

This is the original English version of “Die Seele als Spiegelbild Gottes” published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (3 March 2002)

The Soul as the Mirror Image of God

William C. Chittick

Over the past twenty years or so, most people in the West have come to recognize the word “Sufism.” This is especially true in North America, where the Sufi teacher Rumi has recently become the best-selling poet in the English language and where “Sufi dancing” is taught in health clubs. Despite the name recognition, however, few people have any clear idea of what the name represents.

Any review of the literature will show that scholars have reached no consensus on the meaning of the word. They commonly say that Sufism is Islamic mysticism, spirituality, or esoterism, but such labels can mislead more than they help. There are certainly parallels between Sufism and various teachings and practices associated with these words in the West, but the words themselves designate notoriously fuzzy categories, and using them often adds to the confusion.

What then is Sufism? There is no simple answer. It is certainly not a “sect” within Islam. It has been found among both men and women wherever there are sizable populations of Muslims, Sunni and Shi’ite, from earliest times down to the present.

The original Arabic word, sufi, does not give us much help. It has been controversial from the time it first began to be used in the second/eighth century, and Muslims have never agreed as to what it means. Many other words were also used to designate kindred teachings and practices, such as “poverty” (faqr) and “gnosis” (ma’rifa). Instead of trying to find an exact definition, we would be wiser to accept that the word refers to a certain approach to the religious life and then try to ask about the characteristics of this approach.

Like other religious traditions, Islam addresses three basic domains of human existence. These can be called body, mind, and spirit; or doing, knowing, and being. The body is the realm of activity, ritual observance, and social relationships. The mind is the realm of perceiving, believing, and knowing. The spirit is the realm of the deepest awareness of self and the inner connection with God.

As Islamic civilization developed, numerous Muslims devoted their full attention to “the pursuit of knowledge” that is commanded in the Koran and the Hadith. Some were interested in learning everything that there is to know about proper bodily and social activities. Others were more concerned with understanding the objects of faith—God, the angels, the scriptures, the prophets, the Last Day, and divine providence. Still others focused primarily on developing the virtue, love, and sincerity that typified the Prophet’s relationship with God.

In other words, some Muslims felt that the first priority of human affairs was the body, others that it was the mind, and still others that it was the spirit. Most Muslims recognized that the Koran and the Sunnah provide guidelines whereby all three of these domains can be brought into conformity with the divine purpose in creating the world. They differed among themselves as to how best to follow the guidelines.

Muslim scholars who mapped out proper activity came to be known as the “jurists” (fuqaha). Their specialty was Islamic law (Shariah).

Scholars who focused on correct understanding became differentiated into several schools of thought. The “theologians” (mutakallim) said that the best way to understand was by rational interpretation of the Koran. The “philosophers” held that human reason was a sufficient guide to the truth, without any necessary input from divine revelation. The “Sufis” maintained that the way to true understanding was intuition and the unveiling of the divine mysteries.

Most scholars who focused on developing the spiritual dimensions of the human person came to be known as Sufis. They taught that people must attune their intentions, love, and sincerity to the divine will.

One way to understand Sufism and the manner in which it has been differentiated from other approaches to the Islamic tradition is to look at the Sufi understanding of the human role in creation. Like Jews and Christians, Muslims in general believe that human beings have been created in the image of God. Although this divine image has been clouded by forgetfulness and ignorance, it has the potential to become a brilliant mirror reflecting the divine nature. The role of human beings in the universe is to actualize the divine image and become God’s representatives on earth. They can do so by “submitting” and “surrendering” (islâm) to the divine will and acting as God’s “servants” (‘abd). Once they become perfect servants, God may choose them to be his “vicegerents” (khalîfa).

The jurists defined service of God in terms of proper activity. The theologians and philosophers held that proper activity depended upon right beliefs concerning God and the world. The Sufis acknowledged that both proper activity and correct beliefs are necessary, but they declared that true service of God lies in realizing the divine image latent in human nature. The divine qualities that are obscurely present in the soul must be actualized and made manifest in society and the world.

The divine qualities are frequently discussed in Islamic theological teachings. They include knowledge, awareness, compassion, love, justice, and forgiveness, and they are summarized as the “ninety-nine names of God.” According to the Sufis, people must find the divine image in their bodies, minds, and spirits by worshiping, knowing, and loving God.

In the pursuit of knowledge, the Muslim jurists wanted to discover the right way to perform every activity. The Muslim theologians tried to prove rationally the correctness of the Koranic teachings about God, the prophets, and the Last Day. The philosophers strove to develop their rational faculties with the help of methods and tools derived from the Greek tradition. The Sufis maintained that the only reliable way to actualize the self and gain awareness of God was to subordinate rational thought to prophetic guidance and to find within oneself the God who has revealed himself in the Koran and the Sunnah.

The Sufis took Muhammad as their model. He gained knowledge and self-realization not by studying books or going to school, but by devoting himself to God, who taught him the Koran. They saw the Prophet’s career as marked by two mythic events—descent and ascent. The Koran descended to him from God. Then, when he had submitted himself fully to the revealed message, he ascended up to God in the journey known as the mi’râj (“the ladder”). The Sufis wanted to imitate the Prophet by opening

themselves up to the truth of the Koran and following in his footsteps on the mi'râj. They accepted that Muhammad was the last prophet and the Koran the final revelation, but they insisted that the Koran came down so that human beings can go up. Their goal was to ascend to God here and now.

The Sufis criticized the jurists for thinking that focusing on the right activity of the body is sufficient to make someone a good Muslim. They criticized the theologians and philosophers for attempting to understand God and the world merely by the exercise of their minds. They held that the best way to understand God, the world, and oneself was to search in one's own spirit. To do so, one had to empty oneself of illusions and make room for God in the heart. Egotism, pride, and worldly ambition obscure the divine image. One must "polish the mirror of the heart" by overcoming one's egocentric desires. One does this not by conforming to the expectations of family and society, but by following the dictates of God and his messenger.

What differentiated Sufis from ordinary Muslims was not so much what they did, but their single-minded focus on realizing their own true selfhood and finding God here and now. They attempted to keep God in mind always and everywhere through the practice of "remembering God" (dhikr Allâh), the constant repetition of his names. They held that if one can forget self and remember God, one will be given access to spiritual reality and real being, which are exactly what Muhammad was given when he ascended to God in the mi'râj.

The actual practice of dhikr or "remembrance" (a word that also means "mention") takes many forms. The Koran refers to itself as "dhikr Allâh," so many Muslims, Sufis included, placed heavy emphasis on regular recitation of the holy book. The Koran also calls the salât, the daily ritual prayer, by the name dhikr, and this helps explain the central importance of salât for all Muslims. In several verses, the Koran commands the believers to "remember God's name." Many formulae for remembering his name are employed on a daily basis by Muslims in general, such as al-hamdu Lillâh, "Praise belongs to God," to show gratitude. As for the Sufi teachers, they made the remembrance of God's name a methodical practice. They cite many sayings of the Prophet to support their position, such as his advice to a companion who wanted to know how to keep God in mind while he was working in the fields—"Keep your tongue moist with the remembrance of God."

As Islam expanded and developed, various techniques of meditation were employed to help focus the mind on the remembrance. One of these techniques was listening to music, certain forms of which were held to be conducive to concentrating on the name. By the third/ninth century, various forms of rhythmic bodily movement were being employed along with music. Some Sufi teachers felt that the ecstatic states that music sometimes induced were becoming an end in themselves and that too many people were focusing on their own pleasure rather than on God, so they forbade their disciples from listening to music. The famous dance of the "whirling dervishes" was systematized by the followers of Rumi in Anatolia, but even in the Mevlavi Order, where it is still employed, it has played only an ancillary role.

This then is an extremely brief account of the Sufi approach to Islamic teachings and practices. But it needs to be kept in mind that in Islamic history, Sufism came to be associated with many thousands of teachers, numerous institutions, and a vast literature. On the level of historical actuality we find tremendous variety, local understandings,

individual preferences, and a great deal of disagreement as to appropriate practices, beliefs, and methods of realization, the dispute about the appropriateness of listening to music being only one example.

Nowadays, with an enormous amount of information available in libraries and on the Internet, discerning the real nature of Sufism has not become any easier than it was in the past. The situation is complicated by the fact that numerous “Sufi teachers” have appeared in the West over the past fifty years or so. Many of these may be authentic representatives of the tradition, but many others are certainly taking advantage of the gullibility and alienation endemic to modern society. Those seeking help from present-day “Sufi masters” should tread with caution.