

Key concepts

- Sufi philosophical thought about the nature of God and religious experience, which may be realised using parable, the guidance of a Qutb (Sufi spiritual leader) and the cultivation of mystical religious experience as a way of experiencing God.
- The variety of Sufi devotional practices and their purpose to raise the awareness of the follower towards God: Dhikr (remembrance), Muraqaba (Sufi meditation) and Sama (spiritual listening, specifically whirling).

- Sufism is both a general approach and an organised movement. It is an approach which focuses on the inner, contemplative, spiritual side of Islam. It is organised through tariqas, led by shaykhs who guide murshids to help their followers, mureeds.
- Sufis believe the soul may rise through spiritual stations towards union with God. Less focus is given to the outward formalities of religion and more to inner contemplation. There is some debate about how far the soul may rise. Sufi al-Hallaj claimed to have achieved mystical union with God, saying there was no difference and therefore 'I am God', for which he was condemned as a heretic.
- Other Sufis such as the poets Rabia of Basra, Rumi and Ibn Arabi wrote works to inspire others along the path. Sufis often use parables: stories with hidden meaning, and meditation (muraqaba) in preference to direct teachings.

- Sufis may follow a range of spiritual practices. Many say daily wurd prayers, as directed by their murshid. Often on Thursday evenings they gather for services of zikr/dhikr. These are services for the remembrance of Allah.
- Typically, Sufis call out the names of Allah, sometimes using tasbih (prayer beads) to count them. They may sing qasida songs and raise their spirits into a state of ecstatic dancing. This is to lose awareness of the immediate world around and focus only of God. Some Sufis do this by whirling, as in the case of the whirling dervishes. The ritual act of whirling is called Sama.
- Spiritual retreat may be practiced by some Sufis, to isolate themselves from the world, pray, fast, and meditate to find greater awareness of God.
- Some Muslims reject Sufism as, in the worst cases, shirk, because the Sufi may be associating themselves with God too closely.

Key quotes

- 'I detached my heart from the world and lessened my desires so much that for thirty years I have performed every prayer as though it were my last.' (Rabia of Basra)
- 'The self is an ocean without a shore. Gazing on it has no end in this world or the next.' (Ibn Arabi).
- 'My servant never ceases drawing near to Me through supererogatory works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am his hearing through which he hears, his sight through which he sees, his hand through which he grasps, and his foot through which he walks.' (Hadith qudsi of Prophet Muhammad)
- 'My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christians, and a temple for idols and the pilgrims Ka'ba and the tables of the Torah, and the book of the Qu'ran. I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and faith.' (Ibn Arabi)
- 'Christian, Jew, Muslim, shaman, Zoroastrian, stone, ground, mountain, river, each has a secret way of being with the mystery, unique and not to be judged.' (Jelaluddin Rumi)

Key words

Wurd	Latif	Amal	Ilm
Sama	Muraqaba	Tasbih	Dhikr
Hal	Fana	Maqam	Zuhd
Murshid	Mureed	Qutb	Qasidas

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments, and debates

1. The possibility of a personal mystical union with God in Islam. Is this possible? God is unseen and known through names, characteristics but always behind a metaphorical veil. On the other hand, many Sufis claim to have experienced heightened awareness and the presence of God. Some Qur'anic verses suggest God is near to the heart (jugular vein); others that God is always distinct.
2. The religious validity of Sufi devotional practices. Some decry innovations (bid'ah) as practices introduced after Muhammad, whereas Sufis claim they are following his meditative approach. Differences of sect, individual interpretation and the variety of practices could be evaluated.