
An Analytical Study of the Sources of Islamic Mysticism and the Views of Orientalists

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Abstract

The question of Sufism's origin and roots in Islam is a complex and much-debated issue. Since the latter half of the nineteenth century, scholars have presented conflicting perspectives on this matter. Earlier Orientalists typically viewed Sufism as stemming from a single external source, while more recent perspectives suggest it may have multiple roots. Nevertheless, both groups agree on one key point-that Sufism was a later addition to Islam and not an original part of it. Various perspectives have been put forward to explain its true origins, attributing it to influences from Persian, Indian, Christian, Jewish, or Neo-Platonic traditions. The present paper aims to challenge these view points and to demonstrate that Islamic Sufism finds its true roots directly in the Qur'anic revelation, the Sunnah of the Prophet, and the lives of his righteous companions.

Keywords: *Orientalist perspectives on Sufism's origin, Islamic Mysticism, External influence theories Neo-Platonic, Qur'anic roots of Islamic Sufism, Refutation of non-Islamic sources.*

Introduction

The issue of the origin and sources of Islamic Sufism is extremely complex in Islamic thought. Especially from the beginning of the 19th century until today, Western thinkers and Orientalists have been searching for the true source of Sufism. In this regard, early Orientalists attribute Islamic Sufism to a single source, while later ones tend toward multiple sources. However, all of them believe that Sufism is an external element in Islam - that it came from outside and has no relation to Islam itself. Some say it was derived from Iran and Persian traditions; some consider it influenced by Indian religions; some associate it with Christianity and Judaism; while others link it to Platonic philosophy. This article aims to refute all these perspectives and to prove that the true source of Sufism lies in the Qur'an, Hadith, and the pure life of the Prophet and his Companions.

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Persian Source Theory

Some Orientalists who hold the view that the origin of Sufism is Persian (Iranian) include F.A.D. Tholuck. This German Orientalist, in 1821, wrote in his book *Sufismus sive theologiapanthistiea* that the origin of Islamic Sufism is Magian (Zoroastrian). He argues that after the Islamic conquests in northern Iran, many Magians remained firm in their religion. Furthermore, a majority of the great Sufi masters came from northern Iran, particularly from Khorasan. Additionally, many founders of Sufism were of Magian origin, such as Ma' ruf al-Karkhī and Abu Yazid al-Bistami.¹

Meanwhile, the Dutch Orientalist Dozy, in his book, writes that Sufism came to Muslims from Persia, and in Persia it originally came from India. According to Dozy, a view existed in Persia for a long time that "everything emanates from God, and the universe has no independent existence; the only true existence belongs to God." These words reflect the spirit of Islamic Sufism.²

Answer

Sufism is not indebted solely to Ma' ruf Karkhī and Bāyzīd Baṣṭāmī, nor did it spread entirely due to these figures. It was also profoundly influenced by Arabia and Egypt, by personalities such as Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī, and Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī. The view presented here - that the universe has no independent existence and the only true being is the Lord of Glory - may be a hint toward the doctrine of waḥdat al-wujūd (Unity of Existence) in Sufism. However, this view arose in the sixth Islamic-century and is not a universal path for all Sufis. A scholar, Arberry, rejects Tholuck's view, stating it disregards modern principles of research and sparks needless controversy.³ Tholuck himself admits in another place that Sufism is the summary of the Prophet's spiritual life.⁴

The Orientalist R.A. Nicholson also says that the basis of Islamic theology, jurisprudence, and Sufism lies first and foremost in the Qur'ān and Sunnah.⁵

The Theory of an Indian Source

Some Orientalists view Islamic Sufism as derived from Indian culture and having entered Islamic thought just like certain customs and traditions. They say that some Sufi practices and concepts - such as asceticism, remembrance and contemplation, gnosis, fana, and waḥdat al-wujūd - show a kind of similarity to Hindu traditions. Notable advocates of this view include Hortman, Max Horten, and A. von Cremer. Horten believed that the principles and regulations of Islamic Sufism were borrowed from Hindu thought.⁶

Dr. Abu'l- 'Alā ' Afīfī writes that Horten made strenuous efforts to prove this view and even wrote two articles in 1927 and 1928 attempting to show that the Sufism of Bāyzīd Baṣṭāmī, Ḥallāj, and Junayd Baghdādī was filled with Hindu influences. Horten particularly highlights the strong imprint of Hindu thought on Ḥallāj's ideas. Furthermore, after analyzing certain Persian Sufi terms, Horten concludes that Islamic Sufism is identical to the Vedic religion of India.⁷

Some arguments presented in this view are:

1. The earliest Sufi shuyūkh were mostly non-Arab, such as Ibrāhīm ibn Adham, Shaqīq Balkhī, Bāyzīd Baṣṭāmī, and Yaḥyā ibn Mu‘ādh al-Rāzī.
 2. Sufism first arose and spread in Khurāsān.
 3. Turkistan was a religious and cultural center of the East and West; when its people entered Islam, they blended their ancient Sufi customs and ideas into Islamic Sufism.
 4. Muslims themselves admit to the mixture of Hindu influences and ideas.⁸
- Richard Hortman, as quoted by Arberry, says that the Sufi Abu ‘Alī Sindī was the teacher of Bāyzīd Baṣṭāmī, which shows that the roots of Sufism are Hindu.⁹
- Alfred von Cremer believes Sufism comprises two elements - Christian monasticism and Indian (Buddhist) thought - visible in Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, and others.¹⁰

Responses

In refutation of Max Horten, Orientalist A. Schimmel writes that the arguments Max Horten presented to consider Sufism as having an Indian origin are not convincing and are insufficient to support such a claim.¹¹

Meanwhile, Arberry states that, aside from Max Horten, nobody else has tried to attribute Sufism to an Indian origin. However, the method and inferences Horten used actually contradict his own claim, and his objective and style are polemical. Massignon, meanwhile, has described Hallāj as a monotheist.¹²

Similarly, Orientalist Brown, commenting on Horten’s comparisons in his book *A History of Persian Literature*, says that Horten has exaggerated, presented shallow arguments, and strayed far from the truth.¹³ Furthermore, addressing the absence of Hindu and Buddhist influences on Islamic Sufism, Brown says there are fundamental differences in the teachings of Sufism and Buddhism. Although there is some superficial resemblance between the nirvana of Buddhism and the *fanaa* of Sufism, their methods and goals are completely different. However, there are numerous similarities and methodological affinities between the doctrine of waḥdat al-wujūd and the Vedas.¹⁴

In refutation of Von Cremer, Margrat Smith expresses surprise that even a person of Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī’s stature has been described by Von Cremer as influenced by Buddhism. She says Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī elevated Sufism’s position within Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah (Sunni orthodoxy) much before Al-Ghazali. His ideas were acceptable to both Arabs and non-Arabs (Persians). Furthermore, Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī maintained that the primary and original sources of Sufism were the Qur’ān and the Prophet’s Sunnah.

Similarly, Nicholson, in his book, writes about the source of Islamic Sufism: "His first and chief authority for any doctrine is the Quran, the word of God and his second the Sunnah, the canonical law embodying the traditions of Muhammad."¹⁵

"A part from the fact that Sufism like every other religions movement in Islam, has its roots in the Quran and Sunnah and cannot be understand unless we study it from the source upwards."¹⁶

"The identity of two beliefs does not prove that one is generated by the other, they may be the result of a like cause."¹⁷

Other Orientalists who believe in the Indian influence on Sufism have no weight in their arguments and are completely contrary to historical facts. They refer to Al-Biruni; Abu Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad Al-Biruni died in 440 AH. He wrote his book at a time when Sufism was adorned with Islamic concepts and sources. Furthermore, there is no historical evidence - either in the book, before it, or after it - that Muslims exchanged any Indian or Buddhist ideas.

Greek Source Theory

A group of Orientalists believes that Islamic Sufism is a particular form of Greek mysticism. That is why they say Islamic Sufism bears a resemblance - according to them - to certain thoughts of ancient and modern Platonic philosophy. E. H. Whinfield states that there is a kind of similarity and resemblance between the illuminative, esoteric philosophy of Neo-Platonism and the revelation and mysticism of Sufism, which is clear proof that Sufis were influenced by Neo-Platonism.¹⁸

Major Sufi scholars of Egypt - like Abu al-A'la Afifi, Dr. Mohammed Mustafa Helmy, and Shaykh al-Mashā'ikh Abu al-Wafā al-Taftāzāni - agree that some terminology in Sufism entered Islam through translation from predominantly Platonic, or more broadly, Greek philosophy. They say Ibn Na'im presented these to Muslims by translating the book "Uthulujiya Aristatalis"- a text in which Aristotle is believed to have quoted from Platon's "Enneads"—and from this a theological view was formed. Dr. Mohammed Mustafa Helmy writes: "In 'Uthulujiya Aristu,' a Neo-Platonic book, it is stated that the understanding of ultimate reality is not achieved through thought. Rather, it is attained by shedding oneself and the physical world, and then through direct observation." The view that true knowledge cannot be gotten through senses and pure reason - instead, it comes when a person renounces oneself and God shines light into their heart, causing them to become completely absorbed in the Divine - is present in both Neo-Platonism and the view of the Sufi philosophers. Furthermore, Muslim Sufis were aware of the Greek inscription at the Delphic Temple: "Know thyself." Sufis recognized this and placed it under the Prophet's saying, "Whoever knows himself knows his Lord." Additionally, certain terms formulated by philosophical Sufis - such as "Word" (Kalima), "First Intellect" (Aql Awwal), "Cause and Effect" ('illa wa Ma'lul), "Emanation" (Fayd Wujud), "Unity" (Wahda), and "Multiplicity" (Kasra) - are clear traces of this influence.¹⁹

But this influence remained weak and limited in Islamic Sufism. The philosophers who advocated concepts like the "active intellect" or the soul's detachment from the body to connect with higher creatures fell under its influence. However, the rest - those who spoke about knowledge - drew their perspectives purely from Islamic sources,

the Qur'ān and Hadith. Furthermore, those influenced were a few people from the sixth Islamic century. Sufism had already firmly established itself on pure Islamic foundations long before their time.²⁰

Christian Source Theory

Some Orientalists who advocated this theory include Von Kremer, Neoldeke, Wensinck, Goldziher, Asian Palacios, Andrae, Q Leary, Julian Balick, and Gibb, etc. Each of them presented different arguments in support of this view. The Egyptian scholar Dr. Abdul Rahman Badawi summarizes these as follows²¹:

1. The apparent similarity in attire between Islamic Sufism and Christian monasticism, such as wearing a **khirqā (cloak)**, just as Christian monks put a piece of cloth on their shoulders. Similarly, the use of wool and wearing it as a symbol of Sufism.
2. Some intellectual similarities, like the practice of **self-examination (muhāsaba al-nafs)**.
3. The use of certain Aramaic and Syriac words in Islamic Sufism, such as **Lāhūt, Nāsūt, Raḥmūt, Rāhibūt, Rabbāni**, and **Rūḥāni**.
4. Interaction between Muslims and Christian Arabs in regions like Ḥira, Kufa, Damascus, and Najran.
5. Some traditions of early Sufis that they ascribe to **Jesus (PBUH)**, and many more.

In this context, Von Kremer made the first scholarly and research effort to study the history and compilation of Islamic Sufism in his book **Geschichte der herrschenden des Islam**. Kremer presented the view that Islamic Sufism comprises two elements - a Christian monastic element and an Indian-Buddhist element - and these two components are present in the lives of great Sufi figures such as Al-Hārith Al-Muhāsibī, Dhū Al-Nūn Al-Miṣrī, Abu Yazid Al-Bistami, and Al-Junayd Al-Baghdadi. According to him, the influence of Indian-Buddhism is manifest in the Sufi doctrine of **waḥdat al-wujūd (unity of being)**.²²

Similarly, Goldziher (A. Gold Ziher) divides Sufism into two parts - asceticism and Sufism. According to him, asceticism has a strong Islamic and Sunni basis. It was a result of the Prophet's mission and message and is, in essence, monasticism. Goldziher also refers to traditions of the Prophet which prohibit excess in ascetic practices - such as perpetual fasting, staying up all night in worship, and abstinence from marriage.²³ Another Orientalist, Hamilton A. R. Gibb, states that Islamic Sufism is profoundly influenced by Christian mysticism and Gnosticism.²⁴

Similarly, Nicholson, in his article **Muslim Asceticism**, published in 1909 in the **Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics**, made a strong effort to prove that Islamic Sufism and asceticism are derived from Christianity.

Another Orientalist, Julian Balick, believes that when Muslims accepted the new religion of Prophet, their contacts with Christians intensified and they adopted Sufism from them.²⁵

Furthermore, the word "Sufi" itself is taken from Christian terminology because it is derived from **ṣūf (wool)** - Christian monks made their garments from it, a practice later adopted by early Muslims. Similarly, wearing the **jubba (khirqa)**, which Sufis use, existed in Christian traditions before Islam.²⁶

Responses

In commenting on Balick, the orientalist, says that this is nothing but religious prejudice, as he has disregarded scholarly honesty and made such accusations.²⁷

"It is not so much honest scholarship, as the worst form of the sectarian bigotry."

As for the point that Arabs had relations with Christians both before and after Islam - although there were various Christian sects in Arabia influenced by different cultures and thoughts - it is irrational to say that Muslims sought guidance and instructions from them for their spiritual life. Muslims already had an abundant treasure of spirituality in their own religion. The Noble Qur'an is a fountain of guidance and light; its day-and-night recitation, reflection upon its verses, and quenching oneself from its springs of wisdom, secrets, and spirituality - alongside the traditions (hadith) of the Prophet, which are a rich collection filled with asceticism, discipline of the soul, and love for Allah - all provide complete guidance. The Prophet himself was a perfect example of piety and God-consciousness. So borrowing from others is incomprehensible.

Therefore, Orientalists themselves do not agree on this view; in fact, some Orientalists even contradict their own opinions. Among those who have researched Sufism the most - Massignon and Nicholson - both are inclined toward the view that Islamic Sufism is not derived from any external source. Sometimes they hint at a resemblance to some sources, but later withdraw their view in other places.

As for the relationships between Muslims and Christian monks, there is no doubt that even if such relationships were established, this does not conflict with Qur'anic teachings. Allah says:

"Verily, you will find the most hostile people toward the believers to be the Jews and the polytheists; and you will find the closest in affection to the believers those who say, 'We are Christians.' That is because among them are priests and monks, and they do not behave arrogantly."²⁸ (Qur'an 5:82)

If we carefully study the Qur'an and the Prophet's traditions, it becomes clear, like the light of day, that the clear sources for asceticism, discipline of the soul, and staying away from the desires and pleasures of this world are the Qur'an and the Prophet's traditions.

For example, a verse of the Holy Qur'an:

"Know that the life of this world is only play and amusement and adornment and mutual boasting among you, and rivalry in wealth and children. It is like a rain whose

vegetation pleases the farmers; then it dries up and you see it turning yellow, then it becomes debris. And in the Hereafter, there is severe punishment (for disbelievers) and forgiveness from Allah and His pleasure (for believers). And the life of this world is nothing but the enjoyment of delusion.”²⁹

In the same way, the blessed life of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) was the embodiment of asceticism (zuhd).

Hazrat Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) said that the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) used to worship so much at night that his blessed feet would swell. Because of such abundant worship, the companions (may Allah be pleased with them) submitted, “O Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him), why do you exert yourself so much, while Allah has already promised you forgiveness?” The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied, **“Should I not be a grateful servant of Allah?”**³⁰

Once, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) passed by a dead goat and said, “Look at this carcass-so worthless that no one pays it any attention. By the One in Whose hand is my soul, the world is even more insignificant in the sight of Allah than this dead goat.” He further said, “The companionship of the world is the root of all sins; it is the home of the ruined and the wealth of the destitute.”³¹

Hazrat Fatimah (may Allah be pleased with her) once baked some barley bread and brought it to the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him). The Prophet (peace be upon him) asked, **“Fatimah, what is this?”** She replied, **“Father, today I baked this barley bread, and I could not bear to eat it alone, so I brought it for you.”**

The Prophet (peace be upon him) broke a piece and said, **“Daughter, this is the first bite your father has eaten in three days. By the One in Whose hand is my soul, nothing has entered this stomach for three days.”**³²

Hazrat Ibn Mas‘ud (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated that once the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) rested on a mat, and marks appeared on his blessed body. Ibn Mas‘ud (may Allah be pleased with him) could not bear it and said, **“O Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him), if you permit, I will spread a soft mat for you.”** The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied, **“What need do I have of this world? My example and that of this world is like that of a traveler who rests in the shade of a tree for a short while and then moves on.”** Similar words are also reported when Hazrat Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) once spread a soft bed for him.³³

Maulana Manazir Ahsan Gilani (may Allah have mercy on him) beautifully expressed this:

“The one who had no bedding except the floor of dust-if he slept on dust, then what sleep it was! The one who could have slept on a throne chose to sleep on the earth, and that is the purest sleep, free of all impurities.”³⁴

In the same way, the lives of the Companions (may Allah be pleased with them) were filled with asceticism and piety. Yes, if Muslims later adopted some practices from other religions into their Sufism that would have been after the first six centuries of

Islam- at a time when Islam had already handed over the splendid structure of true Sufism to the Muslims.

Results & Findings

The issue of the source and origin of Sufism in Islam is a complex one. A number of scholars, since the latter half of the nineteenth century have put forward conflicting claims. Earlier Orientalists thought that a Sufism developed from a single source while the latter scholars think a number of different sources should be considered as origin of Sufism. Both groups agree, however, in maintaining that Sufism is an addition to Islam and did not originally belong to Islam. Different opinions have been presented regarding the true source of Sufism, for example, Persian, Indian, Christian, Jewish and Neo-Platonic philosophies. The present paper intends to refute these charges of external influences on Islamic Sufism and attempts to show that the real origin of Islamic Sufism lies nowhere but in the teachings of the Holy Qur'an, Sunnah of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and lives of the blessed companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

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