

Sufism and the Qur'an

Tasawwuf Islamic mysticism, is an ascetic mystical trend in Islam characterized by a distinct life-style, values, ritual practices, doctrines and institutions. Sufism emerged as a distinct ascetic and mystical trend in Islamic piety under the early 'Abbasids at about the same time as similar movements in Syria, Iran and central Asia which, though designated by different names, shared the same world-renouncing, inward-looking and esoteric attitude.

by the fourth/tenth century, the Iraq-based trend in Islamic ascetic (see asceticism) and mystical piety (q.v.) known as "Sufism" (tasawwuf) gradually prevailed over and integrated the beliefs and practices of its sister movements in the other regions of the caliphate (see caliph). By the end of the fourth/tenth century, leading representatives of this syncretic ascetic and mystical trend in Islam had generated a substantial body of teaching, practices and normative oral and literary lore that became the source of inspiration, life-orientation, ethos and identity for its subsequent followers, whose number continued to grow with every century.

with the emergence first of Sufi lodges, and, somewhat later, Sufi "brotherhoods" (the fifth-seventh/eleventh-thirteenth centuries) or "orders" (turuq, sing. tariqa), Sufism became part and parcel of the spiritual, social and political life of pre-modern Islam dom. with the advent of modernity in the thirteenth/nineteenth century Sufism was subjected⁴ to strident criticism by Muslim modernists and reformers, and in the course of the fourteenth/twentieth century lost ground to competing ideologies, both religions and secular (see politics and the Qur'an). Nevertheless, it has managed to survive both criticisms and overt persecutions and even won converts among some western intellectuals.

Early Sufi attitudes to the Qur'an

From the outset, the Qur'an was the principal source of contemplation and inspiration for every serious Muslim ascetic and mystic, whether formally Sufi or not. In fact, many Sufi concepts and terms have their origin in encounters with much-needed legitimacy in the eyes of both Sufis and Muslims not directly affiliated with it. yet, from the very beginning Sufi interpretation of the scripture (as well as Sufi practices, values and beliefs) were challenged by influential representative of the Sunni and Shi'i religious establishments (see traditional, disciplines of Qur'anic study), occasionally resulting in persecution of individual mystics.

Sufis were accused of overplaying the allegorical aspects of the Qur'an, claiming privileged, esoteric understanding of its contents and distorting its literal meaning (see polysemy; literary structures and the Qur'an).

To demonstrate their faithfulness to the spirit and letter of the revelation (see revelation and inspiration) advocates of Sufism drew heavily on the qur'anic verses (q.v.) which, in their view, legitimized their brand of Islamic piety. Such verses usually emphasize the proximity and intimacy between God and his human servants (e.g. Q ۲:۱۱۰, ۱۸۶; ۲۰: ۷-۸;

٥٨:٧; see servant; worship; god and his attributes). God's immediate and immanent presence among the faithful is forcefully brought home in Q ٥٠:١٦, in which he declares himself to be nearer to man than "his jugular vein" (see artery and vein). The relationship of closeness and intimacy is occasionally presented in the Qur'an in terms of mutual love (q.v.) between the maker and his creatures (see creation; cosmology), as, for instance, in Q ٥:٥٤ (cf. Q ٣:٣١, ٧٦, ١٣٤, ١٤٦, ١٤٨, ١٥٩; ٥:٩٣, which also describe different categories of believers deserving of divine affection).