

Introduction to the Islamic and Sufi Traditions

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A challenge arises when a Dances of Universal Peace teacher who is not a Sufi initiate represents the Islamic or Sufi traditions. One knows both too much and too little. Too much because the Dances come out of the lifelong training of Murshid Samuel Lewis in these traditions, and because we often use Sufi terminology and some forms of Sufi practice. Too little because practices in the Sufi tradition are embedded within a teacher-student relationship that activates them in one's inner life. So the dividing line between a Dance that respectfully represents Sufi practice and one that merely caricatures it is as thin (or broad) as the actual spiritual experience in that tradition of the person doing the leading.

In practice, what does this mean? What can one respectfully lead? All of the Foundation Dances that represent Islam and Sufism can be profound spiritual practices. I say "can be" because it depends upon the giver, the receiver and Allah. If you are not a Sufi initiate, stick to these Dances. A claim to lead a "zikr" without the authorization of a Sufi guide is as demeaning to the tradition as it would be to dress up like the Dalai Lama and claim to give a Kalachakra initiation. If you are serious about practising and leading zikr, go to a Sufi teacher and learn. You can't do it from a recording or a book. If you think you can skip this step, you have already created the atmosphere in which it will be impossible to attain the attitude of surrender that the practice demands. If you don't know the difference between a Dance of Universal Peace and a zikr, you don't know enough to lead the latter.

Having said all this, I would like to return to broader concerns. People often ask, "When is a Dance Sufi and when Islamic?" There is a Sufi Dance whenever Sufis (and by that I mean realized students of the path, the strict meaning of the word) are doing the dancing. There is an Islamic Dance whenever Muslims (and by that I mean people wholly surrendered to the One, the strict meaning of the word) are doing the dancing. This should tell us that both Sufism (meaning wisdom) and Islam (meaning surrender) are not organizational trademarks: no one owns them and there are as many different Sufism(s) and Islam(s) as there are practitioners.

Strictly speaking, the issue comes down to the question: is Sufism the esoteric side of and derived from Islam (the religion)? Or is Islam (the religion) derived from Sufism, the original mystical path brought by Muhammad (saas). Did Sufism come from Islam or did Islam come from Sufism? There are good positions on both sides. Hazrat Inayat Khan and Murshid Samuel Lewis come down firmly on the latter: the original message of all the traditions and all the messengers is spiritual not religious, mystical rather than organizational. Even when, in the case of Islam, particular practices were given, they were given in an open-ended way. For instance, the Quran enjoins us to "pray regularly," but does not say that we must pray in exactly the way that Muhammad prayed.

As a Sufi, one can say that there are interpretations of the Quran that support the view that Muhammad brought spirituality, not dogma. The best thing one can do is to begin with Hazrat Inayat Khan's Message Volume Nine, and then to read selectively about Islam, dismissing the mass media views that portray it as a primitive or barbaric tradition. Believe it or not, I have run into a number of DUP teachers who hold the latter view. Below I have listed a few books and authors with which one can begin.

Both Islam and Sufism can be said to emphasize the Unity of Religious Ideals re-expressed by

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Hazrat Inayat Khan. Below are some quotes from the Quran often pointed to by Sufis to reinforce this view:

“So turn thy face and purpose towards the primordial religion of the upright (hanif)--the nature innately formed by Allah in which Allah created humanity. Let there be no change in the work created by Allah, the Religion that is self-subsisting, the standard (qayyim). But most among humanity do not understand.”

--Sura XXX, 30

(That is, the “primordial religion” predates any particular religious forms, prophets or messengers.)

“God has opened to you the Way of Religion which He commended to Noah that he might follow in it. It is the same Faith which we have revealed to you, and which we showed to Abraham, to Moses, to Jesus, to the end that true Religion might continue in the earth. Divide not yourselves into sects.” Sura XLII, 13.

“Each community has a messenger, and when their messenger comes, judgement is given between them with justice.” Sura X, 48

“For each community we have appointed a pious rite.” Sura XXII,35

“Thou [Muhammad] are only a warner, and for every people there is a guide.” Sura XIII, 8

“There is not an animal on earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but they are communities like you. We have omitted nothing from the Book, and they shall all be gathered to their Nurturer and Sustainer in the end.” Sura VI, 38.

For those of us who are Sufis, it is a challenge not to let “our” Allah become another thought-form or mental idol. No doubt each person builds her/his own ideal of Divine Unity, but as the oft-repeated phrase, Subhan Allah, reminds us, the Being of which we speak is free of all of these attributes, no matter how profound. Even the Prophet Muhammad acknowledged the tendency to make Islam into another cultural, sectarian religion, instead of the remembrance of the primordial Religion given at all times and places. Two other Hadith report his words:

“I admonish you to fear Allah, and yield obedience to my successor, although he may be a black slave, for this reason, that those amongst you who may live after me will see great schisms. Therefore hold fast to my ways and those of my successors, who may lead you in the straight path, having found it themselves; and ardently seize my laws and be firm thereto.”

“There are three roots to Iman (faith): not to trouble him who shall say ‘La illaha illa ‘llah’; not to think him an unbeliever on account of one fault; and not to discard him for one crime.”

While the beauty and diversity of the path of the Heart may give us cause to celebrate and to remember our love for each other, if we let this celebration and love congeal into self-satisfaction, we will not be seizing the challenge presented by the condition of humanity and the world today. This challenge does not call for “missionary” work, but for the selfless examples of Unity in thought, word and action that would prove both our Islam and our Sufism and make them the Surrender to Unity and the Wisdom of the Heart for which the world is yearning today:

“There is a polish for everything that takes away rust; and the polish for the heart is the remembrance of Allah, Unity.” The companions said, “Is not repelling the infidels also like this?” Muhammad said, “No, although one fights until one’s sword be broken.”

Note: Koran references may vary in different translated texts.

Introduction to the Islamic and Sufi Traditions

Short Bibliography

(Anything by these authors is recommended. The titles below are given to point the novice researcher in the right direction.)

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