

**THE CONCEPT OF SUFISM: ORIGINS, PHILOSOPHY, AND INFLUENCE IN THE  
ISLAMIC WORLD**

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**Abstract:** Tasavvuf, commonly known in the West as Sufism, represents the spiritual and mystical dimension of Islam. It focuses on the purification of the soul, the direct experience of divine love, and the realization of unity with God (Tawhid). Over the centuries, Sufism has played a central role in shaping Islamic civilization, ethics, and culture. This article explores the historical origins, philosophical foundations, main concepts, and socio-cultural impact of Tasawwuf in the Muslim world.

**Introduction.** Tasavvuf (Arabic: التصوف) is derived from the Arabic root ṣ-w-f, meaning “wool,” which refers to the simple woolen garments worn by early Muslim ascetics as a symbol of renunciation of worldly pleasures. In its essence, Tasawwuf represents the inner, spiritual journey of Islam — a quest for maʿrifah (divine knowledge) through purification (tazkiyah al-nafs) and remembrance (dhikr) of God. While jurisprudence (fiqh) and theology (kalam) deal with the external dimensions of religion, Tasavvuf focuses on its internal and experiential aspects.

### **Historical Origins of Sufism**

The origins of Sufism can be traced back to the early centuries of Islam. After the death of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), many Muslims sought to preserve the Prophet’s spiritual example by focusing on asceticism, prayer, and moral purity. Early figures such as Hasan al-Basri (642–728 CE) and Rabiʿa al-Adawiyya (714–801 CE) are often considered among the pioneers of this spiritual path.

During the 9th and 10th centuries, Sufism evolved into a systematic discipline with organized teachings, master-disciple relationships (murshid–murid), and spiritual orders (turuq). The works of al-Junayd al-Baghdadi, al-Hallaj, and later al-Ghazali provided philosophical and theological foundations for Sufi thought.

### **Philosophical Foundations**

Tasavvuf rests on several core concepts that define its worldview:

- **Tawhid (Unity of God):** The ultimate goal of Sufism is the realization that all existence is a manifestation of the Divine. The Sufi sees God as the only true reality.
- **Maʿrifah (Gnosis):** Knowledge of God that transcends rational understanding and comes through spiritual unveiling (kashf).
- **Dhikr (Remembrance):** Continuous remembrance of God through recitation of His names, meditation, and prayer.
- **Fana’ and Baqa’:** The annihilation (fana’) of the self in God and the subsistence (baqa’) in divine presence are stages of spiritual transformation.

- **Love ('Ishq):** Central to Sufi philosophy is divine love, as famously expressed by poets such as Jalal al-Din Rumi and Hafiz.

### **Major Sufi Orders (Turuq)**

By the 12th century, Sufism had developed into numerous tariqas (orders), each founded by a spiritual master and characterized by distinctive rituals and teachings. Some of the most influential include:

- **Qadiriyya** – founded by Abdul Qadir al-Jilani in Baghdad, emphasizing charity and humility.
- **Naqshbandiyya** – originating in Central Asia, noted for silent dhikr and strong adherence to Sharia.
- **Chishtiyya** – spread through South Asia, known for tolerance and music (sama‘).
- **Suhrawardiyya** and **Shadhiliyya** – influential in Persia, Egypt, and North Africa.

These orders contributed to the spread of Islam, especially in regions such as India, Central Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, by emphasizing love, compassion, and spiritual experience over dogma.

### **Sufism and Islamic Thought**

Sufism has had a profound impact on Islamic philosophy, art, and literature. Thinkers like al-Ghazali integrated Sufi spirituality into orthodox Sunni theology, reconciling mysticism with Islamic law. Ibn Arabi (1165–1240 CE), one of the most influential Sufi metaphysicians, introduced the concept of Wahdat al-Wujud (Unity of Being), which deeply influenced Islamic metaphysics, Persian poetry, and even later European philosophy.

### **Sufism in Literature and Art**

Sufi ideas found rich expression in literature and poetry. Persian poets such as Rumi, Sa‘di, and Attar used metaphors of love, the beloved, and the journey to describe the soul’s path toward God. Sufi symbolism also permeates Islamic art, calligraphy, and music — particularly in sama‘, the spiritual music and dance of the Mevlevi order (whirling dervishes). These artistic forms aim to evoke spiritual ecstasy and the remembrance of the Divine.

### **The Role of Sufism in Society**

Throughout Islamic history, Sufi saints (awliya) and their shrines (maqamat) have served as centers of spiritual and social life. They promoted education, social welfare, and moral reform. In Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Ottoman Empire, Sufism played a major role in cultural integration and the spread of Islam among diverse populations. However, in modern times, Sufism has faced criticism from both reformist movements and secular ideologies, leading to debates about its role in contemporary Islam.

### **Conclusion**

Tasavvuf remains an essential dimension of Islam that emphasizes the inner transformation of the believer through divine love, remembrance, and moral discipline. Beyond its religious

context, Sufism offers universal lessons on spirituality, tolerance, and the unity of humanity. Its influence on philosophy, literature, and art continues to inspire seekers of truth across cultures and religions.

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