

*Sufi Approaches to Peace: The Mystical and the Prophetic in  
Modern Culture*

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I would like to begin with the words of a modern Sufi, who passed away in 1971 after a lifetime of peacemaking work:

Words are not peace. Thoughts are not peace. Plans are not peace. Programs are not peace. Peace is fundamental. It is easy to prove it in the sciences, and the real Masters who are here are teaching it. It is hard to appreciate, hard to experience, hard to realize. It is fundamental to all faiths, all religions, all spirituality. It is from this that everything was, or let us say: In the Beginning was Peace and the Peace was with God and the Peace was God, and out of this Peace has everything been made that was made.

The difference between this Logos Peace and what we generally call "Peace" is that the latter is a vacuum, a zero, a nothing, a blank, a negative to the extreme. The Logos Peace is fullness, is allinclusive, is brotherhood. The human body is a society of myriads of cell units working together. The total of humanity (Adam) is a society of myriads of personalities which must work together in and with and under God. Only this must be experiences and not syllogisms, truth and not truism. Every transcendentalist poet of America knew it, every newsman seems to work against it we must have excitement. Excitement is the death of peace (1987, p. 319)

These words by Sufi Ahmed Murad Chisti, better known by his Western name, Samuel L. Lewis, express a profound view of peace common to the mystics of many spiritual traditions.

It is not my purpose to proselytize for the Sufi tradition. What I do want to do is look at the unique elements of this

tradition's historical development and how they might shed light on the deep conflicts we find today between religion and modern or post-modern culture, as well as between the shared community ethics of the past and the individualistic, utilitarian ethic that we find surrounding us today.

Sufism is first an anomaly. It is a tradition without a titular founder and whose history is subject to a great deal of controversy, even among Sufis themselves. The word itself probably derives from an Arabic or Persian word meaning wisdom. While religious studies textbooks and courses habitually label it the "mystical side of Islam," the picture is far more complex and immediately begs the question, "What do we mean by Islam?" or "Which Islam are we talking about?" As many people now know, the word *Islam* can be translated as either "peace" or "surrender." One point of view expressed by a number of Sufis, East and West, is that the prophet Muhammad came to bring a profound message of peace and social justice as well as a mystical practice and this "pure Islam" later developed into the organizational and institutional forms and divisions we see today. As I heard one Persian Sufi, who emigrated from Iran after Khomeini, baldly express it: "That isn't Islam. It's just politics and the culture that comes from it."

The Sufis, in fact, have many portions of the Qur'an on their side, probably more than do the various fundamentalist formulations of the faith. For instance:

"Tell everyone: 'We believe in the One Being, and what has been revealed to you, and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, and to the tribes, and what was given to Moses, Jesus, and all the prophets from their Source. We will make no distinction between any of them, and we resign ourselves to the same Source of All'" (Sura 3:84, author's translation)

“So turn your face and purpose towards the primordial religion of the upright, the *hanif*--the nature innately formed by the One Reality in which the One created humanity. Let there be no change in this work created by One. This religion is self-subsisting, the standard, always resurrecting itself (*qayyim*). But most among humanity do not understand. Turn to and remain conscious only of the One, remaining constant in prayer. Don't deify anything else in your life, not concepts or beliefs. Don't divide yourselves into sects that congratulate themselves on their own ideas.

--Sura 30, 30-32 (author's translation)

“Please do not pay the least attention to any sectarian views, but courageously and openly proclaim to all: ‘I affirm the truth of every Revelation which has come down as a Holy Book from the Source of Truth, and I am instructed by this very Source to be impartial among the peoples of Revelation. The Ever-Present Source Who calls Itself by countless Divine Names is the Source of our spiritual nation and your spiritual nations. We have our integral practice of the holy way of life, as you have yours. There need be no fundamental disagreement among us. Allah Most High will draw us all together as we return home to the Source of Love.’” (Sura 42:15, Hixon 2003, p. 99)

Sacred Unity has opened to you a way of natural religion. It was given to Noah to follow. It is the same faith that we have revealed to you, and which we showed to Abraham, to Moses, to Jesus, to the end that true religion might continue in the earth. Don't divide yourself sects: the true religion unites all.”

--Sura 42, 13 (author's translation).

The animals on earth, the beings that fly on wings--they are all communities like you. We have omitted nothing from this original holy book of nature, and they shall all be gathered to their Nurturer and Sustainer in the end.

--Sura 6, 38 (author's translation).

Reading the Qur'an, a Sufi finds that a great deal of it focuses on celebrations of cosmic “beginnings. It does not view this creation as a one-time event, but rather as a process that is still going on. In this sense, the Qur'an expresses ideas compatible with spiritual views of evolution proposed by contemporary Jewish and

Christian theologians. Like other ancient Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Aramaic, Arabic views past history as ongoing, receding into the horizon ahead of us, so to speak, as the future comes along behind us. For the Sufi, as for many Jewish and Christian mystics, the cosmic beginning of the caravan of creation can include us at any moment in which we sense our divine purpose in life opening up ahead of us.

The eternal Day of the Ever-Present Source is nearer to the human being than anyone can conceive—nearer than near, and even nearer than that (Sura 75:34, Hixon 2003, p. 63).

The Qur'an balances the ever-present experience of creation's possibility with the experience of judgment: reaping the consequences of our actions here and now. In this sense, "time begins" at any moment that we live in attunement with our divine purpose, the process of becoming. "Time ends" whenever some event cause us to stop what we're doing and face up to the effects we have created from a sense of egotism, or a self that thinks it is separate from the One. In this context, the Qur'an frequently mentions the "day of judgment" (*maliki yaumadin*). This day can be any day, any moment, any small "death" that our limited self experiences, which can that lead us to re-consider and align ourselves with the Source of Being.

Most human beings perceive the end of time as far away, but the Ever-Present Source, above both time and eternity, knows the eternal Day to be near to every life with the most intimate nearness (Sura 70:6-7, Hixon 2003, p.83).

The Qur'an also mentions jihad, literally "struggle," as a dimension of living a sacred life. The so-called "Holy War" publicized by certain Islamist groups (as well as the Western media) is not a pillar of Islam, however. In an offensive sense, war is an innovation from after the time of Muhammad. Every battle fought by the young Muslim community during Muhammad's lifetime was defensive. When the early Muslim community finally returned to Mecca, shortly before Muhammad's passing, the Prophet famously said that the time for the lesser, outer struggle (*jihad*) was over and the time for the greater, inner struggle (*mujahid*) with one's own self-centred tendencies was to begin.

The Qur'an repeatedly enjoins all Muslims to act with honesty and justice; not only towards other Muslims but also towards everyone they meet.

Turning far away from the Source of Love is every person who engages in cruel criticism, or who speaks the slightest untruth about another. Turning even farther away from the Ever-Present Source are those obsessed with selfish accumulation of worldly wealth and authority. They are caught in the basic illusion that riches and power can fulfil the natural longing of the soul for its own True Source.

(Sura 104:1-3, Hixon 2003, p. 191)

Repeatedly, I am asked: If the Sufis have more of the Qur'an on their side than do fundamentalists, how then are we to understand the common media and sometimes even academic stereotype of Islam and the Qur'an as war-mongering and savage?

Philosophically speaking, this is a simple "category error" that arises amongst non-Muslims as well as some Muslims about the different types of literature in the Qur'an. The early Suras of

the Qur'an, revealed to Muhammad in Mecca, when the early Muslim community was still a minority, or counter-culture, are primarily cosmic hymns and wisdom literature, similar to those in the Bible. The later suras are revealed once the early Muslim community decamps under persecution and comes to live in Yathrib (later called Medina), where they are invited to set up an ideal community. Then, as with all spiritual organizations, Muhammad is challenged to work out a practical, communal ethic for the new community. These later Suras address particular situations and cultural conditions of the time, albeit from the standpoint of the highest guidance coming through Muhammad from Allah at the time.

For Christian understanding, this would be the same difference in language and context as between the Beatitudes or Sermon on the Mount of Jesus and the Epistles of St. Paul. As a number of Christian theologians have pointed out, the former are universal wisdom; the latter address specific situations in the specific communities to which Paul writes. Both are inspired, yet inspired for different purposes. For Jewish understanding, one could compare the language and context of Genesis, the Psalms or other Wisdom literature with that of the specific communal rules for the early Hebrews set out in Leviticus.

How then does Sufism differ from any other mystical interpretation of religion present in the world today and why does it matter?

For one thing, because both Muhammad and Sufism arose in the historical era, Sufis can reliably claim to trace their origins at least to Islam's very inception. As I sometimes explain this to Christians, it would be as though there were an ancient tradition of Christianity that through an unbroken history still used

Aramaic for its language of spiritual and mystical practice and could reliably claim authority directly back to Jesus. If this were true, it would make some corners of institutional Christianity very nervous. More nervous than fiction like *The DaVinci Code*.

In fact, we find Sufi and other Islamic mystics (for instance, in the Ismaili, Alevi and Bektashi traditions) persecuted by other Muslims in many places throughout history. However, Sufism and other branches of Islamic mysticism decentralized and diversified at a very early stage, taking on some of the appearance and flavour of the Asian, African, or later North and South American cultures to which they came. Because of this decentralization, and because it had no overall leader, the various Sufi traditions became, like the Internet, virtually impossible to eliminate at one time, even if various Muslim rulers had chosen to mount the sort of inquisition that Christian rulers did in the Middle Ages against the Cathars and Albigensians.

Sufism remains today a tradition of paradoxes. It represents a contemplative spiritual practice that nonetheless has a devotional component. For many people raised religious in Western culture, devotion equals dogma and hierarchal control. Yet the Sufis, by focusing on the divine as first the Ground of Reality and second as the divine Beloved, attempt to re-engage the heart in contemporary spirituality. Like other meditative traditions today, they also have practices to sense, breathe and cultivate simple presence and the interrelatedness of all life. Sufi practice goes beyond this and attempts to engage the volatile human feelings of love, devotion and passionate attraction rather rise above them with detachment.

Second, the Sufi paths represent an ancient way of understanding the religious symbols both in the Bible and the

Quran (as well as other sacred books), a way that is symbolic, psychological and mystical. This is not a new age philosophy invented yesterday. It has a living lineage that says, to use the words of a Sufi saying, "God is your lover, not your jailer." For the Sufi, the most important function of real religion is self-knowledge balanced by a deeper sense of community and communal responsibility.

Third, and perhaps most appropriately, Sufis and other Islamic mystics through the ages have maintained a prophetic voice in the cultures in which they find themselves, speaking and acting on behalf of social justice, service and what we would now call multi-cultural tolerance.

A recent example of this Sufi impulse is the creation by Samuel L. Lewis, whom I quoted above, of the Dances of Universal Peace. These dances invite the adherents of any or no religion to join hands, breathe and move together, to symbolically and actually move out of the comfort zone of sitting in one place, that is one point of view, in order to see and feel from the standpoint of another person. This is practical, not theoretical psychology and spirituality. As a related idea, the German somatic psychologist Wilhelm Reich noted (1946, 1948) that power elites that wished to control their populations encouraged people to, as he called it, "sit on the spot," and inhibit or suppress their natural impulses to free, spontaneous movement.

While circle dance may seem a marginal way to influence peace-making, these Dances have, over the last forty years, been used in various grass roots locations during which citizen diplomacy, non-violent protest and what we would now call inter-spiritual peace-making have taken place. These include the former Soviet Union in 1988 and 1989, and Israel, Palestine, Syria and

Jordan in 1993 and 2000 (For more details see [www.dancesofuniversalpeace.org](http://www.dancesofuniversalpeace.org)).

Today Sufis often find themselves hemmed in or even marginalized between the forces of Western consumer culture and that of fundamentalist religion. However, the Sufi takes some comfort in some of the more recent findings of Western science.

As Thomas Kuhn pointed out, there have been large-scale “paradigm shifts” that have occurred throughout history: unthinkable in one moment and seemingly perfectly natural or obvious in the next. As scientists have sought the patterns for such large-scale changes, they have learned to watch the movements of nature more closely, especially those phenomena—like the movements of clouds in the sky or sand on the beach—which defy mechanical explanations. The beginning intimations of this “chaos theory” seem to reinforce what is said by many great spiritual teachers who have predicted or prophesied such large-scale, silent revolutions: change begins at the periphery, with many diverse, seemingly insignificant, movements that gradually gather momentum until, like a sand dune moving, the margins become the centre.

Institutions and organizations seem to fall apart, come back together and fall apart again. As the writer Morris Berman (2000) notes in his recent book *The Twilight of American Culture*, we may simply be experiencing a very long cycle of swing between periods of human cultural rise and decay, with those dedicated to wisdom and compassion taking the “monastic” option during periods of the latter. Facing such a prospect, the mystic may follow and become one with the movement of the sand, in unison with the evolving, creative flow of the cosmos.

We live in a culture where everyone has an ideal solution to the problems of the world, solutions ranging from the final triumph of free trade and the market economy to the religious conversion of the world to a particular persuasion.

From a Sufi point of view, real difficulties only arise we decide we know the ideal future for someone else and attempt to enforce it upon them. In this regard, a tradition like Sufism would encourage all leaders, political, cultural, religious—even other Sufis—to pursue their agendas with a great deal more humility and compassion. As Samuel Lewis wrote toward the end of his life:

Visions that crystallize are incomplete....

You cannot hold a cloud in its place or shape, nor can human beings of a certain period restrict, formulate or make demands of future cultures, future humanity (1981, p. 87-88).

Seven hundred years earlier, the Turkish Sufi Jelaluddin Rumi counselled a similar patience coupled with a sense of shared humility and peace—the essence of Islam. This is the understanding that God, the intelligence of the cosmos, or the ground of Reality—whichever term you prefer—can act through us for the benefit of the world whenever we are conscious of it.

O Hidden One, you fill East to West,  
behind both moon's reflection and sun's radiance.  
You are the water and we are the millstone.  
You are the wind and we are the dust.  
You are the spring and we are the garden.  
You are the breath, we are the hands and feet.  
You are the joy and we are the laughter.  
(Douglas-Klotz 2005).

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