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# SUFISM AND PARASUFISM

## SUFISM AND PARASUFISM

### Abstract

This article critically considers the definition of Sufism as mystic Islam and provides an alternative definition of Sufism as the Tarikat Islam. It points out that Sufi brotherhoods with a tarikat doctrine – the Path to God through ascetism, seclusion, and prayers with rhythmic body motions, have almost disappeared by the 19th century. They were replaced by the brotherhoods that used the Sufi terminology and attributes, but had goals distinct from those of sufi. Such parasufi currents were Muridism (where sheikhs used their disciples as warriors for Islamic ideals), Ishanism (where sheikhs organised communities of their followers as economic corporations) and Dervishism (degraded mystic form of sufism).

**Keywords:** sufizm, tarikat doctrine, cathegories, zahira, batina, mysticism, muridism, ishaism, dervishism.

### Introduction

Scientists and researchers have been studying Sufism for more than three centuries now. Despite the fact that major scientists such as Goldziher, Meier, Massignon, Tsvetkov, Bertels and others have studied it, this sphere is still at a descriptive stage. Forms and functions of even insignificant Sufi brotherhoods

and works of third-tier Sufis seem to have already been studied (this is particularly proven in the monographs by Schimmel (1999) and Knysh (1991), but the question “What does Sufism mean?” remains unanswered, in our opinion. This is perhaps explained by the fact that Sufism has always had hidden details (esoteric points) in fundamentally open Islam.

Scientists still prefer to notice external features of Sufism, which Sufis call *zahira*, and only few of them have managed to penetrate the internal, hidden essence of Sufism – *batina*. Even if such attempts have been successful, as a rule, scientists prefer to trust what they saw – not what they felt. This corresponded to the principles of science in Europe.

### **Methods**

The first European and Russian researchers of Sufism tried to understand the form that emerged in the Arab-Persian space through philosophical ideas of ancient Greek philosophical schools and universities of the Roman-Christian world. One of the most competent researchers of Sufism, Knysh, believed that the serious academic study of Sufism in Europe started with the publication of a monograph in Latin by German Professor of Theology, Tholluck (1821). The theologian, believing that both the Prophet Muhammad and the Arab people in general were inclined to the monastic lifestyle, concluded that the origins of Sufism stemmed from mysticism of the founder of Islam [1, 116 p.]. Many researches of Islam think that Palmer's poor Eastern Mysticism work in 1867 finally attached a tag of mysticism to Sufism in European academic circles, but it did not close the issue. Natalia Chalisova, in her work dedicated to the pillar of Sufism, Farid ad-din Attar, noted that the 20th century had ended with fruitless attempts to determine Sufism and ironically spoke in favour of determining Sufism as "mystic Islam" [2, 141p.].

Radtke wrote that in non-Arab regions, the mistaken and deliberately wrong interpretation of Islam had been particularly concentrated around Sufi schools. He explained the reasons for this

state of affairs as the laziness of mind with which a person understands new ideas and the fact that many scientists still study Massignon's book *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*, published in 1922. He specified that there was another explanation – while studying one set of mass literature on Sufism and its problems, it was hard to avoid the influence of those writers who did not understand what Sufism was. In short, certain schools believed that an object of mysticism was mystic, which was mystification [3, 70–71 pp.].

Knysh, warning against the absolutisation of the diversity and multi-faceted-ness of Sufi schools, noted that the uniting pivot in Sufism is the concept of the "path" (*at-tarik*), which leads a person through moral and ethical purification, self-control and self-perfection to the understanding of the high truths. "This concept is ideal and in practice it is very often perverted, but it is permanently present in all phenomena related to Sufism" [1, 174 p.]. In his other monograph, *Muslim Mysticism*, Knysh compares the levels of the *tarik* with a triad of Christian (Catholic) mysticism – via purgative, via illuminativa and *in*io mystica [1, 349 p.]. At the same time, he wrote that various Sufi philosophers had their own understanding of the levels of the *tarik*, which makes any comparison with the Catholic triad incorrect at the very least. Moreover, the levels of the Sufi path, mentioned by Knysh, - "Sharia – *tarik*a – *hakika*" and "Islam – *iman* – *ishan*" – are nothing but the very outer cover of Sufism, which aimed to protect Sufis from attacks by orthodox mullahs who tried to accuse Sufis of heresy, clearly read in the deliberate mention of Sharia and Islam – the original and key terms for Muslims – in

these formulas. Actually, the stages of the *tarikah* include stops – *makama* and are not limited to the number 3. Since they are all arranged internally and based on practical use, they are not limited to the borders of Islam and are more likely to be a basis for Sharia laws rather than a superstructure built on them.

## Results

In order to understand genuine Sufism, we should return to its fundamental principles. Modern “Encyclopaedia of Sufism” specifies five aims that a person who chose the Sufi path sets for himself:

1. Purifying soul and revising it;
2. Aiming to please Allah;
3. Adherence to poverty and necessity;
4. Fostering love and mercy in the heart of a religious follower;
5. Embellishing human personality with all beautiful qualities, the prophet called for [4, 10 p.].

We can see that that all five aims, according to the religious vertical, are clear and do not cause any mystical associations.

We should also note that Sufi theoreticians and those who practised it had high esteem for Sharia laws, citing Prophet Muhammad’s hadith: “Sharia is my words [akwali], *tarika* is my actions [amali] and *hakika* is my internal state [ahwali].” [5, 83 p.] Sharia calls for the clear and undistorted fulfilment of traditional Muslim rites, which are far from any mystic practices. Forward claimed that Sufism was not rootless, individualistic and unclear beliefs and customs. The language of the Koran and devotion to the Prophet prescribes it, he said [6, 67 p.]. Makdisi said that Sufism from the very beginning was part of Islamic traditionalism: there had never been the problem of unorthodox Sufism. It grew as

the flesh and blood of orthodox Islam and its security was ensured by the hadiths, the most orthodox Muslim science. In addition to hadiths, there is another sign – Islamic jurisprudence, in which Sufis had always been present [7, 182 p.].

Expressions of Sufi sheikhs can hardly be used for the scientific determinations of Sufi and *tasawwuf*, which amounted to 1,000 in mediaeval ages, according to Abu Mansur abd al-Bagdata (died in 429/1038) [8, 152 p.]. Almost all of them were more metaphors than scientific terms and were emotional as Ibn Gajib’s saying: “Sufism is the heart of Islam” [8, 14 p.].

## Discussion

Out of all states, the most enigmatic and unreal is closeness to God (*al-kubra*). However, if we thoroughly study the definition of *al-kubra* given by at-Tusi, the imaginary mystical mist blows away immediately. It says: “The state of the slave’s closeness [to God] means that he proves with his heart Allah’s closeness to him and then approaches Him through obeying Him and his full concentration before His face, always mentioning Him in his heart and in reality” [9, 150 p.]. More simply, this is the usual state of a person who believes in One God deeply.

However, let us not concentrate on the number of various stages (we understand that any numbers are *zahira*), because any discussion about this, to one extent or another, divides and dilutes the holistic structure in which they all are present and which make up the *tarikah*.

We believe that researchers’ lack of attention to the concept of the *tarikah* as something that defines the essence of Sufism, led to the situation in which those, who clearly retracted from Sufi fundamentals but continued to persuade themselves and people around that they

were Sufis, were regarded as Sufis. As a result, in Europe, Sufi started to be treated as a product of a Syrian monastic order, as a mixture of Buddhism and Islam, and as Muslim pantheism. However, many scientists regarded Sufism as mystic Islam.

We think that Sufism should be defined as the *tarikah* Islam – Islam leading to God. The translation is literal but does not fully reflect the meaning of the word *tarikah*, a more precise translation would be: personal Islam leading to God.

We think the lack of attention to the concept of *tarika* was crucial in the beginning of understanding of this religious phenomenon and it makes it possible to see the difference between present Sufi schools and ancient Sufi brotherhoods that have transformed into other organisations now but are still regarded as Sufi.

Sufi schools can be compared to the university departments. After the death of their genius teacher, who established a certain current, his place is occupied by a talented and well-educated closest disciple, who will manage to preserve the high standards set by his teacher for some time. Then new generations come – they are not just uncreative but are unaware how the Teacher worked when he was alive, so the status of the department goes down, while his ideas are distorted, if not disappear altogether. Only the name of the department remains. A similar process took place in Sufi schools.

The vertical of *tarika*, along which the sheikh led his disciples, took the form of a pyramid of power of Sufi leaders over the members of the school and even the population of the surrounding community (sometimes the number of these communities reached dozens of thousands of people); *silsila* – a spiritual chain of esoteric knowledge that linked the Teacher with his disciples from time to time – broke

and was replaced by the oaths of loyalty and even the pagan incantations; the community life was transformed into an economically isolated community in which everyone worked for one treasury.

Goldziher saw trends in the Sufism of 19th century that decayed the value system due to gaps in capacity – spiritual, intellectual and power [10, 26 p.]. Petrushevski believed that after Ibn Arabi, Jalaladdin Rumi, Abd ar-Razzak Kashani and other great sheikhs, Sufism apparently did not create anything new or original in the sphere of ideas and although it expanded, it was based on old ideas and headed for decline. After genius founders of Sufi brotherhoods died, many followers returned to the orthodox forms of Islam. However, there were also groups that acquired features alien to religious organizations. Certain influential dervish orders after the 14th century got rich thanks to the donations and the endowments of land that were fixed by *wakf* and immunity papers by the authorities, while roaming dervishes increasingly turned into the poor that had no relation to Sufi ideas. Petrushevski wrote: “Another form of the decline and decay of Sufism was some orders (or their branches) turned into some kind of military-knight orders which replaced Sufi ideas of spiritual perfection by the fanatical ideas of jihad and under the cover of a holy war raided infidels (Georgia, North Caucasus, Rus, Buddhist people, India and so on) with practically one aim of getting hold of rich military hauls and prisoner slaves. This is what precisely happened to the Shia order of Sefeviyya” [10, 148–149 pp.].

Prominent Egyptian Sufi Sheikh ash-Sharani (died in 1565), in his book *The Scales of Imperfect People*, noted: “Many people call themselves Sufis in our time

and lay their claims to the highest level of holiness, while they are more mistaken than sheep... As soon as one of them receives permission from their imperfect sheikh to gather people for prayers... bless people... (or) even without receiving such permission or hear in his cell a mysterious voice of a demon or a devil, he regards themselves holy men and start gathering crowds of followers from ordinary people and craftsmen.... He tells people that any person... should have a teacher. After trapping them, he eats their meat and bread and assumes the role of a teacher who has known Allah..." [11, 184 p.].

In the Poem about hidden sense Sufi the poet Jalaladdin Rumi wrote about Sufis: "It often happens in this poor life/  
The light of truth is their only food./  
However, there only few Sufis/Who live only for the light of truth./All others aim at the flesh, Although they are proud of just brothers" [12, 44 p.].

In the past three centuries, many Sufi orders transformed into trade-intermediary networks, political organisations, centres of national self-determination and military resistance to the foreign influence. Sheikhs of the Bektashiya order, for example, represented the interests of conservative military in the Ottoman Empire. We all have grounds to agree with Idris Shah's idea that freemason lodges are Christianised Sufi brotherhoods [12, 50 p.].

The most well-known of Para-Sufi currents are Ishanism, Muridism and Dervishism. Muridism emerged as a response to the Christian empires' colonial policy. Knysh, discussing the activities of North Caucasus sheikhs, noted that it was hard or even impossible to identify clear dependence between the teachings of Sufi brotherhoods and their political positions on European colonial powers. It seems that Sufi ideas and values as such had an

indirect and insignificant impact on the political activities of Sufi sheikhs in various historical circumstances. It is remarkable that Sayyid Jamaladdin, who led a real Sufi lifestyle based on ascetism, isolation from a mundane vanity and Sufi meditation, introduced the founders of North Caucasus Muridism, Gazi Muhammad and young Shamil, to Sufism. He also condemned Shamil's jihad and urged his followers to work on internal perfection, not be preoccupied with a military fight. Knysh noted that Caucasian Muridism was actually interpreted as the regional manifestation of neo-Sufi ideology [1, 340, 341, 347 pp.]

While agreeing with Knysh, we should note that neo-Sufism is too indefinite term and is now applied to Western European Sufism with equally unclear criteria. That is why we think that North Caucasus Sufism of the 18th–19th centuries, like Central Asian Sufism of the early 20th century should be defined as parasufi currents in the form of Muridism. The main idea in Muridism is jihad against infidels, with inevitable bloodshed, which is absolutely contradictory to the Path – the tarikat – of genuine Sufis.

As for Dervishism, we should remember that the title of dervish initially had a high status. Abu Sa'id Abi-l-Hayr (died in 1049) urged everyone who searched for the path to God to lead it through dervishes, because they are gates to Him, in Persian: "dar-e vay ishan" [13, 106 p.].

Many of those who called themselves Sufis due to various circumstances (usually due to a thick internal structure) started confusing Sufi Path, which means the movement of a human soul along the vertical to God, with roaming on Earth. Dervishism is perhaps an acceptable form of the degeneration and decay of Sufi brotherhoods. Sufi Path to God means the

movement of a human soul, while his body can permanently remain in a cell. However, many Muslims who wanted to become Sufis due to various circumstances started to regard Sufi Path as roaming on the Earth. Of course, roaming dervishes played a remarkable missionary role in territories that were not covered or covered formally by Islam, but mixing with pagans and semi-pagans for decades, they themselves acquired mystic elements of local shaman or heretic teachings. Most likely, it is precisely them who gave rise to the idea of mysticism among the first Europeans who showed interest in Sufism, because mixing zikr and kamlaniya can indeed cause strange impressions.

We think that dervishes were a key factor in the development of the cult of Muslim saints in Kazakhstan. We can also add that like any other classification of public movements, our attempt to identify various currents and aspects in parasufism is conditional. In peaceful times, Muridism was more like Ishanism, while ishans could lead military detachments when military conflicts broke out in their territories. For example, according to Krymskiy, in the Russian Empire, Central Asian dervishes took part in both the Andijan rebellion in 1899 and the mutinies among nomads [14, 96 p.]. However, we can say one thing with confidence: that Muridism, Ishanism and Dervishism stopped meeting criteria of genuine Sufism.

As for ascetism, not all Sufis were ascetics – for example, Sufis of the Nakshbandiya order believed that modesty in material consumption was

enough, although the wealth of sheikh, who maintained close relations with the merchants, grew in parallel with the growth of their spiritual influence [6, 282 p.]. That is why it is correct to define Sufism as the Islam of Path, or more precisely – the Islam of Godly Path. In this respect, the metaphoric definition, provided in the “Encyclopaedia of Sufism”, also becomes clearer – “it is the axe of Islam, the path of righteous men, taken from the deeds of associates, this is a path of truth” [5, 16 p.].

### **Conclusion**

We need to clarify another thing. Since the term *tarikāt* cannot be translated into European languages, it should be adopted into the active scientific vocabulary, while Sufism should be defined as the *Tarikāt Islam*. We can definitely say that Muridism, Ishanism and Dervishism did not meet the criteria of genuine Sufism – the *Tarikāt Islam*. The main reason for the emergence of parasufi currents, in our opinion, was that in the late mediaeval ages, Sufism stopped being influential and almost exhausted its potential among the peoples (Arabs, Persians and Turkic peoples), who produced the greatest Sufis due to the widespread establishment of the orthodoxy. It is most likely that new great Teachers will emerge in Europe, which is steadily becoming Islamicised. The world has at least learnt about one – Frenchman Rene Guenon. This means that the *Tarikāt Islam*, or the personal path to God, is becoming relevant and viable again.

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## **СУФИЗМ ЖӘНЕ ПАРАСУФИЗМ**

### **Аңдатпа**

Бұл мақалада суфизмді мистикалық ислам ретінде анықтау туралы сыни көзқарас баяндалған және сопылықтың тарикаттық (құдайды іздейтін) ислам ретінде балама анықтамасы берілген. Тарикат жолы доктринасымен сопылық ағайындары – аскетизм, жалғыздық және ырғақты дене қозғалыстарымен Құдайға апаратын жол – XIX ғасырда дерлік жойылып кеткендігін көрсетеді. Шынайы исламды парасуфийлық ағайындар алмастырды, олар сопылық терминдер мен атрибуттарды қолданып, оны қолдана беруде, бірақ сопылық іздеушілерден өзгеше мақсаттарға ие болды. Олардың қатарына муридизм (шейхтар өздерінің студенттерін соғысқа ислам дінінің идеалдары үшін жібереді), ишанизм (экономикалық бірлестіктер түрінде шейхтерді қауымдастыру) және дервишизм (мистицизмнің жоғары деңгейі бар сопылықтың тозған түрі) жатады.

**Трек сөздер:** суфизм, тарикат ілімдері, категориялар, захир, батина, мистицизм, муридизм, ишанизм, дервишизм.

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## **СУФИЗМ И ПАРАСУФИЗМ**

### **Аннотация**

В данной статье излагается критический взгляд на определение суфизма как мистического ислама и дается альтернативное определение суфизма как тарикатского (богоискательного) ислама. Указывает, что суфийские братства с доктриной тариката-путь к Богу через аскетизм, уединение и молитвы с ритмичными движениями тела-почти исчезли к XIX веку. Подлинный ислам был заменен парасуфийскими братствами, которые использовали и продолжают использовать суфийскую терминологию и атрибуты, но имели цели, отличные от суфийских богоискательских. К ним относятся мюридизм (направление шейхами своих учеников на войну за якобы исламские идеалы), ишанизм (организация шейхами общин в виде экономических корпораций) и дервишизм (деградировавшая форма суфизма с высоким уровнем мистицизма).

**Ключевые слова:** суфизм, доктрины тарикат, категории, захир, батина, мистицизм, мюридизм, ишанизм, дервишизм.

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