

What is Sufism?

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Sufism describes the traditions of spiritual and ethical practice that have flourished in Muslim societies for over a thousand years. The original Arabic term *tasawwuf* means “becoming a Sufi,” and it points to ideals of sincerity, purity, community, and discipline. Here are two definitions of the term from early Sufi masters: “Sufism means that you prefer others to yourself.” “One who is absorbed in the Beloved and has abandoned all else is a Sufi.”

Sufism became prominent in the 9th century in the capital of the `Abbasid empire (Baghdad) and on the eastern frontiers of Persia. Early Sufis turned away from the enticements of imperial power and sought to find the inner meanings of the Qur’an through meditation, and they regarded the Prophet Muhammad as their inspiration. From small informal circles, Sufism grew into a popular phenomenon, found in countries from Morocco to Indonesia. Devotion focused on the tombs of major Sufi saints, which were attended by both men and women, and pilgrims of different religions. Major lineages of masters and disciples formed in different regions, often with distinctive practices – the Chishti order (South Asia) favored performance of music and poetry, while the Naqshbandis (Central Asia) preferred silent meditations.

Sufi masters have played a strong role in literature, as seen in the Persian poems of Rumi or the Arabic writings of Ibn `Arabi. Beyond those “classical” languages, Sufis also made major contributions to the literatures of modern Indian languages, Turkish, Malay, Swahili, Wolof, etc. Sufi poetry is often sung and has a rich musical heritage. Although some Sufis were considered heretical by certain legal scholars, it was a major feature of Muslim religious life until recent times.

Colonialism and fundamentalism conspired to marginalize Sufism; secular Turkey banned the Sufi orders in 1925, and theocratic Iran and Saudi Arabia repress Sufism severely. Yet the ideals and culture of Sufism, especially in music and poetry, remain vital resources both for Muslims and non-Muslims.