BOOK REVIEW

What Is Sufism?

Martin Lings (Abū Bakr Sirāj ad-Dīn), **What is Sufism?** Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2005, 134 pp.

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Dr. Martin Lings (1909-2005) was a renowned English Muslim writer, philosopher and scholar. He is also considered the authority on the literary work of Shakespeare. His book titled "Muhammad: His Life Based on Earliest Sources" gained much popularity and recognition in the academic, literary and social circles of the world. He completed his PhD in the field of mysticism from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London in 1959. Dr. Lings got spiritual inspiration from the writings of René Guénon, a French metaphysician and Muslim convert and those of Frithjof Schuon, a German mystic and metaphysician. The inspirational meeting with Schuon led him to embrace Islam and he remained one of his disciples.

In the book "What is Sufism?", the author has described the concept of Sufism (Islamic Mysticism) in light of Quran Teachings and Holy Traditions through eloquent use of symbolism and linguistic sophistication. This introductory book on Sufism is intended for those readers and 'travelers' who have quest and deep interest in seeking Truth. It has been divided into nine chapters, namely, the originality of Sufism, the universality of Sufism, the Book, the Messenger, the Heart, the doctrine, the method, the exclusiveness of Sufism and Sufism throughout the centuries. The book starts with the famous prayer of one of the greatest Sufi, Ibn-e-Arabi: 'Enter me, O Lord, into the deep of the Ocean of Thine Infinite Oneness' (p. 11). The concept of Divine Ocean of Oneness could be found in Sufi teachings and all the Divine Revelations are considered as tidal waves originating from this 'Ocean' to our outer world. Though the water of Infinite Ocean is same for all these Revelations but each wave of Revelation is different from other because of its particular needs of time and space.

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The author has described Sufism as kind of mysticism which is concerned with exploring the 'mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven' (p.12). Sufism is not merely concerned with the outward forms of religion inasmuch the water left by a particular wave of Divine Ocean, but also intended to go deep into that Ocean, that is, to ebb with the ebbing wave of Ocean of Oneness. The author emphasizes that though religious forms are important but a mystic should 'travel' with the ebbing wave to Original Source. Thus, a Sufi, though depending upon one particular religion, should also have sense of independence in that one is able to puck flowers from gardens other than one's own. Our Prophet (PBUH) said, "Seek knowledge even if it be in China" (p.16). However, there is misconception in Western world that Sufism is not based on any particular religion.

The universality of Sufism does not imply that it is free from the domain of a particular religion. However, the author argues that particularity is quite consistent with universality and it does not put harm to any society or religion. For example, though the designs and structures of sacred art vary from one religion to other, yet they have universal appeal in the sense that they portray the spirituality or sacredness whether you see a mosque, church, temple or shrine in any part of world. Therefore, the aim and purpose of Sufism is sainthood and all sacred arts are a symbol of crystallization of sanctity in one sense and manifestation of Divine Perfection in other. Each mysticism could be considered as a separate radius emanating from Divine Centre. As each radius approaches Centre of Divinity, it becomes closer and closer to other radii of Revealed Revelations. If there was no Truth or Divine Reality, all such spiritual paths would vanish and the universe would cease to exist (p. 20). Therefore, a mystic always believes that standing at certain point of a particular religious radius would have no fruit if he does not ebb with radius of Ray of Divine Mercy to its Supreme and Infinite Centre. One can safely argue that all mystical paths have sense of universality in that they all lead to One Truth. However, Islam and Sufism has its own specific and everlasting universality because it sums up all other Revelations and being ending Revelation of this cycle of time. The Quran has given this final view of university: "*Believe in God and His Angels and His Books and His Messengers".* The author also points out

that all great Sufis quote the following Holy Tradition (hadith-e-qudsi): '*I was a Hidden Treasure and I wished to be known, and so I created the world*'. Therefore, Sufism sends a universal message to all people in the world that with all apparent exoteric differences, esoteric destination is same for it explains the very purpose of creation of human being to find out the Hidden Treasure to awake Ture Self in his soul so that he could ebb to Divine Ocean.

The ultimate tidal wave originating from Divine Ocean could be best symbolized in the form of Quran. Therefore, Sufis use the Book to achieve extinction or 'drowning' (*fana*) through the verses of Quran. They recite Quran not merely to achieve heavenly rewards but to get concentration upon God. Therefore, most Sufis in India and Africa use the personal Name of Allah to get this concentration and consider this sacred name as an ebbing wave along with the flows of other waves in form of verses. The author says that Quran is above all; Allah Himself and therefore the remembrance and invocation of His Name (known as Ism-e-Azam) to ebb towards Infinite Divine Ocean (p. 26). The authors also provide evidence that Quran is not only book of the whole community but is also book of spiritual elect. For example, there are open verses which have both implications for exoteric community and Sufis. When we say in Surah *Fatiha*, "Show us the straight path and path of those who were blessed by You!". It has different meanings for both groups. The exoteric scholars take it as pursuance of formal outward religious form, while mystics take it in deepest sense and ask himself that what is the straightest path of those blessed people to have the most direct approach to God. This is called *Tariqa* or Methodism in Sufism. Our Prophet (PBUH) said that Quran has both an inside and outside. Therefore, Sufis are more concerned with inward journey of the finite self to Infinite Self to achieve subsistence (*Baqa*). On one occasion after returning from Holy War, Our Prophet (PBUH) said to his Companions, 'we have now fight the Greater Holy War against our base self'. Therefore, author concludes that Sufism is Greater Holy War in its fullest sense. A Sufi is one who has a proactive approach towards this fight and get '*Ridhwan*' (God Acceptance) which is better than Paradise (p. 41). There are several verses in Quran which are intended only for Sufis. For example, Allah Says in Quran, "We (God) are nearer to him (man) than

his jugular vein". Here the inside meanings of this holy verse is quite literal meanings and not everyone is interested to get this secret and they divert their attention to other verses, but only Sufis have inspiration or presentiment to go in search of a Sufi Master who could unveil the Divine Secret of being Nearness (p. 32).

The chapter four focus on Divine Nature and role of the Messenger to achieve spiritual poverty (*faqr*) to get Ascent towards Divine Ocean. The nature of our Messenger is as Quran as told by Hadhrat Ayesha (R.A). The author holds that Islamic Doctrine of Rasul is same as Hindu Doctrine of Avatara.; the ultimate difference is that Avatara is treated as decent while Rasul is as Archangel or human incarnation of the Spirit. Prophet (PBUH) is himself personification of Divine Centre and through him the mystics could ebb towards Divine Ocean. The author says that our Prophet (PBUH) is always present at this Centre and has power to throw a 'life-line' (*Silsilah*) that traces a spiritual lineage back to himself (p.38). Therefore, every Sufi Order is descended from the Prophet (PBUH) in this way. It is common practice among Sufis to write '*Ridhwan'* with the name of a Saint because he has assimilation with the Divine Nature which is personified in our Prophet. The Quran says: 'Verily those who pledge unto thee their allegiance pledge it unto none but God' (p.42). Therefore, a novice who has joined a particular Sufi Order is given this access through attachment to spiritual chain. The next step is to achieve Divine assimilation which is achieved either through invocation of blessings upon him or through recitation of his names and the litanies associated with the names so as to become like him or through remembrance of God.

The author expresses that Sufism is a name today without a reality. Earlier at the time of Prophet (PBUH) and his Companions it was a practice without name. Ibn-e-Khaldun remarks that as people become more and more materialistic later on, they used to call Sufis to those people who were dedicated to the worship of God (p.45). The word Sufi means woolen and by extension it also implies 'wearer of wool'. There is no doubt that woolen dress was attached with spirituality as Prophet (PBUH) clearly mentioned that Moses (A.S) was wearing such dress when God spoke to him. The other logical explanation of this name is

that earlier it was applied to a group of people wearing wool, but later on this term was indiscriminately applied to all the mystics of the community. In Arabic, Sufi also means purity or a person with pure heart (p. 46-47). Sufi mystics also call themselves 'the poor'. 'Al-fuqara' because they have sacrificed or given everything for getting '*Ridhwan*'. Therefore, the origin of the Sufi term is this verse: "God is the Rich and ye are the poor". Quran also says that it is not the eyes that are blind but the hearts. Therefore, this concept is consistent with that of the whole ancient world of both East and West that consider the vision of heart is to reach Centre of soul. The author has explained this concept with the help of Jacob's Ladder to describe the spiritual hierarchy of the heart. The heart has an importance in Sufism also as it denotes Centre of consciousness also called inward Moon which could be enlightened with Divine Sun when vibrations are sent to heart through remembrance of God. In another context, it has been described as *ihsan* (excellence) which is also related to heart knowledge. The Holy Tradition emphasizes that excellence is that you worship Allah as if you see him! According to Quran, remembrance of God (*Dhikr Allah)* is greater than ritual prayer (p. 59). The Prophet (PBUH) also said that the best polish for rusting heart is the invocation of Allah. All mystical doctrines talk about three level of certainties that a soul can achieve, the Lore of Certainty (*ilm al-yaqeen*), the Eye of Certainty (*ayn al-yaqin*) and the Truth of Certainty (*haqq al-yaqeen*). All these stages of certainty relate to heart-knowledge. This last degree is the extinction (*fana*) of all otherness which alone gives realization of the Supreme Identity.

All other doctrines related to the mind but mystical doctrine is more related to heart. The doctrine revolves around Divine Name Allah which is synthesis of all truth. Even the *Shahadah* also reveals around the Name of Allah. If first part of *Shahadah* (*La Ilaha Illa Llah*) is broken into letters, it gives three letters *Alif, Lam and Ha* which again make the name of Allah. However, initially mind faces perplexity but it needs supervision of Spiritual Master to bask the inner moon in the Sun for Divine Enlightenment (p.73). The whole of Sufism revolves around famous Holy Tradition: 'Nothing is pleasing to Me, as a means for My slave to draw near unto Me……which I have made binding upon him; with added devotion……. the Hand whereby he graspeth and

the Foot whereon he walketh" (p. 74). This Holy Tradition is more often repeated by Sufis to justify their doctrine and method. It not only obligatory prayer but also voluntary rites to get extra dimension of height and depth of soul. Quran also supports this mystical method, 'Call upon Me and I will answer you'. Of these voluntarily rites, the invocation of the Name Allah is performed by the Sufis. The other methods include recitation of Quran and other long litanies to invoke the Self. Moreover, in some Sufi orders, sacred dance is also performed to get life into perpetual invocation. For Sufi, Quran is a great source of meditation as Sufi quotes verses to highlight essential link with *dikhr* (remembrance) and *fikr* (invocation) (p. 89). The practices of Sufism vary from one order to another order to meet the variety and complexity of soul (p. 91). Sincerity is key element in such practices as Divine Acceptance could only be achieved when human *rida* (acceptance) is there in form of sincere desire and efforts of remembrances and invocation.

The author emphasizes the distinctive and exclusive nature of Sufism and describe its very characteristics such as central, exalted, profound, mysterious, inexorable, exacting, powerful, dangerous, aloof and necessary. It should not be misperceived here that it is indifferent to outward religious forms, rather it discourages flat outwardness. Sufism is also exclusive in the sense that it requires the novice to be courageous enough to cross the gulf of wilderness and darkness (p. 99). This fact cannot be denied that spread of Islam in subcontinent has been mainly due to the exalted nature of its mysticism. At the end, the historical background of Sufism has also been given tracing it back to apostolic age of Prophet (PBUH) and his Companions. In this regard, the contribution of few great Sufis like Hassan Basri, Rabia Basri, Abdul Qadir, Ibn-e-Arabi etc. are highlighted. The more information about their valuable work and scholarly contribution can be found in the last chapter. The book requires thorough reading to get more insight about Sufism and its widespread impact and popularity in the world.