

Outline of Sufism: The Essentials of Islamic Spirituality

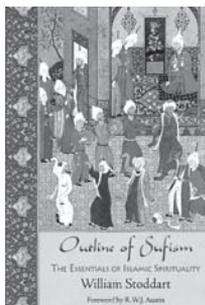
By William Stoddart, Foreword by R.W.J. Austin
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“The knowledge of God cannot be obtained by seeking,
but only those who seek it find it.”

(Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī)

We live in a time where the intersection of extremes is everywhere palpable, yet this should not be erroneously taken to be the “norm” or lead to the conclusion that this is the way things have always been as is all-too-often presumed. Although it may be quite out-of-the-box for contemporary minds to imagine, traditional societies in the pre-modern world were inseparably connected to the Sacred and applied this understanding to everything that they did. This meant living in both internal equilibrium within oneself and external equilibrium between oneself and others, understood as the ecological Whole. It is necessary to be ever so cautious in entertaining the assumption that the traditional world was somehow flawed or ‘backward’, thereby denigrating it so that the modern and postmodern outlook can in turn triumph. Modernity and postmodernity are essentially secular and anti-spiritual and it is valuable to recall that their trajectories have had detrimental consequences which the world at large has been, and is, a witness to. Their worldviews are in blatant contradiction with the timeless message of the saints and sages of all places. The Thomist



metaphysician Bernard Kelly (1907–1958), who is cited within William Stoddart’s classic book, *Outline of Sufism*, explains:

The complete secularism of the modern [and postmodern] western world, and wherever its influence has spread, has opened the floodgates to a confusion which sweeps away the contours of the spirit. Traditional norms provide the criteria of culture and civilization. Traditional orthodoxy is thus the prerequisite of any discourse at all between the traditions themselves.

The following accolade of Dr. Stoddart’s book, provided by R.W.J. Austin (b. 1938) in his illuminating Foreword, refers to its ability to fully render an exposition of the mystical dimension of Islam and simultaneously to illuminate the universal spirituality found at the heart of the diverse revelations:

Dr. Stoddart has produced a work on Sufism which provides the serious reader with a true universalist approach, in that he has kept firmly and distinctly in view the Islamic nature and context of Sufism, while employing comparisons with other religious traditions where such comparison illuminates common fundamental principles and does not obscure real and providential differences of spiritual perspective, a consideration of crucial importance in any legitimate study of the religions of the world.

Thirty-five years have passed since the initial publication of Dr. William Stoddart’s (b. 1925) book under the title *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam* (1976), and as it still stands firmly in its import now as it did then, readers will welcome the release of this revised and augmented edition, *Outline of Sufism*. This slender book comprising less than a hundred pages brings to light the essentials of traditional Islam and its inner dimension, Sufism, in a remarkable way. The Introduction presents key facets in understanding the fullness of Sufism as the heart of Islam, and, of their relationship, the author unwaveringly notes: “*No Sufism without Islam*”. Likewise, an analogous mistaken assumption is that spirituality can be practiced in absence of a religious form. This outlook has led to the popular expression: “I am spiritual but *not* religious.” Stoddart elaborates upon this outlook and clarifies the hazardous consequences that it has not only for the individual in question but to society at large:

It seems that people prefer “spirituality” because what they regard as such puts few demands on their minds, and little restraint on their egos. On the contrary, it allows their minds to wander at will, and it opens the way for the indulgence of any wayward desires. What may be called “objective element” in religion goes by default. It has been forgotten that the great revealed religions, with their time-honored teachings of wisdom and salvation, with their intellectual requirements, and their moral restraints, cannot be cast aside without the dire consequences for society that we already see all around us.

The book is divided into three chapters which convey the heart of Sufism:

[T]he outward religion, or “exoterism” (known in Islam as the *shari’a*), may be likened to the circumference of a circle. The inner Truth, or “esoterism” (known as the *haqiqa*) that lies at the heart of the religion, may be likened to the circle’s center. The radius proceeding from circumference to center represents the mystical or “initiatic” path (called the *tariqa*) that leads from outward observance to inward conviction, from belief to vision, and, in scholastic terms, from potency to act. The complete religion thus comprises *shari’a*, *haqiqa*, and *tariqa*.

This work also contains a significant essay titled “Aspects of Islamic Spirituality” and a handy Appendix containing valuable quotations from the Koran, Hadith and the Sufis themselves.

Stoddart notes that while Islam is the third of the three Abrahamic monotheisms, some Muslims like Muhammad bin Qasim (695–715), Al-Bīrūnī (973–1048), Jalāl ud-Dīn Muhammad Akbar (1542–1605), Dara Shikoh (1615–1659) and Mirzā Mazhar Jān-e Jānān (1699–1781), have suggested that Hindus (and Buddhists) are also “People of the Book” (*Ahl al-Kitāb*), along with Jews and Christians, as they were offered *dhimmi* (“protected people”) status.

Noting that one of the central distinctions between the exoteric and esoteric perspectives is that the first holds salvation of the human soul upon death as its fulfillment, while the second holds realization or integration into the Divine Principle in this life as the apex, Stoddart observes as follows regarding Sufism’s relationship to *shari’a*: “Sufism, while outwardly conforming, is inwardly free. The *shari’a* is the doorway that opens on to freedom, the ‘straight path that leadeth unto life’. For the Sufi the ‘doorway’ is not an end in itself.”

Disdaining the many contemporary attempts to extract Sufism from Islam, Stoddart communicates the conviction of the great Sufis themselves: “There can be no Sufism without the corresponding religion of Islam.” At their core both Islam and Sufism stem from the same message: “The central Message (*risāla*) of Islam is declaration of faith (*shabāda*): “There is no god but God; Mohammed is the Messenger of God” (*Lā ilāha illā ’Llāh; Muhammadun Rasūlu ’Llāh*). All Muslim doctrine and all Sufi doctrine derive from the *shabāda*.”

In his discussion on Islamic esoterism, Stoddart remarks that Sufism is situated between two predominant poles, those narrow minded interpretations that not only question but flat-out deny its legitimacy and its integral connection with Islam (vide Wahhabism and the so-called Islamic fundamentalism that is actually a definitive betrayal of Islam)

and those who attempt to sever Sufism from Islam. However, the truth of the matter is that Sufism has its roots in the Koranic revelations, the hadith and the Sunnah.

In summary, let it be said that Sufism cannot be other than orthodox, and this for two reasons: firstly, being the “inward” dimension of the “outward” dogma, it cannot repudiate the latter, though it “frees” itself from the formal constraints of the dogma “from within”. Secondly—and this is a point worth stressing—the doctrines and practices of Sufism, as Louis Massignon and other orientalisks have amply demonstrated, are entirely derivable from the Koran alone, the Koran being the very basis of Islamic orthodoxy.

While it is common knowledge that we are living at the end of a temporal cycle, it is worth recalling the Prophetic Tradition anew: “No time cometh upon you but is followed by a worse!”

With this said, the awareness of the current decline should not lead one to despair; on the contrary, what has been called “the eleventh hour” has its spiritual advantages, as the saying of the Prophet indicates: “He who omits one tenth of the Law in the beginning of Islam will be damned; but he who accomplishes one tenth of the Law at the end of Islam will be saved”. It is apparent in our times that all of the mystical dimensions of the religions are currently available to anyone regardless of any serious commitment to a spiritual form. In this way, God makes His grace available to all who are seeking it in an era where disorder is everywhere visible and has become normalized. And while we are living in a world that obscures and veils the manifestation of the Sacred, embodied in the Koranic perspective, is applicable to all sapiential traditions: “Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God.” Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240), the Spanish-born mystic provides one of the most potent articulations of the transcendent unity of religions; while centered on a single orthodox spiritual tradition (in his case Islam) and at the same time traversing all spiritual traditions, he sets an exemplary model for other travelers, as in the following passage quoted by Stoddart:

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles, a cloister for Christian monks, a temple for idols, the Kaaba of the pilgrim, the tablets of the Torah, and the Book of the Koran. I practice the religion of Love. In whatsoever directions its caravans advance, the religion of Love shall be my religion and my faith.

While every Sufi is a Muslim, not every Muslim is a Sufi as this latter status requires a rite of initiation. Discussing the spiritual path (*tariqa*) within Sufism, Stoddart notes that every spiritual or mystical path has a right of initiation, and this is indispensable. Sufis who embark upon the

path need to fulfill two general requirements; these are adherence to the religion of Islam and a sincere longing for the spiritual path with a view to the deeper understanding of the outward religion. Again, the distinction between the aims of religion and spirituality are further elaborated:

The only difference between spirituality (or mysticism) and religion in the ordinary sense, is that spirituality envisages as its main end the attaining of sanctity (or the embarking on the path that leads to sanctity) even in this life, here and now.

In order to become a true human being, the empirical ego must be transmuted, and this requires adherence to both an integral or orthodox spiritual theory and practice. “The Sufi spiritual method par excellence is the *dhikr*.” *Dhikr* can be translated as invocation and remembrance and is superbly summarized in the Koranic dictum: “Remember Me and I shall remember you”. In fact the method of Invocation of the Divine name can be found in all of the world’s religions and Stoddart makes a striking observation: “Thus do the religions meet, not only in pure metaphysics, but also in pure prayer.” It is noteworthy to mention that the nineteenth century Hindu saint Rāmakrishna (1836–1886) summarizes the importance of invocation in the phrase: “God and His Name are one.” When reflecting on the impermanent nature of all phenomena in this worldly existence, the Invocation of the Divine Name is ever more imperative when contextualized by the Koranic saying: “Everything on the earth shall pass way (*fān*); there remaineth (*yābqā*) but the face of thy Lord resplendent with Majesty and Bounty”.

While business in the spiritual marketplace may appear to be waning and in somewhat of a decline, make no mistake, the spiritual parodies are proliferating at an extraordinary rate and are to be found everywhere. Thus reliance upon one’s discernment is crucial and cannot be ignored without having detrimental consequences for both the individual and society. Sincere seekers, in whatever phase of the journey they may be, will find that this book will always have something to teach them. True expressions of religion (the outer dimension) and its corresponding spirituality (the inner dimension) are rare in this topsy-turvy era. However, sincere and dedicated seekers will always, or until the end of time, be guided in finding authentic paths that embody the One Truth hidden within all the forms. Stoddart’s *Outline of Sufism* is a crystallization of this message.