

Lecture 14: Sunni and Shiite; Sufism

I come now to my third and final lecture on the western religion of Islam. As usual, just a quick review to begin with. I spent some time in my first written lecture in this module defining the word *Islam* and explaining that Muslims see their religion of “submission and peace” as both the oldest and the youngest of the world’s major traditions. I also spoke about the Prophet Muhammad and certain historic events in his life, as well as about the Holy Qur’an, the Muslim Bible. Last time I focused on the fundamental teachings of Islam, which compose what we call the *shariah* or law. There are five basic points to remember, five “pillars” of Islam: first, the *shahâdah* or Muslim creed, “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Prophet of God”; second, the practice of *zakah* (plural: *zakat*), which has to do with almsgiving, charity, and compassion; third, the annual *sawm* (plural: *siyâm*) or fast during the holy month of Ramadan; fourth, the *hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca; and fifth, the *salah* (plural: *salat*), which is the practice of daily prayer.

In wrapping things up, I would like to do a couple of things. I want to focus your attention today on Sufism, the mystical aspect or dimension of Islam, and in this connection I’ll be referring to the selection you were assigned in *A Book of Saints*. But first of all it’s important to say just a few words about some of the differences between the two major denominations or branches of Islam. We’ve had occasion to take note of certain subdivisions within the various religions we’re studying. In Hinduism, for example, there were the Vaishnavites, Shaivites, and Shaktas; in the case of Buddhism I told you about the two major branches of *Theravada* and *Mahâyâna*; and in discussing Taoism we mentioned some of the differences between philosophical Taoism, religious Taoism, and yogic Taoism. For the most part I’ve been concentrating on commonalities, not differences, since the main goal of this class is to introduce you to the distinctive beliefs and practices of each given religion—those agreed-upon doctrines and methods that make *all* Hindus Hindu, those that make *all* Taoists Taoist, those (in the present case) that make *all* Muslims Muslim. But it’s important nonetheless to take an occasional peek at some of the divisions within these traditions.

When it comes to Islam, the most important denominational distinction we need to be aware of is between a mainstream majority of Muslims called Sunnis and a minority known as Shiites. The word *Sunni* comes from the Arabic *sunnah*, meaning “tradition”; the Sunnis or

“traditionalists” account for around eighty-seven per cent of all Muslims. The term *Shiite* is based on the Arabic *shi'ah* meaning “party” (as in the Republican or Democratic Party, not a birthday party); it can be traced back to the fact that the Shiites were originally the “party”—that is, the followers—of Ali, Muhammad’s son-in-law. Today the largest concentrations of Shiite Muslims are in Iraq and Iran.

The dividing line between these two groups is not primarily doctrinal but rather historical and political. Sunnis and Shiites both accept the Five Pillars and other basic teachings of Islam, but they disagree over the proper transmission of authority—that is, over who has the right to interpret the Qur’an and make official pronouncements on Muslim law and practice. The division is roughly parallel to the split within Christianity between members of the Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholics. Both of these Christian groups believe that Jesus Christ founded a visible, institutional Church and gave its leaders the authority to teach in His name. But at this point a major difference comes in. Orthodox Christians believe that Christ gave equal authority to all His apostles, and that all their duly appointed successors (the bishops) have equal rights in guiding the Church on earth. In contrast Roman Catholics teach that Christ gave full authority to only one of the apostles, namely Peter, and that it’s only Peter’s successors, the popes, who are the proper heads of the Church.

Where Jesus had twelve “apostles” or “disciples”, Muhammad had four “companions”—four close friends: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali. Here is where the analogy comes in. Sunni Muslims are like Orthodox Christians in believing that all four of these companions had equal authority and that their duly chosen successors down through the centuries, called *caliphs*, are all valid transmitters of the Islamic *sunnah* or tradition. Shiites on the other hand are more like Roman Catholics when it comes to their view of religious authority. Just as Catholics say it was Peter whom Christ chose above the other disciples, so the Shiites believe that Muhammad’s son-in-law, Ali, was his only legitimate successor, and in turn that Ali’s blood-descendants are alone the proper heads of the Muslim religion, the only completely authoritative interpreters of the *shariah*. There’s a further rather interesting twist among Shiites themselves. Many of them believe that after a period of years the last of Ali’s successors of whom we have any historical record went into hiding, or “occultation”; this occurred, they say, many centuries ago. He’s referred to as the “hidden *imam*”. The Arabic word *imam* means literally the one who “stands at the front” in leading the prayers; every mosque has an *imam* who plays something of the same role as a Christian minister. It’s said

that this mysterious person will not reappear publicly until the end of the world, when (as a prophetic figure called the *Mahdi*, or “rightly guided one”) he will play the role of preparer for the Second Coming of Christ. (I mentioned in my last lecture that Muslims share with Christians a belief in Christ’s eschatological return.) Depending on which of the successors they look to as the hidden *imam*, Shiites divide up into various subgroups; the “twelvers”, who believe it was the twelfth successor to Ali—a man born in 869 A.D.—are the largest of these groups.

Setting aside, however, this largely political demarcation between Sunnis and Shiites, I would like to turn now to a second distinction—between the exoteric and the esoteric. We’ve had occasion to mention this dividing line several times this semester. As you know, the term *exoteric* refers to what is external or outer: to the literal formulation of doctrines and to the outward actions involved in certain rituals and other practices. By contrast the term *esoteric* refers to what is internal or inward: to the deeper, symbolic, and mystical meanings of doctrines and to the inner intentions behind ritual and practice. In Christian terms it’s the difference between the “letter” and the “spirit”, a distinction found, as we have noted before, in Saint Paul’s epistles in the New Testament (see for example 2 Corinthians 3:6). In Chinese terms, it’s the difference, as you know, between Confucianism, which is relatively more exoteric, and Taoism, which is relatively more esoteric. When it comes to Islam, the same basic dividing line can be drawn between Shariites and Sufis. The term *shariite* (as perhaps you can guess) is derived from the word *shariah* or law, and it refers to Muslims whose religious practice and worldview is determined more or less exclusively by the letter of the law—by the literal meaning of the Qur’an and the Five Pillars. Sufis on the other hand are Islamic mystics; they are Muslims whose beliefs and practices, although firmly grounded in the law of the exoteric tradition, are intended to take them into a deeper, more intimate, more “esoteric” relationship with God than is ordinarily expected in this present life.

I want to highlight a few specific points about Sufism, but it’s important to say something first about mysticism in general because it’s a term that’s often misunderstood and misused. Etymologically, the words “mystic” and “mysticism” come from a Greek verb, *muein*, which means “to close” and which is used in reference to both the eyes and the mouth. The mystic is someone who can see things even when his physical eyes are closed—things that go beyond what ordinary sight can discern—and whose mouth is likewise closed or sealed insofar as those things can’t be put into words. Mysticism thus refers to our contact with dimensions of Reality that are invisible—in fact beyond the reach of all the physical senses, not only sight—and ineffable or

indescribable. To make the same point in terms of what I called “levels of religious participation” (see Lecture 1), you could put it this way: The mystic is the person who’s not satisfied with simply *believing* in the spiritual world or taking its existence on authority, the way many other religious people do. Nor is he content to stop at the level of *faith*, putting his trust and confidence in God and hoping for a reward after death. Instead the mystic aspires to go further and to ascend to higher levels of involvement: he seeks to *experience* God directly and to be *transformed* by that contact. You should have read the assigned selection for this module in *A Book of Saints* by now, and if so you’ve encountered the words of the Sufi master Ahmad al-Alawi (1869-1934) concerning this higher quest (see p. 104).

Mysticism is largely a western phenomenon. One could talk about “Hindu mystics” or “Buddhist mystics” or “Taoist mystics”, but as you know the main thrust of these Asian religions is already directed toward spiritual insight and transformation. In a sense all Hindus, Buddhists, and Taoists are mystics. In the West, however, the situation is very different. Most Jews, most Christians, and most Muslims think of their religious involvement primarily in terms of faith and obedience. The vast majority in other words are exotericists, concentrating mainly on the letter of their respective laws. God (they would say) has done certain things for us human beings and for the sake of our salvation, and it’s up to us to respond, trusting in His authority and conforming ourselves to His will. Whatever rewards or blessings or blissful experiences may be in store for us will come only after death, and even then—however you might define or describe them—they will in no way undercut or compromise the radical difference between the Creator and His creatures, between God and man. This, as I say, tends to be the mainstream attitude in the Abrahamic religions.

Mystics, however, are western exceptions to this rule. The mystic is the Jew, the Christian, or the Muslim who senses that there’s a fundamental truth in the Hindu claim that *Atman* and *Brahman* are a single Reality, or who like the Buddhist is seeking the goal of *Nirvâna*. I need to be careful because I don’t want to mislead you here. There are certainly important differences in the way western mystics look at “God” compared to how Taoists (let’s say) see the *Tao*. Nevertheless, speaking in very general—and therefore, as so often, in simplistic—terms, mysticism could be described as a western religious phenomenon with a South Asian or East Asian flavor. This is undoubtedly why the mystics of the Abrahamic religions have always been viewed with a certain amount of suspicion by their respective exoteric communities. Some of them, like

many of the Jewish cabalists, have simply been ostracized; others, like the medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, have been condemned as heretics; and still others, like the Sufi saint Mansur al-Hallaj, have been executed. In the meantime—and rather ironically—the theological and philosophical thought of all three Semitic traditions has been deeply and lastingly affected by the spiritual teachings of their mystics, who in some cases have held powerful and influential religious positions, as abbots of monasteries and advisors to caliphs.

After this necessary digression, let me return to Islam and its mystics, the Sufis. No one seems to know for sure where the term “Sufi” comes from. Some speculate that it’s derived from the Arabic word *sūf*, meaning “wool”, and that it’s meant to refer to the woolen garments the first Sufis wore. Others suggest that “Sufism” should be traced to the Arabic *safa*, meaning “purity”, which is obviously one of the goals of any spiritual path. Whatever the history of the term, it’s important to stress that authentic Sufism is a specifically and self-consciously Muslim path, a way of approaching God that presupposes among its adherents an exoteric foundation in the Islamic *shariah*. The true Sufi—as opposed to the numerous contemporary pseudo-Sufi counterfeits one can find on the internet and elsewhere—must therefore be a practicing Muslim, who accepts the Qur’an, the traditional *hadīths* of Muhammad, and of course the Five Pillars (see *A Book of Saints*, p. 95). But—and here’s the difference between the Sufi and the shariite—the Sufi attempts to go further. In addition to these outer or exoteric elements, he seeks an inner or esoteric depth, and rather than waiting for the fulfillment of his religion’s promises in Heaven or Paradise, he wants salvation *now*.

Another distinguishing mark of the true Sufi mystic—another feature that sets her apart from her counterfeits—is that she is not a soloist or individualist, whatever the exotericists around her may think; in other words the person who wishes to follow the mystical path of Islam doesn’t simply strike out for God on her own initiative or on the basis of her own personal spiritual resources. On the contrary she is a member of a traditional spiritual brotherhood, and she willingly places herself under the direction or guidance of a *bona fide* spiritual master. The Sufi seeker or disciple is called a *faqīr*, which means the “poor one”. Poverty in this case is not financial but spiritual and is meant to connote a radical, self-effacing dependence on God; Christians will recall these words of Christ: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 5:3). A Sufi brotherhood is known as a *tariqah*, a word meaning “path”, and a Sufi master is called a *shaykh*; this is an Arabic term which literally means an “old man” but which is

used to refer to anyone noted for having deep wisdom and powers of discernment. (As you may remember, the Chinese *lao tzu* and the Japanese *roshi* have a similar double meaning; see Lecture 9.) Among genuine Sufis, it's understood that in order to be a *shaykh* a person must be a living link in an initiatic chain or spiritual lineage (*silsila* in Arabic) running all the way back to Muhammad himself. In other words there's no individualism in this regard either, for a self-appointed *shaykh* would be a contradiction in terms: a true master is someone who has been initiated by a previous master, who was initiated by a yet earlier master, and so forth. This pattern, as perhaps you can see, is comparable to the Christian idea of "apostolic succession", whereby a bishop must have been consecrated by a previous bishop and so on all the way back to one or more of Christ's apostles.

While I'm on the subject of Christian analogies, Sufism may be compared in a very general way to Christian monasticism in the sense that monasticism, especially in the Christian East, also represents an effort to deepen, intensify, and interiorize the doctrines and practices of the exoteric tradition. One very significant difference, however, is that unlike Christian monks and nuns Sufis are not necessarily celibate. They are in this respect more like *Mahâyâna* Buddhists, whereas Christian monks and nuns are more like *Theravada* Buddhists (to review that distinction, see Lecture 10). Sufis may, and in fact normally do, marry and have families and ordinary jobs in the world. As you probably noticed, this was the case with many of the disciples of the Shaykh al-Alawi—"a Sufi saint of the twentieth century", to refer to the title of the book from which the assigned selection in *A Book of Saints* was taken.

Let me say a few things about Sufi spiritual practices. As it happens I've personally had the good fortune of meeting one of the successors of the Shaykh Al-Alawi—the Shaykh Isa Nur al-Din (1907-98). I had the privilege of talking with Shaykh Isa on a number of occasions during the last decade or so of his life, and this led to my being given permission to witness many of the spiritual practices of this particular lineage, practices that are ordinarily secret. You've been offered just a taste of these in the assigned reading. It's important to stress again that these practices are meant to build upon and intensify the exoteric requirements of Islam, in particular the canonical prayers or *salat*. Beginning with the obligatory exoteric standard of the five daily prayers, the Sufi strives to go every deeper, to the point where every moment of every day of his life becomes one single, continuous prayer. I can't go into all the details, of course—in part because of time, but also in part out of courtesy to the Shaykh whom I knew and as a point of discretion—but what I

can tell you is that the spiritual disciplines of his community, like those of most other Sufi orders, include at least three basic elements. You've seen evidence of each of these in your reading.

First, there is invocation. By "invocation" I mean the rhythmic repetition of a sacred word or phrase containing a revealed name or names of God. We've already seen an example of this practice with Swami Ramdas, who repeated the name of the *avatâra* Rama, and I spoke (in YouTube Lecture 10) about a parallel practice among Pure Land Buddhists, who invoke the *nembutsu*. In the case of Muslim mystics, the sacred word invoked is usually *Allah*, although one or more of the "Ninety-Nine Excellent Names" of God (Lecture 13) may also be used for this purpose. The Arabic term for this traditional practice is *dhikr*, which means "remembrance"; it's based on a *hadîth* of the Prophet Muhammad in which he said, "Verily, everything on earth is accursed except the remembrance of God." Sufis have traditionally quoted this saying in support and defense of their method. In a section of the reading called "Seen from Within", the Shaykh Al-Alawi describes how his own *shaykh* taught him the proper use of invocation (*A Book of Saints*, pp. 108-109).

A second practice is meditation. As we've seen in earlier discussions, meditation can mean a number of things, and in different religions it takes on a variety of connotations involving different techniques. In Sufism it often refers to the mental discipline of focusing one's attention on the visual form and sound of the Arabic word *Allah*. As I've mentioned, Muslims in general—and not only Sufis—believe that the words of the Holy Qur'an are a kind of "incarnation" of God and that in reading and reciting the Arabic words of this sacred text they're engaging in a sacramental activity. The same intense devotion to the Qur'an can be seen in the centuries-old Islamic art of Qur'anic calligraphy. The Muslim would say there's a message, not only in the dictionary meaning of the words in their Bible and not only in the sounds of its sacred language, but also in the visual shapes of these words on the page, and by copying out these shapes in beautiful lettering the Muslim calligrapher means to highlight that message. Sufis pick up on this basic idea and dedicate themselves to a disciplined, meditative exploration of the symbolic significance of the Arabic letters *A-L-L-A-H*. They do this in part by concentrating on the way the letters sound and how they reverberate in the chest when chanted aloud, but also by means of highly disciplined visualizations in which the letters of the divine Name are very carefully drawn in the mind's eye (*A Book of Saints*, pp. 109-110).

Third, there is “dance”. The Arabic word usually employed for this practice, *hadrah*, has the literal meaning of “presence”, and it refers both to God’s presence and to the “presence of mind” it is meant to provoke in each participant. The *hadrah* is a form of collective invocation in which a number of *fuqarâ* (plural of *faqîr*) join together in chanting the Name of *Allah*, one or more of the other Qur’anic Names of God, or the *shahâdah*. The rhythm of the chant is carefully linked to a pattern of physical movements, and the aim is to coordinate the very rhythms of one’s physical life with what we might call the “pulse” of the Name. (This is the third time we’ve encountered a religion that makes use of physical movement as an aid to contemplative focus, the first being *Tai Chi Chuan* in Taoism and the second *kyudo* (archery) in Zen Buddhism [see above Lectures 9 and 10].) The beat of the dancing is often marked by the sound of an accompanying drum, and some Sufi orders use other instruments as well. Although the precise pattern of dance can vary from one *tariqah* to another, it requires in each case that the individual’s movements, and even the rhythm of his breathing, become subordinated to that of the group as a whole, leading to a state in which the participants begin to forget about their separate selves and thus become more and more “poor”, more and more “empty”, and more and more “open” to the Divine. Historically, the most famous example of this method is to be found in a Sufi lineage descended from a great *shaykh* named Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-73), whose disciples were called “whirling dervishes” (“dervish” is the Persian equivalent of *faqîr*) because of the pattern of their own particular dance. I’ve asked you to watch a short YouTube video where you can see a bit of this form of Sufi dancing. The section of the assigned reading in *A Book of Saints* called “Seen from Outside” contains a description by the Shaykh Al-Alawi’s French physician, Dr Marcel Carret, of the somewhat different style of *hadrah* used in that *tariqah* (p. 93).

Whether it’s invocation, meditation, or dance, the ultimate aim of all these practices is to bring the Muslim mystic into the deepest of all possible unions with God—and to do so now, in this present life, in order that he might experience Paradise on earth. Sufis sometimes say that their goal is to recapitulate the *miraj* of the Prophet Muhammad, ascending like him to the very throne of God—and indeed even further. For coming *to* the throne suggests a continuing division between the human and the Divine, and what Sufism is aiming toward is not just proximity but penetration. Sufis don’t just want to be *with* God; they mean to enter *into* Him so as to participate fully in His own inward energies. They wish to go beyond both *belief* and *faith* to the level of *experience*, and then beyond even that to the point of complete *transformation*. This is what Orthodox Christians

call *theosis* or deification, a teaching based on Saint Peter's conviction that the ultimate goal of the Christian life is to become "partakers of the Divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). The Arabic term for this ultimate state is *fanâ*. It means "extinction", and it's an almost exact synonym of the word *Nirvâna* in Sanskrit. To experience *fanâ* is to overcome all egoistic tendencies, to go beyond identification with one's separate physical and psychic individuality, and to become inwardly identified instead with God.

There's a saying that the Sufi is the person who doesn't want the Garden, that is, the Garden of Paradise or Heaven; what she wants is nothing less than the Gardener. We've quoted this Christian parallel before: "It is no longer I, but Christ who is in me" (Galatians 2:20).