, 1993/1413, pp.279-83; Zarrük, p.7ff.

¹¹ A.M. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1975, p.7.

¹² See D.F. Eickelmann, *The Middle East: An Anthropological Approach*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1981, p.236. E. Gellner in his *Muslim Society*, Cambridge and Sydney, 1981, p.115, says: “Under the general category of Sufism, people tend, for instance, to group together genuine mystics and tribal holy men whose connection with mysticism is minimal. Both may be classified by the same kind of terminology, not only by scholars, but also by the local population. But this does not mean that the two phenomena are homogeneous and deserve to be classified together, either from the viewpoint of social significance or from that of religious phenomenology. Roughly speaking: Urban sufi mysticism is an alternative to the legalistic, restrained, arid (as it seems to its critics) Islam of the ulema. Rural and tribal ‘Sufism’ is a substitute for it. In the one case, an alternative is sought for the Islam of the ulema because it does not fully satisfy. In the other case, a substitute for it is required, because, though its endorsement is desired, it is, in its proper and urban form, locally unavailable or is unusable in the tribal context.”

¹³ For example, in the Turkish Sufi orders, it is possible to see the traces of old Turkish religions. See F. Köprülüzâde, “Influence du chamanisme Turco-Mongol sur les ordres mystiques musulmans”, *DFTEM*, no.1, İst., 1929, *passim*; E.B. Şapolyo, *Mezhepler ve Tarikatler Tarihi*, İst., 1964, pp.53-5; A. İnan, *Eski Türk Dini Tarihi*, İst., 1976, *passim*.

¹⁴ The *semâ* is a sort of dance accompanied by religious music, which forms the rituals of some Sufi groups. It has a very special form in the Mawlawiyya. For detailed information, see Ulu-dağ, *Terimler*, p.461; Trimmingham, pp.495-6; Eraydın, pp.360-5.

¹⁵ See H.A.R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism*, London and Toronto, 1957, pp.136, 138.

learn. There were bitter disputes between “Popular Islam” of Sufis and “orthodox Islam” of *ulemâ*.¹⁶

Yet, there have always been differences between popular and theosophical forms of Sufism. Popular Sufism encourages its followers to spread Islam. The first Sufi lodges, that is, *ribâts*, were built for this purpose. Thus, the first Sufis could be called “*kolonizatör*” (colonialist, or rather colonist) in Barkan’s words¹⁷ and “*mücahid misyoner*” (missionary fighter) or “*alp eren*” (hero dervish) in Köprülü’s words.¹⁸ They were fighters for Islam. Nothing has changed much today, when we consider the Sanûsîs in Libya in the 1910s and Naqshî fighters in Chechnia from the nineteenth century onwards. Although I believe that this sort of Sufism is more relaxed than orthodox Islam, and helps people fight only for a legitimate cause, I will not treat it here because of its potential for enlisting and encouraging warriors.

What I want to emphasize is theosophical Sufism, which is more attractive for religious scholars because it gives answers to most of the questions of being and becoming, of creation and return. It emphasises the “*Wahdet-i Wudjûd*” (Unity of being). To this Sufism, existence is an absolute unity and totally presents itself everywhere without division. It leads Muslims to the “Truth”, which is immanent in all forms of beliefs. Everything, good or bad, beautiful and ugly, healthy and ill, etc. are manifestations of God’s names and attributes. In fact, the limited physical forms are being mistaken for the reality. The only existence is God, nothing else. This outlook can lead us to attain a universal perspective that can help us to ease the problems. “If one wants peace with one’s neighbour, one must work towards a point of vision which is higher than both sides and looks over both sides. This is not to be attained without giving up the self-defined limits.”¹⁹

¹⁶ For a general survey of the discussions on orthodox and popular Islam, see M.van Bruinessen, *Popular Islam, Turkish Nationalism and Rural Revolt, The Rebellion of Shaikh Said in Turkey 1925*, Berlin, 1981, *passim*; Eickelman (1981), pp.222-35; C. Geertz, *Islam Observed, Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, Chicago and London, 1968, p.70 ff.; E. Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas*, ed. N. R. Keddie, Chicago Univ. Press, 1969, *passim*; Trimmingham, pp.241-4; *Scholars, Saints and Sufis, Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East Since 1500*, ed. N.R. Keddie, Univ. of California, 1972, *passim*; B. Spooner, “Religion and Society today: an anthropological perspective” in *Iran faces the seventies*, ed. E.Y. Shater, New York, 1972, *passim*; P.M. Gilson, *Saint and Sufti in Modern Egypt*, Oxford, 1973, *passim*.

¹⁷ See Ö.L. Barkan, “İstila Devrinin Kolonizatör Türk Dervişleri ve Zaviyeler”, *VD*, no.II, İst., 1974, pp.279-304.

¹⁸ See M.F. Köprülü, “Ribat”, in *İslam ve Türk Tarihi Araştırmaları ve Vakıf Müessesesi*, İst., 1983, pp.332-50 (The same article is to be found in *VD*, no.II, İst., pp 267-78). See also J. Chabbi, “La Function du ribat à Bagdad du Vè Siècle au début du VIIè siècle”, *Revue des études islamiques*, v.42, no.1 (1974), p.101-21. For the role of the *ghâzâ* in the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, see P. Wittek, “Le rôle des tribus dans l’empire ottoman”, *Mélanges Georges Smets*, Brussels, 1952, pp.554-76.

¹⁹ P. Young, “Ibn ‘Arabi: Towards a Universal Point of View”, Paper read at the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society Symposium, Oxford, 1999, p.3

Bâyazîd Bistâmî (d.267/880) and Hallâdj-i Mansûr (d.309/921) set the basis of this Sufism and Muhyî'l- Dîn Ibn Arabî (638/1240) had systemized it. Although the *Wahdet-i Wudjûd* concept exists in all Sufi orders, it was interpreted by them mostly as God's unity, *tawhîd*. Mawlânâ Djalâl al-Dîn Rûmî's (d.672/1273) Mawlawism can be counted as an exception among these orders.

Theosophical Sufism presents us positive approaches to other religions, which can lead to dialogue between them. For example, according to Bistâmî, the existence of different religions is a law of God and no one should be blamed owing to his or her beliefs. While passing near by a Muslim cemetery he said: "They are conceited", meaning that they are so proud that they were Muslim, a situation which cannot be proud of from as they had not chosen it themselves, and while passing near by a Jewish cemetery, he said: "They are forgiven", meaning that it was not they themselves who had chosen the religion, it was God's law, so they were forgiven.²⁰

Likewise, Hallâdj, who was executed solely because of his deep love of God, and was a pantheist or pure monist according to some scholars, a secret Christian or infidel toothers,²¹ believed that all religions belonged to God. Each community has a religion, and each follows a way "chosen for them", not one that they themselves chose. Therefore, it is not plausible to blame anyone for his/her religion. The Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other religions are different in the name but same in the aim.²²

As to Ibn Arabî, who was the master and systemizer of the "*Wahdet-i Wudjûd*", and whose ideas are understandable only to highly intelligent people, he is praised as the advocate of religious tolerance by many who try to stress the "mystical ideal of tolerance" and indifference to exterior forms and rituals.²³ To him, the wise individual is the one who does not limit him/herself to one belief. He/she has a wide range of beliefs, as everything in the world is a manifestation of God.²⁴ Ibn Arabî also implies that one is in state of experiencing all religions even in one day. To him, the heart has the ability of taking all forms of belief : it can be a monastery at a time, and the Ka'ba at another. It can be the Torah at one time, and the Koran at another. He says:

My heart is capable of every form,
a cloister of the monk, a temple for idols,
a pasture for gazelles, the votary's Ka'ba,
the tables of the Torah, the Koran.

²⁰ Abu Nasr Sarradj, *Lumâ'*, Bağhdâd, 1380/1960, pp.472-5.

²¹ For details, see Schimmel, p.64ff

²² Y.N.öztürk, *Hallac-ı Mansur ve Eseri*, Istanbul, 1996, p.401

²³ Schimmel, p.271.

²⁴ Ibn Arabî, *Lübb al-Lübb*, translated by I.H. Bursevi, Ankara, 1963, p.10.

Love is creed I hold: wherever turn
His camels, love is still my creed and faith.²⁵

It should be noted here that according to Schimmel, this tolerant statement contains, rather, a statement about Ibn Arabî's own spiritual rank: "The form of God is for him no longer the form of this or that faith exclusive of all others, but his own eternal form which he encounters at the end of his *tawâf* around the Ka'ba (circumambulation during the pilgrimage), and does not point to tolerance preached to the rank and file.²⁶ In my opinion, whatever he meant by the above-mentioned verse, he recognizes a spiritual rank, above and free from all religions. His system is the very reverse of the teachings of orthodox Islam, as Schimmel also admits.²⁷ For, in his system, both good and evil are from God, and as much as Muhammad is the manifestation of God's name, *al-Hâdi* (who guides right), so also is Satan equally the manifestation of the name *al-Mudill* (who leads astray). All these are in perfect order –that is the meaning of God's *rahma* (mercy).²⁸ The theory of the names and the named also implies that a certain form of faith is designated for every human being. They can have different faith, but there is nothing wrong in this as all are manifestations of names of God, so they are right from this aspect.²⁹

Also, according to the world-wide known Sufi Mawlânâ Djalâl al-Dîn Rûmî, religions are like ways to the top of a mountain. Once one reaches to the top, understands that although they were seemed to be different, they all lead to the same end. So, essentially, there is no difference between them, for the ones who managed to reach the Absolute, the Real. To him, "religions are like ladders to the sky. Everyone has his/her own ladder. And as everyone minds his/her own ladder, is unaware of others' ladders. But, in fact, they all go towards the same infinite.³⁰ To him, there is no difference between the Prophet Mûsâ and Pharaoh for those who reached to "white", using all colours,³¹ as they are far from all religions, being from the "Gods' order". His words in Persian are: Millet-i ashk ez heme dinha djüdâ est/ Ashîkânra millet ü medhheb-i Khudâ est.³²

Mawlânâ had many followers from different religions. And when he died, they all held his funeral in accordance with their own religions. It is not

²⁵ *Idem*, *Zahâ'ir al-A'lak Sherhu Tercüman al- Ashwak*, Beirut, 1312, pp.39-40 (translation is lended from Schimmel, pp.271-2).

²⁶ Schimmel, pp.271-2

²⁷ *Idem*, p.273

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁹ See Ibn Arabi, *Lübbü'l-Lübb*, translated by İ.H. Bursevi, Ankara, 1963, p.34. Cf. Also Schimmel, p.272.

³⁰ Mawlânâ, *Djalâl al-Dîn Rûmî, Mathnawî*, (facsimile from original edn) couplet no. 2556ff.

³¹ *Idem*, *Mesnevi*, (tr. and commentary by A. Gölpınarlı), 6 vols, İstanbul,1990, expanded 3rd edn, V. I, p.143

³² *Ibid.*, v.II, p.1770.

surprising that reforming Ottoman sultans used the Mawlawî order against the *ulemâ*, who supported the treatment of the Muslim community as a privileged community against the *dhimmîs*³³ (the Jews and Christians between whom and the Muslims there is, according to Muslim law, a certain legal relation).³⁴

Today, many people all over the world try to convey human love, unity and togetherness to all nations without any discrimination of religion, race, sect and class, with the inspiration they received from Ibn Arabî or Mawlânâ . Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society, an international society founded in 1977 to promote a greater understanding of the work of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabî,³⁵ and Prenal Philosophy supporters among modern Sufis, like Sayyid Hosein Nasr and Martin Links³⁶ are instances. There are also many Europeans who call themselves "Mawlawî" without declaring any connection with Islam or any other religion. Some of them live around Konya after leaving their homeland. We can see news or comments on the order such as the following one:

"Tuesday, Frindt of American origin and Rie Yamazaki of Japanese origin became members of Jalal Ud-din Rumi's whirling dervishes order. Reuters and AP news agencies transmitted a news report about foreign women in the dervish order in Turkey. According to the news report, Frindt, a painter and English teacher from Boston who grew up without religious instruction, said she had found peace in the ritual founded by the philosopher and poet Mevlana Jalal al-Din Rumi. The news agencies said, "the Mevlevîs are a branch of Sufism, which emphasizes personal devotion and often blends local practices into worship. The order is open to all religions, but is based on the principles of the Prophet Muhammad." The news agencies quoted Mevlana as saying in one of famous poems: Come! Come again! Whoever, whatever you may be, come! Heathen, idolatrous or fire worshipper, come! Even if you deny your oaths a hundred times, come! Our door is the door of hope, come! Come as you are!³⁷

I have presented here only some examples from prominent Sufis commentaries on religions. I think Sufis' endless love for all creatures, taking

³³ D.S. Margoliouth, "Mawlawiyya: Political importance of the order", *EI*, v.VI (new edn), p.888. See also H.A.R. Gibb and H. Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West*, v.I, part II, London, 1957, p.195; F.W. Hasluck, *Bektâshîlik Tedkikleri*, tr. R. Khulûsî, İst., 1928, pp.129-34; A.Gölpınarlı, *Mevlana'dan Sonra Mevlevîlik*, İstanbul, 1953, pp.271-2; *idem*, *100 Soruda Türkiye'de Mezhepler ve Tarikatlar*, İstanbul, 1969, p.163; B. Lewis, *Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 2nd edn, Oxford Paperbacks, Oxford and New York, 1968, p.407.

³⁴ C. Chehata, "Ahl al-Dhîmma", *EI*, v.II (new edn), p. 231. See also Gibb and Bowen (1957), v.I, part II, pp. 195-6.

³⁵ For details, see their website: www.ibnarabisociety.org

³⁶ For details, see S.H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, London, 1972, *passim*; *idem*, *Islamic Spirituality*, Newyork, 1987, *passim*; A. Adnan, S.H.Nasr and J. Hich, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy*, Richmond, 1998, *passim* ; M.Lings, *What is Sufism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975, *passim*; etc.

³⁷ *Yeni Binyıl*, 8 January 2001.

them as manifestations of the same God, and their compassion, humility and latitude can produce many positive results if it can be reached more people on the world.

In fact, the Koran needs no commentary regarding tolerance and understanding others. Many verses in the Koran clearly state that the existence of different religions is a law of God. The Koran states: "For each We have appointed a law and path; and if God had wished He would have made you one people. But He has made you as you are that He may put you to the test in what He has given you. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God you will all be brought back and He will then tell you about those things wherein you differed."³⁸ The Koran always describes itself and the prophet Muhammad as "confirming" previous divine religions,³⁹ not abolishing them. Being a Muslim requires belief in all the earlier books and prophets. Nothing comparable to this rule can be found in other religions.⁴⁰

Many steps can be taken to help increase the understanding between Islam and other religions. The first step is for everyone to free themselves from the grip of all prejudices towards each other, and the bloody historical past, starting from the Crusades. And this understanding can only be achieved by people knowing each other. For the success of the efforts to understand each other, the effort has to be come from all sides, not only from Islam in general, or Sufism in particular.

³⁸ Koran, Maide (V), 48.

³⁹ See, for instance, Koran, Bakara (II), 91,97; Alu İmran (III), 3,50; En'am (VI), 92; etc.

⁴⁰ Cf M.Lings, *What is Sufism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975, p. 23