

## SUFİSM: A MEDIUM FOR DIALOGUE

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### ÖZET

#### **Diyalog Ortamı Olarak Sufizm**

Diyalogun genel anlamı birden fazla grup insanın bir konuda anlaşması anlamındadır. Dini manada ise diyalog, birbirini kendi dinine çevirmek anlamında değildir. Daha ziyade pluralist bir dünyada insanların farklı dinlerden olan komşularıyla barış içerisinde nasıl geçinebileceğini ön plana getirmektedir. İslam dininde de diyalog söz konusu olduğunda sufizm dikkati çekmektedir. Sufizmde Allah sevgisi ve buna bağlı olarak da insanlara sevgi ile yaklaşmak oldukça önemlidir. Bu makalede sufizmin tarihine kısaca bakılacak; temel yaklaşımlarına da özetle değinilecektir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Sufizm, Mistisizm, Diyalog.

Dialogue usually means a formal discussion or negotiation. In religious sense, the purpose of dialogue is not conversion, but to learn how in a pluralistic world people from different religious background can understand each other and live in a harmony. In this respect, common grounds between religions help to establish such an understanding. In each religion there are some parts that can share some things with other religious systems. For instance in Islamic *shariah* (religious law) and Islamic mysticism one can find many concepts that exist in other religions. Particularly, Islamic mysticism, Sufism represents its main goal as love. My aim in this article is to describe the concept of love in Sufism and emphasize on its importance.

There are different approaches to the Islamic mission in the history of Islam. Some people, for instance, say that its mission is to teach people to fear God, while others say to teach to love Him. For this reason, in Islamic mission, one of these two emotions or both of them has been used: fear of God or love of Him. In accordance with using those two emotions, two big groups in the Islamic thought occur: Orthodox Islamic group and mystical group, Sufi's. In orthodoxy, it is believed that if each member of a society believes that there is the One who always observes persons' actions and

wills, and will punish them if they not obey His orders, no one may do any forbidden act. According to them, in order to establish a good society God's fear must be a common sense in the society. From this point, they have highlighted the emotion of fear from God's wrath. On the other hand, the second group represents the reverse side of the mission. They have preferred to underline the love of God in the Islamic mission. According to them His love always comes first.

Although, in the history of Sufism, we can observe that, in different periods that may be described as the processing time of construction of Sufism, one of the emotions of fear or love was the main idea among the Sufis, in the end love of God began to be understood as the main purpose of Sufism and Islamic mission. When the Sufism first occurred as a formal discipline, this was at about the second century after *hicrah* (the beginning of eighth century A.D.), it was qualified by asceticism which, as it might be said, derives from the fear of God and of his judgments. In this period, the basis of asceticism was fear of God and of the wrath to come.<sup>1</sup> In the third century, in addition to the idea of asceticism, the idea of gnosis occurs. In this period, Subhan says that the ascetic, while not losing altogether his ascetical ideal, tends more and more to center his attention in Gnosis and *zahid* (ascetic) becomes the *arif* (Gnostic).<sup>2</sup> The idea of gnosis precedes the idea of *fana fi Allah* (self effacement). The main characteristic of the idea of gnosis is that: Gnostics mostly incline to themselves and try to recognize themselves, because their essential thesis is that *who perceives himself, he perceives his Lord*. So, when someone looks the Gnostic ideas and sayings, he can see that they usually pay their attention to how they can search their inner selves. For this purpose they sometimes categorized some feelings or rituals. After the forth century A.H. (ninth century A.D.) *love period*, so to speak, occurs in Sufism as the last and longest time. From that period on, Sufis' answer to the question of: "is God the object of formal worship or of love?" is always love. Just as, according to them, "everything in this world is only empty and transitory without love and involvement."<sup>3</sup> So, one can call their religion as *religion of love*. Fatemi quotes the same idea from one of the famous Sufis Bayazeed of Bestam (d. 875 A.D.), saying: "A single atom of the sweetness of love and knowledge of God in a man's heart is better than a thousand palaces in Paradise. Knowledge without Love and service is

<sup>1</sup> H. A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 90.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Subhan, *Sufism, Its Saints and Shrines*, (New York: Samuel Weiser Inc., 1970), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Nasrullah S. Fatemi, "A Message and Method of Love, Harmony and Brotherhood", *Sufi Studies: East and West*, L. F. Williams, Ed., (New York: Dutton, 1974), 47-48.

useless.”<sup>4</sup> One of the most famous Turkish Sufis and poets Yunus Amra’s saying “we love creature in favor of the Creator” became a standard motto for Turkish Muslims to describe their feelings concerning the nature. Also Grunebaum describe Sufistic love saying that love is the mood of the sufi, gnosis his aim, ecstasy his supreme experience. Man’s love toward God is a quality which manifests itself in the heart of the pious believer, in the form of veneration and magnification, so that he seeks to satisfy his beloved and becomes impatient and restless in his desire for vision Him.<sup>5</sup>

One definition of religion is “a systematic theory of the superhuman or divine” or “influence behind material processes and the general course of events.”<sup>6</sup> If we accept this definition, we realize that it is a kind of a connection between human and transcendental being. This connection between a person and Divine derives from one of these two ways: a man gets this connection by himself or by another person (prophet, messenger etc.). In other words, religion is that of an individual or of an organization. Individualistic religion is that a person finds a way to communicate to the transcendental being by reasoning, i.e. he goes from creature to the creator. In the Qur’an, Prophet Abraham’s realization of divine being by himself is expressed.<sup>7</sup> Organized religion is a system of beliefs where a person believes in a prophet to be a messenger of God and trusts in his claims. In an organized religion, “trust in a prophet” is the keyword, so what shapes a person’s beliefs in God is the prophet’s claims about the divine. In this sense, Orthodox Islam and Sufism should be put under the umbrella of organized religion, because both of them claim that their sources are the Qur’an and the Prophet’s *sunnah*, his tradition. What put them on the opposite poles of religion are their different approaches to the Qur’an and *sunnah*. Clearly, it is believed that there are two meanings of most verses in

<sup>4</sup> Fatemi, *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>5</sup> Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 133.

<sup>6</sup> James Drever, *A Dictionary of Psychology*, (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1952), 242.

<sup>7</sup> “Thus did We show Abraham the kingdom of the heavens and the earth that he mighty be of those possessing certainty: When the night grew dark upon him he beheld a star. He said: This is my Lord. But when it set, he said: I love not things that set. And when he saw the moon uprising, he exclaimed: This is my Lord. But when it set, he said: Unless my Lord guides me, I surely shall become one of the folk who are astray. And when he saw the sun uprising, he cried: This is my Lord! This is greater! And when it set he exclaimed: O my people! Lo! I am free from all that ye associate (with Him). Lo! I have turned my face toward Him Who created the heavens and the earth, as one by nature upright, and I am not of the idolaters. His people argued with him. He said: Dispute ye with me concerning Allah when He hath guided me? I fear not at all that which ye set beside Him unless my Lord willeth. My Lord includeth all things in His knowledge. Will ye not then remember? How should I fear that which ye set up beside Him, when ye fear not to set up beside Allah that for which He hath revealed unto you no warrant? Which of the two factions hath more right to safety? (Answer me that) if ye have knowledge.” 6. En’am, 75-81.

the Qur'an: Zaahere (external) and Baatenee (internal). In many verses, this is a fact:

What is amiss with these people that they come not nigh to understand a happening?<sup>8</sup>

Will they not then ponder on the Qur'an? If it had been from other than Allah they would have found therein much incongruity.<sup>9</sup>

Will they then not meditate on the Qur'an, or are there locks on the hearts?<sup>10</sup>

They will not fight against you in a body save in fortified villages or from behind walls. Their adversity among themselves is very great. Ye think of them as a whole whereas their hearts are divers. That is because they are a folk who have no sense.<sup>11</sup>

Some scholars deduced from such verses that in order to understand the internal meaning of the Qur'an, one has to gain some inner abilities. As a result of this understanding, it is not possible for everyone to understand the Qur'an completely except for those trained persons who called themselves *Sufi*.<sup>12</sup> While Sufis mostly seek the internal meaning, Orthodox Muslims generally look up the external meaning. Because of their different approach, their concepts about the divine being are dissimilar. For example, when it is talked about the internal dimension of a religion, the matter of communication occurs between an individual and the transcendental being. In other words, although what is transcendental is that cannot be seen in the outer world, this being can be felt by internal way. So to speak, if a person utters his communication with the divine being, he speaks of an action, which took place in his inner world. On the other hand, speaking about the external dimension, this communication become between a society and the divine being through a medium. God somehow reveals meanings to his messenger's heart, and then the messenger mediates these meanings between God and people. In this figure, people trust the messenger and accept his personal experience with God.

Sufism is a two-sided system: It accepts the Qur'an and Sunnah as their primary sources, while it gives a big importance to personal experiences. To have a better understanding, it is proper to mention the roots of the word "sufi" and its literal history. The word "Sufi", which has been used,

<sup>8</sup> 4. Nesaa, 78.

<sup>9</sup> 4. Nesaa, 82.

<sup>10</sup> 47. Muhammed, 24.

<sup>11</sup> 59. Hashr, 13.

<sup>12</sup> For a brief discussion about this matter, see: Süleyman Ateş, *İşari Tefsir Ekolü*, Ankara 1974, 27-38.

according to Suhrawardee (d: 1234 A.D.), since the end of the second century, comes from one of these two Arabic roots: s-f-v or s-v-f. For the first root, it means purity or someone who was chosen as an intimate friend, same as one of the Prophet's names "Mustafa" which means the Chosen, the Elect. As to the latter derivation, it means *woolen* and by extension *wearer of wool*. In addition, it is said that this word comes from the term of *Ashab-i Suffah* that is used as a special name of a group of companions of Muhammad who were poor people and were living by the Prophet's help.<sup>13</sup> However, to take the utterance of which shows this word's meaning as *wool* or *wearer of wool*, is more appropriate its historical usage, because those who called themselves as "sufi" were wearing clothes made of wool. As a matter of fact, Ibn Sereen (d. 729 A.D.) criticized some ascetics for wearing *soof* said: "I prefer to follow the example of prophet who dressed in cotton."<sup>14</sup>

The word "*tasawwuf*" comes from the word Sufi. Defining the Islamic mysticism, Shoun says: "Tasawwuf coincides according to tradition with *ihsan* and *ihsan* is 'that thou shouldst adore God as if thou didst see Him and, if thou dost not see Him, yet He seeth thee.' *Ihsan* -tasawwuf- is nothing other than the perfectly 'sincere' (muhlisah) 'adoration' (ibadah) of God, the bringing of intelligence will into full accord with its 'content' and divine prototype."<sup>15</sup> It seems that Schuon passed the word of "ihlas" and mentioned just "ihsan" though both are very important terms in Sufi understanding. Actually, *ihsan* refers mostly to one's self-control. He obeys God as if he sees Him. Though he does not see Him, He continuously sees him. On the other hand *ihlas* is more like a personal experience of God's oneness. In the Holy Qur'an, there is a chapter (surah) that concerns the oneness (wahdaniyyah) of God.<sup>16</sup> So to explain the Sufism, the words of *ihlas* and *ihsan* should be mentioned together. In fact Alden defines Sufism in a different way from that of Schuon and he connects the Sufism with the idea of *Wahdah al-Wujood*. He says that *Sufism* means that God makes you to die to yourself and makes you alive in him. It is to purify the heart from the recurrence of creaturely temptations, to say farewell to all the natural inclinations, to subdue the qualities which belong to human nature, to keep far from the claims of the senses, to adhere to spiritual qualities, to ascend by means of Divine knowledge, to be occupied with that which is eternally the best, to give wise counsel to all people, faithfully to observe the truth, and to

<sup>13</sup> Martin Ling, *What is Sufism?*, (California: University of California Press, 1975), 45-47; Sublan, *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> Gibb, *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>15</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, Trans. By: D. M. Matheson, (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1972), 154-5.

<sup>16</sup> 112<sup>th</sup> chapter, Surah al Ihlal.

follow the prophet in respect of the religious law.”<sup>17</sup> As well, Zaehner quotes from al-Sarraj these words: “What distinguishes the Sufis from all the others have mentioned,” says the tenth-century Sufi, al-Sarraj, ‘is that they abandon what does not concern them and cut off every attachment which separates them from the object of their quest; and they have no object of quest and desire except God Most High... And they asked Juneyd, ‘what is Sufism?’ and he replied, ‘that you should be with God and free from attachment.’”<sup>18</sup>

A Sufi should know that, since he wants to reach to Love of God, he must first know God. One’s knowledge of God depends on the knowledge of one’s self, because they believe that “he who truly know himself, knows God”.<sup>19</sup> For this reason they tried to describe human. According to their description, in man himself, there are three organs of communication: Kalp (heart), which knows God; Rooh (soul), which loves him; and Sirr (inmost ground of soul), which contemplates him.<sup>20</sup> In every order (tariqah) these organs are worked and that activity is called ubudiyah (service), which is also the stage that Sufi starts his/her journey from. The service begins with “meditation and silence”.<sup>21</sup> This beginning journey continues on seven other stages. They are: ashq (love), suhd (renunciation), marifah (gnosis), wajd (ecstasy), haqiykah (reality), wasl (union) and fana (self negation).<sup>22</sup> Although the love is the second stage according to this categorization, the main goal of all stages is the love. This categorization is based on a Sufi’s progress. As Fatemi says: “Sufi has no other interest but his love of God and a world-brotherhood. He gains his knowledge and his strength by direct and personal communication with his creator.”<sup>23</sup> Also, Sufi Jooneyd maintains this idea in his poems clearly:

I will seek my love straightway  
 Over yon hills, down where yon streamlets flow.  
 To pluck no flowers I’ll stay;  
 No fear of beast I’ll know,  
 Past mighty men o’er frontier-grounds I’ll go.<sup>24</sup>

In the Sufi tradition, there are two kinds of definition of love: creature’s love that is limited by their ability, and the eternal divine love that is love of God

<sup>17</sup> John Alden Williams, Ed., *Islam*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), 132.

<sup>18</sup> R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 149.

<sup>19</sup> Fatemi, *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>20</sup> Fatemi, *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>21</sup> Fatemi, *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Subhan, *Ibid.*, 68-72.

<sup>23</sup> Fatemi, *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Fatemi, *Ibid.*, 71-2.

Himself. What we see at the second stage is such a creature's love, and what a Sufi wants to reach is the eternal love.

As mentioned above, Sufi's understanding of mission is based on reaching an eternal love of God. To get that love is not an easy task. That is why we see many tariqahs (sufi orders) established around a Sufi saint. Whoever joins to a tariqah, he has to do some extra special prayers to get close to love of God. This obligation costs a long period of process of mortification and purgation of all evil qualities of the Nefs (self). The process is almost the same in every tariqah (order) and becomes in these degrees of purity: Nafs al-Ammara (the soul of depraved); Nafs al-Lawwama (the soul of accusatory); Nafs al-Mulhama (the soul inspired); Nafs al-Mutmainna (the soul tranquil); Nafs al-Radiyya (the soul satisfying); Nafs al-Mardiyya (the soul satisfied); Nafs al-Safiyya wa al-Kamila (the soul clarified and perfect).<sup>25</sup> The perfect soul can understand the real divine love, and, in order a Sufi to reach that level, that Sufi must pass the previous levels.

In conclusion, Sufism is a way to get God's love that is the highest point of religious experience and the emotion of love is among the most individualistic ones. A person can love God only by his/her independent will; in other words, a person tries to reach to the love but not wants to get fear. A person fears from God, because the tradition says that God is one to fear. Also that person is afraid of His wrath. Somebody loves God just because his/her personal desire to love Him. For this reason, it might be said that Sufism reached a high worth after paying attention to the emotion of love. Love is a medium where all divinely originated religions dwell. God sent prophets with books and religions solely to be known and to be loved. Love reflects sincerity and honesty of people in a way that makes it for them possible to communicate each other. That we see in the history of Sufism is an important evidence of this.

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<sup>25</sup> Subhan, *Ibid.*, 77-8.