

Tasawwuf/Sufism in Islam by Sh. Hamza Yusuf

A talk sponsored by [CAIR](#), Stanford University, May 4, 1997

Sh. Hamza Yusuf, sometime khatib at the [Muslim Community Association](#) of Santa Clara, California, spoke on Sufism in Islam, directly following a [lecture by Dr. Anne-Marie Schimmel](#), former Harvard professor of Oriental Studies. Imam Hamza began by noting that the architecture of Stanford is modeled after traditional Andalusian, Moroccan and North African universities. He said that Islamic architecture and civilization was once great as was its scholarship, but unfortunately the Muslim ummah has fallen behind in these spheres.

Imam Hamza continued:

"The fundamental and underlying message in the tradition of Islam I think personally is that it does not and refuses to create this dialectic in which a person's inward and their outward become split. [In non-Islamic systems] people are either forced to become esoterists or they are forced to become exoterists.

"In fact what Islam is trying to do and what most of the other spiritual religions and in fact from the Muslim perspective all of them have failed to do is to join these two elements in a harmonious and balanced way and this is why in the tradition of Islam Sufism has always been part of the traditional Islamic curriculum in every single Muslim university. I know of no period in the Islamic tradition in which Sufism was not taught in the universities and not seen as an important and fundamental aspect of the tradition of Islam.

"Sidi Ahmad Zarruq wrote a great book called the principles of Sufism in which he clarified traditional and orthodox Sufism says in his principle number 208, 'there are five reasons for repudiating the Sufis the first of these is with reference to the perfection of their path. For if the Sufis latch on to a special dispensation or if they misbehave or are negligent in a matter or if a fault manifests itself in them, people hasten to repudiate them.' Because they are people who have traditionally been the most strongest and fierce adherents to the sacred teaching of Islam and they have been the ones also that have never inclined toward easy ways out on terms of the *shariah* or the sacred law.

"They have been the strictest adherents to the sacred law, but they have a wonderful principle: that is be hard on yourself and be gentle with other people. Unfortunately, the disease of this age amongst many Muslims is be easy on yourself and be hard on everybody else. So I think this is where the real crises of rejecting Sufism as one third of Islam has had really devastating results in much of the modern Islamic phenomenon. {Shaykh Ahmad Zarruq} said 'this is because no servant is free of fault unless he is granted infallibility or protection by God.'

"The second reason [for people to repudiate Sufis] is the sensitivity of the observer. [The observer's] criticism of the Sufis and their knowledge and states occurs as much as the ego, *nafs*, hastens to deny knowledge it does not possess. Imam Sayyidina Ali was known for saying, 'Whoever is ignorant of a thing is its natural enemy.'

"The third reason [to reject the Sufis] is the existence of many who fall short of their claims and those who seek [worldly] gain through the guise of religiosity. This has been an affliction within the Muslim ummah. It is well known of the people claiming to be Sufis, putting on the garments of Sufis, and tricking simple followers and worshippers; getting them to give them their money, to slavishly serve them, and these type of things. This has happened historically in the Muslim world. The [pious] imams have always been the strictest at trying to prevent this deception, because there is nothing worse than deceiving somebody in religion. Give me a mafia gangster any day over a fraudulent religious observer--really! This is the reason for denying any claim that they might make even though there is proof of it. Because it is found doubtful.

"The fourth reason is fear for the generality that they might be lead astray by following esoteric doctrines without upholding the letter of the law as happens to many ignorant people. So ignorant people might hear some

statement which is said by a Sufi and they completely misunderstand it. And Abu Yazid al-Bistami put in Imam Dhahabi's *tabaqat* is considered a *faqih* (jurisprudent). Imam Dhahabi is considered a student of Ibn Taymiyya and he considers Abu Yazid al-Bistami a reasonable and sound source of hadith. Yet Abu Yazid al-Bistami is the one who is noted for saying '*Subhane*' which means 'Glory to Me!' This is known in the technical vocabulary of the Sufis as a *shatha*, an ecstatic utterance. If a person says it in a state in which their self is absent they are not taken to account for it We have proof of it in *Sahih Bukhari* about a slave in the middle of a desert in which the Prophet (s) says that because he finds his lost beast he shouts out in joy 'Allah you are my slave and I am Your lord!' The Prophet explained that that slave made a mistake in his ecstatic state after finding his animal. This is someone who finds their animal, so how much greater for someone who has found his Lord?! What about his state of ecstasy?

"The fifth reason [to reject Sufism] is the covetousness some people have for the ranks of Sufism. In traditional Muslim society the Sufis were held up as literally the highest people in the society; they were the shaykhs. Imam Nawawi was a great Sufi, [Qadi] Iyad was a great Sufi, Ibn Hajar Asqalani was a great Sufi, Imam Ibn Jawzi was a great Sufi. All of these great imams were known to be Sufis of great stature. Abu Hamid al Ghazzali who is given the title Hujjat al-Islam is probably the greatest example. People wanted to be like them, and the Arabs are notorious in their understanding if you are not like noble people pretend to be like them because even that is a type of nobility.

"Finally [Sidi Ahmad Zarruq] said, 'Thus people are inclined to become inflamed with the Sufis, more so than with any other group.' People in official positions exert pressure on them more than anybody else. This was a traditional area in which the government would try to influence the Sufis because they knew that they had such a vast amount of power over the common people The Sufis were traditionally the most distant and furthest people from the governors or the government unless they were righteous rulers like Nizam al Mulk who Imam Ghazali actually helped to build the Nizamiyya system of teaching. And anyway [Sidi Ahmad Zarruq] says, 'Anyone who falls in any of these categories except for the last is either rewarded or excused and Allah knows best.'

"I was asked to make a du`a and I would like to make the du`a of the people of North Africa which I heard many, many times in North Africa and was always very impressed by it; it is called *Salat Tunjiyya*--the prayer that saves people:

*"Allahumma salli ala Sayyidina Muhammadin salatan tunjina biha min jami al ahwali wal afat
wa taqdi lana biha jami`a al hajjat
wa tutahiruna biha min jami`a as-sayyat
wa tarfauna biha `indaka ala darajat
wa tubalighuna biha aqsa al ghayat min jami`a al khayrat fil hayati wa bad al mamat
wa ala alihi wa sahibih wa sallim tasliman kathira"*

O Allah pray on our Master Muhammad a prayer by means of which we will be saved from every awe-inspiring harmful thing,
and that will take care of all of our needs,
and purify us by means of it from all of our ugly qualities and characteristics
and raise us and purify us by means of it from all of our ugly qualities and characteristics
and raise us up by means of it in Your Presence to the highest of degrees,
and cause us to reach by means of it the extremes of all goodness in our life and after our death
and this prayer be upon his family and his companions
and may he be given safety and much salaam.