



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Sufism in an age of political Islam

Description: Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam, may bring to mind the poetry of Rumi or Turkey's whirling dervishes, but what are its practices and beliefs? Who are its detractors in the greater Muslim world, and why do some in the West see it as a panacea for political Islam? Dr Muhammad Kamal and Dr Shirin Yasar examine the origins of and contemporary attitudes to Sufism.

Listen: <https://player.whooshkaa.com/episode/?id=398639>

Voiceover: The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

Ali Moore: Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Muhammad Kamal: Sufi discourses are heavily criticized by the mainstream of Muslims. Particularly in Islam, the doctrine of divine retribution is essential, that a Muslim is seeking divine justice and wants to be rewarded by God. But that's not the ultimate goal for a Sufi; a Sufi wants to reunite with God, not to be rewarded by God.

Shirin Yasar: In terms of interpretations of Sufism that have appeared in a post-9/11 context, you have a real utilization of Sufism as a political project, almost, to politicize Sufism as an alternative to political Islam. I mean, is it going to translate into a perfect secular liberal project? I think that is questionable at best.

Ali Moore: In this episode, Islamic mysticism and how it's regarded by Muslims and the rest of the world. Ear to Asia is a podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

With all the attention and media coverage of the Islamic world, there's little mainstream discussion of the mystical side of Islam, Sufism, the word often used for that mystical tradition may bring to mind at the very least, the poetry of Rumi or the Whirling Dervishes of Turkey. But beyond these simple and some argue, sanitised stereotypes, Sufi beliefs, practises and institutions span most of the history of Islam and reach across its vast, geographic and sectarian expanse.

Sufism is popularly described as a more tolerant, open and free branch of Islam, that to Western eyes, serves as a counter balance to the harder line Orthodox betrayals. But are those views missing the point of a mysticism



that according to practitioners, emphasises interior pathways, so as to know and merge with a divine? Why is it the Sufi practises are condemned by many in the Muslim world as heretical? To make sense of the complex and often esoteric subject of Sufism, we're joined by Islamic Studies researchers, Doctor Muhammad Kamal and Doctor Shirin Yasar, both from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Welcome, Kamal and welcome, Shirin.

Muhammad Kamal: Thank you.

Shirin Yasar: Thank you.

Ali Moore: Kamal, let's start with what on the face of it might seem like a very basic question, but in reality I know is far from it, what is Sufism?

Muhammad Kamal: Sufism should be understood in historical context as it is embedded in the era of political instability, sectarianism and the establishment of religious institutions in the Islamic world. All these factors contributed to the rise of Sufism and Sufism came as a response to this development in the Islamic world. It was a response to an attempt to politicise religion and legalism in the Islamic world. It was advocated by some individuals who believed that the core of religion is not politics, power and wealth, the core of religion is a spiritual connection with the creator or with God. Since we have come from God we should go back to God.

Ali Moore: But it's not as sect as such, is it? It's a style of worship?

Muhammad Kamal: It's not a sect, at least at the beginning it was not a group, even a sect. It was advocated by certain individuals, for example, the first Sufi we have in history of Islam is Hasan al-Basri, who died in 728. He was from Iraq and he's the founder of Sufism.

Then we have a number of individuals after him, and those individuals gathered in Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid dynasty at that time and they founded the School of Baghdad. But they were individual Sufis and gradually, in the 12th Century, Sufism became a kind of cult, or we call it now Sufi Orders. We have many Sufi Orders in the Islamic world.

Ali Moore: But tell us about the practise of Sufism.

Muhammad Kamal: The practise is different from individual to individual, from Sufi Order to another because there's no single practise, but they all focus on spirituality and the purification of the soul, in order to reunite with God.

Ali Moore: But what does that mean? Does that mean that Sufis have the same fundamental practices as other Muslims?



Muhammad Kamal: This is the question about legalism and religion. As I said, Sufism was a response to legalism in Islam because in the 8th Century, Islam became a well established religion with different legal schools, different sectarian groups and different theological perspectives. It became more ritualistic than spiritualistic, so these Sufis wanted to liberate individuals from ritualism and legalism and they believed that an individual should be free to communicate with God, without being restricted in any kind of religious institutions.

For this reason, the Sufis, at least at the beginning, they didn't practise religion the way ordinary Muslims practised religion. For example, Muslims pray five times in a day, but Sufis pray constantly. In the eyes of mainstream Muslims, Sufis did not practise religion the way it is required.

Ali Moore: Because they have a direct relationship with God.

Muhammad Kamal: With God, and they have their own methodology, which is very different from ritualism and legalism. I give you another example. Muslims fast during the month of Ramadan and that's one month in a year, but the Sufis fast constantly. They don't need to show people they fast only in one month, or they don't need to show they are praying five times in a day when they are praying constantly. That became very controversial in Islamic history.

Ali Moore: Shirin, let's bring you in here, Sufism is complex, isn't it, and it's also multi-dimensional. It's been absorbed by various cultures over the course of history.

Shirin Yasar: The chord that resonates with me, in an attempt to define Sufism was one made by a pre-modern scholar, [inaudible 00:05:56]. He basically says that in its early form, Sufism was a reality without a name, whereas now it is a name without a reality. This was part of the kind of anxieties that I think Muslims have always had about maintaining the authenticity of something but also a struggle with defining something, at least in its early stages. That could only be described at a prescriptive level and perhaps in terms of what was most visible, in terms of its manifestations.

If you look at some of the kind of manuals that emerged, particularly in the 10th Century afterwards, where you could say Sufism or tasawwuf, gains a more systemized approach, in terms of its principles and its doctrines. In attempt to define them, this tends to also be the focus of these very manuals, what is tasawwuf? What is Sufism?

You find a predominantly prescriptive approach, so the kind of descriptions you find by say, an early Sufi figure like Junayd, who represented the sober school of Sufism, as opposed to the ecstatic forms. He says that anyone who



improves your character is a Sufi. This is just one example of a very broad, prescriptive approach.

In a broad sense, if you think of it as Islam spirituality or interiorization of the faith or mysticism, you could say that it has a family resemblance with spirituality or mysticism in a broader context. But it also tends to be attached very much to the kind of concrete structures of Islamic history and social practice. We see it gaining a more and more institutionalised and visible form, particularly after the 11th Century, when you have the rise of mainstream or institutionalised forms of Sufi Orders.

Ali Moore: Do you agree with Kamal, that it is a reaction to the politicisation of religion? That this is about a direct relationship with God, it's not about the architecture around that relationship, that a religion builds?

Shirin Yasar: It evolves, historically. What it means, differs depending on the specific kind of context. When you look at early Sufism I think you see definitely a kind of undercurrent, in terms of the type of ideas and practices that are being expressed, as a kind of predominantly and other worldly approach to faith tradition. This is, you could say, a counter current to the kind of worldly Islam that had become dominant through the Umayyad palaces and the visible or worldly aspects of Islam that had come to dominate in this context.

Muhammad Kamal: I'd like to add something to this point because Sufism is very relevant when we say it is a response to political instability and sectarianism in Islam. Because what happens, a religion has divided people and Sufism comes to unite people. That's why the Sufis want to bring a new type of theology and metaphysics to reunite humanity, not to divide them, because religion is always exclusionary. It excludes people regularly. Sufism is not exclusionary. It has come to include everybody, regardless of colour, faith, gender, ethnicity. That's why we have great thinkers or great Sufis, like Rumi. He was appealing to everybody in the West and the East. This is very important in Sufi metaphysics and world view.

Ali Moore: Just before we get to Rumi and to the other artists expressions of Sufism, where do we find Sufis today and how popular is it now?

Muhammad Kamal: Well, you find Sufis everywhere in the world. They are here in Australia and they are there in the Middle East and different parts of the Muslim world. In fact, Sufism has been a popular religion in the Islamic world, and very popular before the rise of political Islam. With the rise of political Islam, or let's say Islamic militancy, Sufism in some areas has disappeared or you don't find Sufis anymore in those areas controlled by those militant



Muslims, because in the views of Islamic militancy, Sufism is heretical movement and it is not part of Islamic tradition.

Ali Moore: We will explore that a little later in the podcast. Shirin, is Sufism as prevalent today as it was centuries ago?

Shirin Yasar: I think it's probably taken on global relevance, through the increase in print or digital media. It's potentially even taken on a new face or new manifestations that it previously did not have, in its Indigenous context. I think that since it had been such a prevalent aspect of Islamic history, then it only makes sense that it would evolve and continue to exist in various forms in a contemporary context. Although there have definitely been tensions in relation to how it has shifted as a concept, particularly in modernity.

Ali Moore: I guess that prevalence in part is because of the artistic expression that you referred to before, Kamal. We mentioned in the introduction to the podcast that Sufism might bring to mind the poetry of Rumi or the Whirling Dervishes of Turkey. Take us through some of that artistic expression of Sufism and why Sufism lends itself to that.

Muhammad Kamal: Sufism focuses on the inner experience of human existence, with the reality. It is not relying on sense of perception or a rationalistic discourse. It had its own epistemology or religious experience. In that religious experience, when a Sufi is trying to get into trance to reunite with God and comes out from that experience it will be very difficult to explain it, to describe it, to interpret it to other people.

The only way to describe it is through poetry or an artistic expression. To show that mystical experience will be very difficult because it's very subjective. The Sufis have produced a wonderful body of literature to express what they experience in their religious experience. That's why we have Sufis literature, Sufism poetry and then some Sufis use different methodology to get into trance, like playing music and dance and listening to songs or singing themselves.

Ali Moore: The Whirling Dervishes, for example.

Muhammad Kamal: Like the Whirling Dervishes. Not only them, and other sects also use different musical instruments to get into trance.

Ali Moore: Of course, the poetry of Rumi is so well known across the world, certainly not just in the Islamic world. Can you give us an example of some of his work?



Muhammad Kamal: Yeah I like to read a poem of Rumi's, it's very important. Rumi says, "What shall I do all Muslims? I am neither Christian nor Jew, nor Magian, nor Muslim. I am not of the East, nor the West, not of the land, nor of the sea. I am not of this world, nor the next. My place is place-less, my trace is traceless. It's not the body, nor is the soul, for I belong to the soul of my beloved."

This is a beautiful poem by Rumi. I believe he transcends ethnicity, religion, nationalism and he tries to tell us that Sufism is a universal religion. It is there for everyone, not only for Muslims or for Christians or for any particular religion. It is a kind of universalism of Sufi belief and ideology.

Ali Moore: Yet, can you be a Sufi and not be a Muslim?

Muhammad Kamal: Well, this is a difficult question because Sufism is considered to be a mystical dimension of the religion of Islam, but why not? If there is one reality and one God, and we all belong to that reality, so everybody can be a Sufi.

Ali Moore: It's an interesting question, isn't it? That if you look at the mystical elements of Sufism, how Islamic are they, as opposed to universal?

Muhammad Kamal: As I mentioned before, for me, Sufism historically is Islamic. No one can deny that. But essentially, or philosophically, Sufism goes beyond all religions or we may say it has its own theology, which is called Prisca theology. Prisca theology is the type of theology which says all religions, all kinds of faith are united or connected by one truth and that is God. All of them try to find God and reach God. This is something universal, and Sufism is focusing on that aspect of human existence and reality. That's why it is essentially or philosophically it is universal, but of course historically it could be particular or even call it Islamic.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia, from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by Islamic Studies researchers, Doctor Muhammad Kamal and Doctor Shirin Yasar, both from Asia Institute. We're talking about the mystical Islamic tradition of Sufism and how it's practised and perceived today. Kamal, we don't hear a lot about Sufism, in terms of contemporary discussion of Islam, why is that?

Muhammad Kamal: I think today, political Islam has dominated every aspect of life in the Islamic world and international politics. Political Islam is very much in media and it has controlled our debates and intellectual life. That is there for political reasons, of course.

Not only mysticism or Sufism, many things are marginalized nowadays in the Islamic world. No one is talking about Islamic art, literature and other



aspects of cultural life of Muslims in the Middle East. Even today, what we have is only politics and religion. These two things have dominated our cultural life and we don't talk even about Muslim philosophy in the Islamic world or in the world today. Not many people even at universities talk about Muslim philosophy and that's all because of political Islam and the rise of political Islam in the 20th Century.

Ali Moore: Shirin, do you agree that we don't hear much about Sufism and indeed, other vital areas of philosophy as well, because of the rise of political Islam?

Shirin Yasar: I think that could definitely be an interpretation. I think it's also to do with, if we're speaking about Western media context, then the kind of Islam that we are most often exposed to is headline Islam and headline Islam has a specific focus. I think that when we think about how discourses shape and construct our realities, as opposed to reflecting them, then we also might see that as another possible reason as to why there is a focus on specific aspects at the exclusion of the others. Although I think it's also undeniable that there is a kind of rise in what might be considered political or extremist forms of Islam.

Ali Moore: It's interesting, your point about headline Islam and the view of the West, we'll look at in a minute but if we look at the issue that, Kamal, you raised earlier, you talked about tensions within the Islamic community over Sufism, and in fact it is severely criticised by some Muslims, isn't it? It's regularly attacked by extremists. In May this year a suicide bomber targeted security forces outside the famous Sufi shrine in Lahore, in Pakistan, and that is not an irregular occurrence.

Muhammad Kamal: I think militant Muslims, we call them jihadist or whatever nowadays, they are not only against Sufism. They are against everything and against everyone, whoever disagrees with their theology is the enemy of religion for them, and the enemy of God. That's why they attack Sufism because Sufism disagreed with their interpretation of religion and then theology.

Ali Moore: Only to a point though, isn't it? Where do you see the main sources of disagreement? Is it the devotion to the Saints, is that the main source of-

Muhammad Kamal: I don't think that's the main thing but that could be an excuse to attack the Sufis, because the theology and the metaphysics of Sufism is very different. As I said, Sufism is trying to universalize faith. Sufi discourses are heavily criticised by the mainstream of Muslims.

Muhammad Kamal: The first one is the doctrine of Fana, which is a doctrine advocated by early Sufis. It says that the aim of a Sufi is to reunite with God, to become one



with God. When a Sufi soul is becoming one with God and that's the final stage, and that is Fana - the self annihilation of the Sufi in God.

The mainstream of Muslims don't believe in that, they don't believe in the reunion with God, because as you know, in religion and particularly in Islam, the doctrine of divine retribution is very essential, that a Muslim is seeking divine justice and wants to be rewarded by God. That is the ultimate goal for a believer, but that's not the ultimate goal for a Sufi. A Sufi wants to reunite with God, not to be rewarded by God. A reward is different from reunification.

That's why we have a female Sufi, Rabi'a, who lived in the 8th Century. She believed that we should love God unconditionally, not to look for rewards from God. To love God unconditionally, then you love God for the sake of God, not for the sake of going to paradise. This is very different from the mainstream believer of Muslims.

The second discourse of Sufi, which has been criticised by the mainstream Muslims is the practise of Islamic law. The way they practise Islamic law is very different. As I mentioned before, the Sufis don't show to people they pray five times in a day because they pray constantly, that's the idea.

Ali Moore: The devotion to Saints, tell us about that.

Muhammad Kamal: Well, it has become a tradition because for Sufis, the Saints, who are the Sufi masters mainly, have some spiritual power and you can seek help from them. They can be a link between you and God. That's the whole idea, that's why they venerate Saints and they visit the tombs of the Saints.

Ali Moore: That would be considered idolatry.

Muhammad Kamal: It is considered by some Muslims, not by all Muslims, yeah.

Ali Moore: Kamal, how does the rise of the ultra-conservative Muslims, the Salafis, how does that fit into the tension with Sufism?

Muhammad Kamal: Before Salafism, we had the rise of Wahhabism in Arabia in the late 18th Century.

Ali Moore: The two are very closely identified, aren't they?

Muhammad Kamal: Yeah, very close. Wahhabism was a puritanical reform movement started in Arabia by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab to purify Islam from all additional doctrines and beliefs, which came into existence after the death of Prophet Muhammad. Whatever came into existence after the death of Prophet



Muhammad, and whatever was not in the Quran was considered to be heretical and Sufism is part of that heretical tradition.

Muhammad Kamal: For Wahhabism, Sufism was heretical. It is not there in the original text of Islam and it should be removed from the Islam tradition. Then Salafism is part of this tradition, this theological debate, which was made by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Now that we are using Salafism for another group and they say they are not Wahhabist, but they are not actually essentially or theologically different from Wahhabism. They also believe that Sufism is not part of the Islamic tradition, it is heretical and it should be removed from the Islamic culture.

That kind of conflict is there. Then you talked about persecution of Sufis, ie, just like you mentioned then because Sufism was a response to the political development and legalism in Islam. Then it was very natural for Sufism to have or to create two rivals for itself. The first rival is the political leadership in the Islamic world and second is the institution of clergy, which came into existence after the death of Prophet Muhammad. So these two institutions were very much against Sufism. That's why Sufism was persecuted, we had Sufis like Hallaj bin Mansur, he was executed or crucified in Baghdad at a public place because of his political opinion as well as his mystical opinions.

Ali Moore: Shirin, you talked before about headline Islam and if we look at Sufism from a Western perspective, do you think that the West has oversimplified it, that we can have this mild and acceptable form of Islam, versus this more headline Islam? Do you think a false dichotomy has been created in the West?

Shirin Yasar: Definitely. When you look at it in terms of interpretations of Sufism that have appeared in a post 9/11 context particularly, and near conservative think tanks, you have a real utilisation of Sufism as a political project almost, to further US or Western interests. I think this can also be problematic when you try to politicise Sufism as an alternative to political Islam. Is it going to translate into a perfect, secular, liberal project? I think that's questionable at best because it denies the historical complexity and the reality and also the ways in which Sufis were deeply political as well. This is something that you see a lot, particularly in contemporary studies of Sufism, that it's not this kind of apolitical, or essentially apolitical phenomenon in all of its historical manifestations.

Ali Moore: Indeed, that was going to be my next question, Kamal. How political are Sufis?

Muhammad Kamal: There have been some Sufi groups in Islamic history that were highly politicised against the colonisers. For example, in India the Naqshbandi Sufis



group had a revolt against the British colonisation of India. Then in North Africa, we had in Algeria, Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi, he was a mystic, a Sufi himself and he was leading a revolution against the colonisers. The same thing in the Sudan, we had the movement of Madhuri against the British rule and they were all Sufis. Because they were fighting against social injustice. But today, to say we have Sufis, they have a political agenda and they want to establish a Sufis state or an Islamic Sufi state, it is difficult to find any group like that.

Ali Moore: But you talk there a lot about colonises, what about in terms of when you're not talking about a colonising authority, are they generally accepting of the legitimacy of governments?

Muhammad Kamal: I don't think there is any Sufi group or any Sufi who has accepted legitimacy of any political authority in Islamic history. That's why they're very much against the political development of Islam because they believe that religion is not politics. When religion becomes politics then it's politics, it's not religion. In order to save religion or spirituality from politics, you have to de-politicise your theology.

Their theology, as I said, is Prisca theology, is not dealing with the worldly affairs. For a Sufi, political power is not important. Wealth and greed are all leading to corruption and they should not be there, so the only way to purify your soul and to reach God and reunite with God is through this process of spirituality and inner purification.

Ali Moore: How does that sit with active campaigns against colonising authorities?

Muhammad Kamal: Well, maybe that was a historical movement and when the Sufis saw colonisation and social injustice, they wanted to react against it, and they did that. But they're not interested in politics, or they don't have a political agenda.

Ali Moore: What's the future of Sufism? You talked there about it in its Western context as well, but also how it changes. It's not one necessarily definable concept, so Shirin, do you see it as having a strong future?

Shirin Yasar: Yes, I do. I think that it might evolve in terms of how it has historically existed, so in terms of the more institutionalised forms and this strong emphasis for the tariqa or the order and that relationship between the Sufi master and the disciple base have been very inherent. I think these will probably continue in the context in which they have been always existent and always popular. But I think we also see different modes of Sufism being expressed in global and specifically with the interplay of technology and how



this will affect different ways in which Sufi ideas might be disseminated, that vastly differ from how they might have historically been professed.

- Ali Moore: I guess that sort of social media, that rise of communications, that also though opens the way for those who criticise Sufism to have a stronger voice as well.
- Shirin Yasar: Definitely, it's a double edged sword.
- Ali Moore: Do you see that threat to Sufism from within as also growing?
- Shirin Yasar: Definitely, but I think it has shown a historical resilience and I think there's no reason to think they wouldn't continue and evolve and adapt in different ways. If we think of it as, in one sense, Islamic spirituality and mysticism, then there's no reason why Muslims would not adapt and navigate and reorientate the ways in which they manifest that in a contemporary context.
- Ali Moore: Kamal, how do you see the future of Sufism?
- Muhammad Kamal: Well, Sufism can challenge political Islam and modernity but it cannot destroy them. It's not possible to destroy modernity. Then this rise of political Islam, it might stay there for quite some time. But Sufism, as I said, it doesn't have a political agenda, it will not become a socio-political movement or a kind of alternative. It is an individual attempt to see God and reunite with God. If a person is seeking God, so maybe Sufism is a proper way to adopt it and through that, to understand the reality in his own existence, otherwise Sufism will not become a popular movement in a dominant trend, in our contemporary time or in future.
- Ali Moore: But it can remain resilient? Is it, as Shirin suggested there's no reason to think it cannot?
- Muhammad Kamal: Definitely, I agree with her completely and it has been like that, all the time from the 8th Century, Sufism has been always there and it has been the only way for some individuals to seek spiritual salvation.
- Ali Moore: Kamal, and Shirin, thank you very much for joining us on Ear to Asia. I think this is an absolutely fascinating conversation and I do urge people if you have not yet, to go and seek out the poetry of Rumi, which is absolutely truly beautiful.
- Muhammad Kamal: Thank you very much for having me.
- Shirin Yasar: Thank you.



Ali Moore:

Our guests have been Islamic Studies researchers, Dr. Muhammad Kamal and Dr. Shirin Yasar, both from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify or SoundCloud. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show, and of course let your friends know about us on social media.

This episode was recorded on the 11th of June 2019. Producers were Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param at profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons Copyright 2019, the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore, thanks for your company.