

# SUFISM AS A CONTINUATION OF PRE- ISLAMIC PAGANISM

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H.A.R. Gibbs (*Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, edited by Stanford J. Shaw and William R. Polk, Beacon Press, Boston, 1962, pp. 179-218), maintains that “the general body of pagan Arabs accepted the dogmas of the Koran without completely giving up their old beliefs, which he describes as animism. “So the Arabs believed in magical powers which were inherent in or which haunted such objects as stone fetishes, sacred trees, or wells which were possessed by certain persons,” some human but most being non-human called the jinn. According to Gibb it “might be summed up as the endeavor to find and to use the most powerful conveyors of Baraka (“blessing”) against the ever-present malevolence of evil spirits. Despite Muhammad's efforts to eradicate this animism, “The Arabian legacy persisted. The belief in magic, in the superhuman and mostly malevolent powers of the jinn, in the Qarina or familiar spirit attached to each individual – these and similar beliefs survived with more or less of an Islamic veneer, to play a very large part in the ideas of Muslims about the world.” He adds: “The whole subject has been illuminatingly analyzed by D.B. MacDonald in his lectures on the Religious Attitude and Life in Islam.” One may expect, ponders Gibb, due to the Arabs’ contacts and conflicts with the people of “Zoroastrian, Christian and Hellenistic beliefs, the influence of Arabian animism would have diminished This is a subject which has not yet been thoroughly studied and any conclusion that may be expressed here have only the value of personal impressions. But certain facts seem to be clear,” and even among these other ancient peoples some animistic beliefs had long prevailed and the Arabs did drive some of them out. However, “where they were easily reconcilable with Arab animism as, for example, the belief in astrology, the two currents combined and strengthened one another.” When Islam spread so far and wide in Africa and Asia, “The inevitable result was to reinforce very powerfully the heritage of animism which still survived in popular Islam.” As it was the Sufis who carried out much of the work of conversion,” it often ended in a kind of compromise which left much of the old animistic ideas still effective in the life and thought of the new converts. Even though Muhammad transposed the reverence for the Black Stone into a rite for worshipping Allah, Gibb contends: “Nevertheless, it is undeniable that in the structure of religious thought amongst all Muslim peoples there still subsists something of the

attitudes and beliefs derived from primitive animism and folk beliefs of the Muslims everywhere “supply ample confirmation” of it. Gibb quotes Sir Thomas Arnold, a scholar whose “sympathy with Islam and accuracy of statements are not open to question” to drive home this point.

As Gibb is also very sympathetic to Islam, his observations suggest that the Islam as practiced by the prophet's followers differed much from the Islam of the prophet. And Sufism even accentuated such a tendency further.

Gibb explains at length how Muslim scholasticism became “almost exclusively logical” and “it never attacks the real philosophical problems” with absolute monotheism as monotheism raises grave philosophical difficulties: “The orthodox refused to admit any limitations whatsoever upon the power and will of God,” as attempted by “the slightly more philosophical Mutazila.” “Yet because of its ruthless logical development of its doctrine of “difference,” it stood opposed to the spirit and meaning of those passages in the Koran which speak of the mystic indwelling of God in the universe and in man.” This led to “dogmatism and intellectual conformity” rather than to “inner conviction sustained by the intuitive vision of the unseen called out by the Koran” and it dried the springs of religious experience by denying any relation between God and men. “So monstrous an exaggeration, for all the lightness of its postulates, could not but evoke protest,” which culminated in the form of the Sufi movement. While scholars may not endorse Gibb’s views in its entirety, there seems to be general agreement about the rise of Sufism fulfilling this crying need though perhaps not for the exact reasons advanced by Gibb.

In Gibb’s view, the quasi-Islamic pantheism of Sufism “attempts the very opposite of what Muhammad set out to do,” and “threw open the door to a number of ideas and practices which were destructive of the religious views of orthodox Islam.” So, “its virtues cannot be viewed in isolation from the exaggerations and eccentricities in religious thought which the Sufis patronized, or from the exploitation of human weaknesses” even at times by its major orders, as exemplified by the revival of Pir (saint) worship which necessitated Pir’s intercession for blessings, salvation, etc. Gibb wonders how “later popular Derwishism differs from pre-Islamic animism.” Nevertheless, Gibb maintains that some reputable Sufi orders “still clung to the Koran and its ordinance,” and their endorsement of compassion, charity, honesty and the other social virtues left an indelible impression on Muslim society. Despite many confusing superstitions in its fold, “it prepared the soil for the living seed of faith” by bringing them into the sphere of influence of the orthodox institution and Koran with its mosques, madresas and mullas. For Gibb “the greatest achievement of Sufism” is in leading to the organic and thorough integration with all units of Muslim society, saint

worship adding “a still closer sense of intimacy,” each village and locality eagerly seeking “saints,” alive or dead. Gibb posits the ultimate justification of the Sufi movement in this development. He even claims that “the survival of official Islam as a religion in any true sense between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries was due to the nourishment which it drew from the Sufi brotherhoods.” Gibb contends that the modern day reformers are driving out good along with the bad elements in religion when they attack Sufism thereby paving the way for secular culture which, in turn, has its own share of new and even deadlier superstitions. Gibb concludes by asking, “what will it profit Islam and the religious life of mankind” if these reformers do away with the Sufi vision of the Love of God and dry up the spring of religion itself? But the issue raised by scholars in general is how irreconcilable Sufism is with the tenets of Islam.