

SUFISM AND SHI'A ISLAM: SIMILARITIES AND RUPTURES

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ABSTRACT

This research aims at understanding the long alleged relation between Sufism, in its Sunni Orthodoxy form, and Shi'a Islam. Such relation shall be unfolded by drawing on the historical development of Sufism, its conceptions and its esoteric nature on one hand, and on the other hand similar notions in Shi'ism, including the significant role of Imam Ali and concepts such as Wilayah and hidden knowledge (Ilm Al Batin). There is only minimal academic work that directly tackles Sufi-Shi'a similarities and ruptures, except for a few masterpieces which all nourished and benefited this paper. The primary sources used here are solid works on Shi'ism and Sufism by prominent scholars who researched these topics separately like Kamil Mustafa Al Shaibi, Aayatullah Murtadha Mutahhari, Henry Corbin, Seyyed Hussein Nasr and Muammad Ali Sabzvarī to name a few. The paper helps in the general understanding of Sufism in its mainstream Sunni frame juxtapose the notion of tasawwuf in Shi'a Muslim thought.

Keywords: *Sufism, Shi'ism, Gnosis, Islamic philosophy, Islamic Asceticism*

1. Introduction

There has been a long debate in both Western and Muslim scholarship on whether Sufism and Shi'ism share the same roots and foundations or not. This goes back to the fact that both Sufism, as a Sunni school of thought, and Shi'ism as a sect of Islam share several rituals and similar conceptions. Such similarities and ruptures shall be discussed in a later section to measure whether or not one can claim resemblance between Sufism and Shi'ism.

To understand the relation between Sufism in Shi'a and Sunni Islam, it must be first emphasized that Sufism and these two sects of the Muslim religion are not on the same level or category of Thought. On one hand, Sunni and Shi'a Islam are the largest denominations that shape the Muslim community worldwide since the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in 632 AD. As many scholars suggest, Islam has two dimensions through which it can be understood, the exoteric (*Zahir*) and esoteric (*Batin*). The esoteric dimension is the shared pillar between Sufism and Shi'a Islam through which both doctrines formulate their unique interpretation and reading of the text¹. It is said that Mar'uf Al Karkhi, who was a Sufi disciple of the Shi'a Imam Ali Al Ridha, was the first to claim relationship between Sufism and Shi'ism.²

It is important though that we identify the time frame of this study as each of the philosophies at hand came to develop on several stages and were influenced by the surrounding preexisting ideologies of their times. As Seyyed Hussein Nasr explains "If we take Sufism and Shi'ism in

¹ Nasr, p. 230

² Al Shaibi, p. 60

their historical manifestation in later periods, then neither Shi'ism nor Sunnism nor Sufism within the Sunni world derive from each other. They all derive their authority from the Prophet and the source of the Islamic revelation, but if we mean by Shi'ism Islamic esotericism, then it is of course inseparable from Sufism" (Nasr, 1970). Esotericism is also the nuclear notion on which Irfan or Gnosticism cultivated.

Needless to say, this study is constrained by several challenges and limitations due to the complexity and depth of the topic at hand. One cannot conduct a profound comparison between Sufism and Shi'ism or Irfan without acknowledging and realizing the deepness and diversity within each of these philosophies. Another major challenge in studying Sufi-Shi'a linkage is the subjectivity of scholars and tendencies to direct the research in a certain track depending on personal preferences.

For instance, in Orientalist scholarship on Sufism, there is a prevailing discourse suggesting a direct influence of pre Muslim Iranian religions and practices on the shaping of early Sufism³. "Because Orientalists are anxious to bring everything down to the historical level it could hardly be expected that they would explain this double aspect of Sufism otherwise than as the result of influences coming into Islam from outside and, according to their various preoccupations, they have indeed attributed the origins of Sufism to Persian, Hindu, Neoplatonic, or Christian sources." (Burckhardt, 2008) Mohamed El Kahlawy in his Comparative Sufism study of 2008 emphasizes this idea by adding that the Protestant Theologian F.R.D Tholuk was the first to suggest that Islamic Sufism originates from Zoroastrianism⁴.

Many Orientalists as well as Arab opponents to Sufism support this discourse relying on the fact that most early Sufi Scholars were of Persian origins. This idea also supports the suggestion that Shi'ism and Sufism have greatly influenced and enriched each others. The dichotomy between discourses on the origin of Sufism will be discussed further in the next section. This research to put it briefly is an analytical study of the commonalities and ruptures between early Sufism and the Shi'a doctrine.

Zuhd

Although Sufism today is dealt with as an independent philosophy with its own rituals and traditions, since the rise of Sufism it was presented as a part of the Sunni creed. For example, Al Junaid, one of the earliest prominent Sufis, followed the Shafi'id school of *Fiqh*.⁵ However, Sufism is the spiritual path that represents embracing esotericism (*Zohd*) in order to reach the truth (*Al Hakika*) through a path of love and devotion (*Tariqah*). In differentiating Sufism from the orthodoxy Muslim philosophical thought, it could be summed up that "Whereas the ordinary way of believers is directed towards obtaining a state of blessedness after death Sufism contains its end or aim within itself in the sense that it can give access to direct knowledge of the eternal" (Burckhardt, 2008)

In Sufism, one cannot rely on personal intellectual faculties or solely depend on logic to attain knowledge, but rather "it implies a disposition to open oneself to the essential Reality (*al-Haqīqa*), which transcends discursive thought and so also a possibility of placing oneself

³ Burckhardt, p4-5

⁴ Kahlawi, p. 100-101

⁵ Al Shaibi, p. 11

intellectually beyond all individual subjectivity.”(Burckhardt, 2008). This in other words sums up the idea that both Sufism and Shi’ism were founded on esoteric beliefs and conventions that made them both philosophically quite alike. “One can say that Islamic esotericism or gnosis crystallized into the form of Sufism in the Sunni world while it poured into the whole structure of Shi’ism especially during its early period” (Nasr, p. 230)Tuhfah Yi Abbasi by Muhammad Ali MuadhhdhinSabrawazi – published in 1918- is considered one of the oldest comprehensive academic works on Sufism in Shia Islam. According to Sabrawazi ,he term Gnosticism got its name from the Greek word γνῶσις, „knowledge“ or „understanding“ and in the Gnostic tradition it means especially“redeeming knowledge”⁶.

Hidden Meanings

Mustafa Kamil Al Shaibi offers a thorough historical analysis of the political power plays between early Sufists and Shiites under the Abbasid and Fatimid reigns. One of the major foundations that Sufism and Shi’ism share is their common belief in “the two-fold nature of everything”⁷ From this assumption, Sufis and Shi’a alike generated their narratives on means to unravel the hidden meanings (*Ilm al batin*) and their distinct way of allegorical interpretation of the sacred text. With regard to these hidden meanings that Sufism and Shi’ism suggest and tend to unravel in their doctrines, Al Shaibi explains that Sufis lik Shi’a used metaphoric interpretation to understand three areas, these are 1)- understanding the opening letters of Quranic chapters, 2)- interpreting ambiguous verses and 3)- use Qur’anic verses to support notions of *Wilayah* and *Imamah* in Sufism and Shi’ism respectively⁸. According to Al Shaibi “It is striking that both the Shi’ites and the Sufis employed nearly the same verses to support the *Imamah* and the sainthood” (Al Shaibi, 1991)

Imamah and Wilayah

This quote leads us to undertake another major commonality between Sufism and Shi’ism, which is the hierarchy of religious figures and interceding role of the righteous. The concepts of *Wilayah* (Sainthood) and *Imamah* are exclusively adhered by Sufis and Shi’a even though the majority of Muslim Sunni orthodoxy rejected ideas of sainthood and the interceding role of saints (*Shafa’ah*). Also, comparing the outer appearance of a Sufi and a Shi’a religious figure, among the similarities listed by SeyyedHossein Nasr is the practice of using cloaq (*Khirqah*) to symbolize mysticism. According to Shi’a narratives, the practice was initiated by Imam Ali and then embraced by Sufi Shaykhs like Al Junaid. ⁹The role of Imam Ali and his authority will be discussed later as a denominator between Sufism and Shi’ism.

A (*wali*) in Arabic stands for someone with authority and in some Quranic verses it implies friendship. It is also derived from (*Wilayah*) which refers to someone with authority and in Sufi context it implies sanctity¹⁰. According to Ahmad Hussein Ya’qub in his *Al-Wajīz Fī Al-imāmah Wa-Al-wilāyah* of 1997, the notion of *Imamah* was mentioned twelve times in Qur’an and from this usage, the term has two meanings: 1)- a covenant and agreement from God to his chosen sincere worshippers. 2)- the unrighteous leader leading others oppressively towards sin and misguidance. ¹¹ “In Shi’ism, the whole function of the Imam is associated

⁶Sabzvārī

⁷ Al Shaibi, p.73

⁸ Al Shaibi , p. 66

⁹ Nasr, p 230

¹⁰ Nasr, p232, Ya’qub, p19

¹¹Ya’qub, p19

with the power and function of what in Persian is called *walayat* and which comes from the same root as *wilayah* and is closely connected with it.” (Nasr, 1970) However, one major distinction that should be taken into account between Sufi *Wilayah* and Shi’a *Imamah* is the concept of infallibility of the Imams (‘Ismah)

Al Shaibi offers an outstanding detailed historical analysis of the development and evolution of both doctrines since the eleventh year of *hijra*. “From the many similarities prevailing between both parties, we can infer that Shi’ism came first and had established its whole body of doctrine upon a spiritual foundation, just as Sufism did afterwards” (Al Sahaibi, 1991) The first formal use of the term Shi’a was in the arbitration document of the battle of Saffin, describing a group of those supporting Imam Ali as the rightful candidate for caliphate after the death of the prophet (PBUH).¹²

Since both Shi’ism and Sufism embrace asceticism as a key pillar of both doctrines, scholars concluded that *Zuhd* and fighting against oppression are also shared attributes between Sufism and Shi’a. “Sufis competed with Shi’ism in attracting both the victims and the enemies of the Arab conquest, who were opposing the Arab rulers, and perhaps, sometimes Islam itself” (Al Shaibi, 1991). This also goes back to the nature of the Shi’a community and the initiation of Shi’ism to support Imam Ali and fight against oppression and injustice against the Prophet’s household. “In the days of Ali the term shi’a came into being to indicate the political groups of Islam (...) which had formerly been the groups of the Muhajirin of Mekkah and the Ansar of Medinah.” (Al Shaibi, 1991). The year 851 A.D witnessed a shifting point in the position of Sufism towards shrines and the development of their position on leaders’ divinity when the Abbasid Caliph Al Mutawakil ordered the demolition of Al Hussaen’s grave in Karbalaa¹³. Al Shaibi calls this particular instance as “a beginning that led Sufism to the same phenomena of extremist leaders’ divinity, and the same phenomena of the Imams’ Mahdiyya” (Al Shaibi, 1991)

Role of Imam Ali

Another core commonality between Sufism and Shi’ism is the significant role and authority of Imam Ali. Seyyed Hussein Nasr emphasizes the significance of Imam Ali’s role in Sufism as in Shi’ism by referring to the prophetic hadith “I am the city of knowledge, and Ali is its gate” as the direct reference to Imam Ali as a possessor of the esoteric knowledge of Islam¹⁴. Al Shaibi agrees with this position and takes it even further by suggesting that “If Al-Junaid could have expressed himself freely, he would have declared the direct connection between his doctrine and Shi’ism, but he was content with allusion” (Al Shaibi, 1991). He goes on by giving numerous examples of how Sufi Shaykhs dignified and claimed authority of Imam Ali within their doctrine, including one of their prominent *Tariqah* founder Ahmed Al Rifa’i, as well as Ibn ‘Arabi, Al Dusuqi and Al Bistami to name a few.¹⁵

In addition to the divine knowledge, role of Imam Ali, notions of Imamah and Wilayah, Al Shaibi elaborates on forms of connection between Shi’ism and Sunni traditions saying that “Some orders such as the Rifa’is, reflected some Shi’ite views unconsciously as they annually practiced the seven day retirement of *Muharram*” (Al Shaibi, 1991)

¹² Al Shaibi, p.14

¹³ Al Shaibi, p.56

¹⁴ Nasr, p.231

¹⁵ Al Shaibi, p. 58

There is a dichotomy today between scholars who deny that Shi'ism and Sufism influenced each other and share various aspects of their philosophies on the one hand, and those who emphasize such link and support it with historical evidence. Muhammad Kahlawi takes that perennial philosophical stand which suggests the overlapping and interactive nature of all doctrines and religious philosophies of the world¹⁶. However, and as a conclusion from the above conducted analysis, it is undeniable that Shi'ism as a religious doctrine and Sufism as the Sunni ascetic philosophical path share various commonalities and ideas that prove their innate connection and adherence to the same truths.

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¹⁶Kahlawi, p. 118