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Sufism and Jihad

"The lion who breaks the enemy's ranks is a minor hero compared to the lion who overcomes himself" (Helminski 40).

The first time I read the poetry of the 13th century Sufi Jalaludin Rumi I felt that I had finally found some poetry I was truly moved by. As the daughter of two people who spent significant time in Iran and North Africa, I have always had a fascination with Middle Eastern culture, and so to hear Rumi depicting the walled gardens and desert skies of my imagination was, in a way, like hearing about my own childhood. The atmosphere of Rumi's poetry caught my attention, but the striking thing as I read more was his description of spirituality and spiritual practice, which he sometimes portrayed in terms of fierce battles, or destruction (Helminski 40). I came to see that Rumi, a revered Sufi teacher, was expressing through his poetry important rudiments of the Sufi philosophy, particularly the subtleties of the struggle inside of oneself for attainment of the state of spiritual grace (Friedlander 31). The struggle to conquer one's egocentric self to achieve spiritual purification is known to the Sufis as *jihad* (Armstrong 261). What keeps the Sufi from the state of spiritual harmony and tranquility that he yearns for is the *nafs*, the troublemaking and appetitive self, also known as the animal soul. The Sufi can gain willpower over the *nafs* with, for example, disciplines such as fasting, meditation and solitude that train the body to not crave so much food, sleep and stimulus. Subduing

the *nafs* allows the Sufi to access mystical states without distraction, and reach his goal of mystical union with God (Nicholson 28).

The contrast between the Sufi approach toward spiritual attainment with quietism and asceticism, and the orthodox Islamic approach of studying the doctrine and following the rules of religious leaders is illustrated in a dramatic way in their different teachings of *jihad*. *Jihad* is from the root *jhd*, meaning ‘striving’ or ‘to exert oneself’ (Nasr, “Spiritual” 1; Tabrizi). This unfortunately has become greatly misunderstood within certain factions of Islam and spread over much of the world with the connotation of ‘holy war’ in the sense of religious-sanctioned terrorism (Nasr, “Spiritual” 1).

Sufism is the spiritual core and therefore moral vanguard of Islam. The teaching of the true meaning of *jihad* is preserved in Sufism because of its great emphasis on spiritual, or inward, practice to achieve greater understanding and compassion. Even though Islam does not wholly condone terrorism or ‘holy war,’ its emphasis on outward conduct allows for extremist interpretations of religious doctrine (Sedgwick 10). By offering a look into the teaching of *jihad* from its very roots, I hope to increase understanding for non-Muslims of this rich cultural and spiritual tradition.

Sufism is the mystical aspect of the Islamic religion, meaning that Sufis are essentially Muslims that follow a more intuitive and devotional approach toward religion and spirituality (Friedlander 51; Nicholson 4-5). This intuitive and meditative method often contrasts or even conflicts with orthodox Islam where the importance lies more in following the rules and customs of the religion (Ali, “Rumi”). For the Sufi the most important goal is to gain self-knowledge through spiritual practice, and ultimately

transform into a being that can experience union with God (“Of Saints” 74). Emphases on the dogmas of religious Islamic doctrine are seen for the Sufi as contrivances that inhibit spontaneous and direct mystical experience (Ali, “Rumi”).

When the bombings of the World Trade Center buildings happened in 2001 I was shocked and concerned about my friends that lived in New York City, but I was absolutely astounded by the immediate anti-Muslim reaction that seemed to permeate the media and American culture in the aftermath. In his book Jihad, Paul Fregosi exemplifies this American sentiment: “It needs to be said: Islam considers itself doctrinally a religion whose destiny it is to dominate and to rule the world” (411). From FrontPageMagazine.com John Perazzo writes: “scholar Bat Ye’or explains that historically jihad has meant ‘war, dispossession, slavery, and death’ for its victims.” I knew that the terrorists were extremists, and that killing hundreds of people in the name of Islam was horribly wrong, but I still was troubled by the broad distrust of Islam that this event triggered in America because terrorism was such a departure from what I understood Sufism, and by extension Islam, to be about. This inspired me to further investigation, where I found a rich and humane philosophy within Islam, and a deeper understanding of the subtleties of *jihad*, commonly know only as ‘holy war,’ within the teachings of Sufism. The more information I found about the Sufi’s dedication to improving themselves, and therefore society, through spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer, and dance, the more appreciation I felt for their approach toward *jihad*. I saw more clearly the contrast between the Sufi’s goal of *jihad* as a technique for self-improvement by waging war on their lower, egocentric self and the Islamic

extremist's misinterpretation of *jihad* as religious justification for violence against non-Muslims (Nasr, "Spiritual" 3).

One of the rudiments of Sufism is that humanity's current condition is of an exile from the "other world," the spiritual world, and their true origin has been forgotten while becoming accustomed to a flawed and incomplete existence (Shah xxviii). For the Sufi it is through spiritual practices that it is possible to purify oneself enough to return to the spiritual state, and this the basis from which he directs all of his efforts and actions (Nasr, "Garden" 5; Nasr, "Spiritual" 6). The Sufis often use the metaphor of humanity's current state as being in prison and not aware of it, or living in a perpetual dream that is mistaken for reality. Because of ignorance about its condition, humanity prefers to remain in prison rather than exert the strong efforts necessary in order to transcend it (Shah 11). *Jihad* is the battle to break out of prison, to struggle against the prison walls of ignorance, desire and egotism, and experience the expansive and blissful state of union with God (Nasr, "Garden" 5).

The spiritual world, the union with God, is a state of perfect balance and equilibrium, while this world is in a constant state of imbalance. Without certain efforts being made to restore balance and equilibrium in himself and in the world, there is danger of total degeneration (Nasr, "Spiritual" 2). *Jihad* refers to struggling to restore balance and it is *jihad* that the Sufi performs when he works to improve himself and society through prayer, fasting, meditation, and solitude, thereby bringing him closer to the perfect balance of divinity (Nasr, "Spiritual" 5).

Not all of the Sufi's spiritual practices are quietist and withdrawn. Dance, calligraphy, music and chanting are also important spiritual disciplines for the Sufi to

focus on his goal of mystical union and transcend his ordinary and habitual way of being (Friedlander 115). The practice of *zikr*, which means remembrance, is the repetition of the words *La Illaha Ila 'Llah*, 'There is no God but God.' This practice can vary among Sufis from a quiet whisper to himself throughout the day to group gatherings where the chanting is accompanied by rhythmic movements and drumming (Sedgwick 31-44). The repetition of this phrase, for the purpose of remembering God at all times without distraction is one of the ways *jihad* is practiced by the Sufi. "Zikr exists not except in the way of struggles" (Shah 440). This differs from the average adherent to orthodox Islam, who follows the custom to pray five times a day, but may not bring the practice of prayer into every moment of their life. This great dedication to remembrance of God illustrates how Sufism preserves a foundation of spiritual practice that is given much greater importance than religious dogma and conduct (Sedgwick30).

Islamic scholar Mark Sedgwick explains that even as interest in Sufism grows in the West, particularly through the poetry of Rumi, it still remains somewhat misunderstood or oversimplified as a "spiritual alternative" to Islam (1). Far from being an alternative or offshoot of Islam, Sufism can be said to be the center of gravity of Islam, preserving important core tenants that have become lost in the emphasis on complex orthodoxy, theology and *Shari'ah*, or Islamic law (Ali "Rumi"). Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University, describes: "...Sufism represents the spiritual engine and heart of Islam, which is rooted within the core of its scholastic traditions, and is capable of revitalizing modern day Islam rooted in literalism and political extremism" (Ali, "Rumi"). Nasr is saying that Sufism is an interior and hidden piece of Islam that has the power to bring a more humane and

spiritual approach to this religion. Mystical yearning pulls the Sufi to be closer to *Allah*, to God, and therefore his drive to purify himself has a spontaneity that does not easily get bogged down in “literalism”, or by-the-book definitions of what religious attainment means. Nasr goes on to explain why Sufism is also an ethical or moral anchor for Islam, “Sufism has always had the function of purifying Islamic ethics and [Sufi practices such as fasting are] like lighting a lamp... by virtue of being a lamp it illuminates the space around it. Therefore, the practice of purifying one’s soul, of living virtuously, has tremendous impacts upon the ethics of the surrounding society” (Ali, “Rumi”).

The Sufi differs from the Muslim in his emphasis on attaining mystical experience over following dogma and doctrinal rules. The average Muslim might go through his whole life following the rules of the Islamic religion but without ever having a mystical or spiritual experience with the God he prays to, while the Sufi seeks the direct experience of divinity even if it runs contrary to the law of the land. “[Sufis] have deepened and enriched the lives of millions by ruthlessly stripping off the husks of religion and insisting that the kernel must be sought, not in any formal act, but in cultivation of spiritual feelings and in purification of the inward man” (Nicholson 65). Mark Sedgwick expands on this: “Sufis take a pragmatic view of the law...to avoid making a false idol out of [it], remembering what it is for” (10). It is this approach to spirituality that makes it possible for the Sufis to preserve the teaching of the inner *jihad*, an approach that involves spiritual practices to voluntarily improve oneself; a far cry from citing religious doctrines to justify violence and religious intolerance as in the case of some Islamic extremists.

A cornerstone of Sufi action is to seek inwardly, with spiritual practices, for the purpose of overcoming one's urges related to the world of life, and find a connection to God from within (Sedgwick 8). Mark Sedgwick elaborates, "Sufism is best understood as a practical program for controlling the nafs. Once the nafs have been subdued and a space made for God in the heart...the Sufi may come to know God while still on earth" (10). The Sufi's practical program has some similarities to a devout Muslim's practices, which include prayer five times a day, annual fasting and pilgrimage, and regular donation to charity. Muslims and Sufis being monotheistic, both pray with the sacred phrase, "*La Ilaha Il Allah*" "There is no God but God" (Nasr, "Spiritual" 5). However a Sufi would be more likely than a Muslim to take this into a deeper spiritual practice, such as reciting this phrase to himself continually throughout the day, rather than just at prayer time (Sedgwick 38-40).

Since I have discussed some of the differences between Sufism and Islam, some background information on Sufism is necessary to show how it developed and give some historical context. The history of Sufism is somewhat mysterious and even the name 'Sufi' has different reported etymologies. One of the most common explanations of the name Sufi is that it is from the Arabic root *suf* meaning 'wool' and referring to the rough wool clothes worn by early Sufi ascetics (Nicholson 2). Other explanations include the similarity to the Greek *sophos*, which means 'wisdom', and the Arabic *suffa*, or step, which refers to platforms that the devoted followers of Mohammed would sit on near his house ((Nicholson 2; Sedgwick 5). Mark Sedgwick, professor of Islamic history at the University of Cairo suggests that the name 'Sufi' was used to denominate the original devotees of Mohammad who preserved the integrity of his teachings which is the 'pure

Islam' This distinguishes the 'Sufis' from the later followers which were merely taking the name of 'Muslim,' but lacking in depth of understanding (Sedgwick 8). It is useful to mention here that Islam means 'to submit,' and a Muslim is 'one who has submitted.' In that sense, a Sufi always considers himself a Muslim: one who has submitted to God.

Even with the varying explanations of the Sufi name, it is clear that the development of Sufism is tied closely to Islam, and the teaching of *jihad* came from Mohammad, the originator of Islam. Mohammad was a merchant in the 7th century A.D. in the city of Makkah in the Arabian Peninsula, at that time occupied by a mix of rivaling and unsettled tribes. The tradition of Islam relates that at the age of 40 while on a spiritual retreat in a cave, Mohammad had the legendary visitation from the angel Gabriel and received the *Quran*, the holy book of Islam (Ramadan 34).

The *Quran*, which means recitation, is the holy book for Muslims and Sufis, along with the Old and New Testament, and Mohammed is considered to be the last prophet in the tradition of Abraham, Moses and Jesus (Ramadan 89-90). In addition to the *Quran* there is the *Hadith*, or tradition, which are sayings of Mohammed that complement and supplement the *Quran* for much of the instruction for conduct of living (Armstrong 263; Sedgwick 11). Muslims tend to follow the teachings in the *Quran* and the *Hadith* in a literal way, while Sufis interpret them in a more psychological way (Shah 46). An online academic forum for Islamic studies shows a common literal interpretation of *jihad* from the Quran: "In religious parlance, this use of force is called Jihad, and in the Qur'an it can be classified in two distinct categories: Firstly, against injustice and oppression. Secondly, against the rejecters of truth after it has become evident to them" (Ghamdi 1). The literal interpretation of *jihad* is of a use of force against injustice, as well as against

‘rejecters of truth.’ This is understood in extremist circles to justify terrorist violence against political and economic oppressors, particularly of the non-Islamic world (Habeck 20). The psychological teachings of the Sufis abound in the poems of Rumi: “Destroy your own house, destroy it now! A treasure greater than Pharaoh’s is hidden under it... In the end, whether you like it or not. Your house will be pulled down and destroyed, and the treasure under it revealed. But then it will not belong to you” (Harvey 10). Is this to mean this Sufi teacher was telling his students to literally tear down their homes to find the physical treasure beneath? It is doubtful that Rumi would still be one of the most read poets and esteemed Sufis in the world if he had been merely an eccentric wordsmith (Sedgwick 1). When Rumi says to destroy one’s house he is using poetic imagery to inspire the spiritual seeker to break down their mental constructs, to explore past their current reality into a deeper and richer world (Shah 447). Sufi writings can, and must, be understood on non-literal levels particularly on the psychological level (Shah 46). The psychological level is where the imagery of wars and destruction become clear as a message to overcome the dark side of ourselves in order to be a force of compassion and wisdom (Michen 204).

One example of the call of the mystical Sufi path over the theological and literalist approach is of Al-Ghazali, who was one of the foremost contributors to what is now Islamic theology. He was a renowned scholar in 12th century Iran and gave up a prestigious teaching position to become a Sufi ascetic, and held that mystical experiences, perceiving or encountering divinity, were superior to a theological, or merely intellectual understanding of divinity (Watt). Al-Ghazali understood that for a mystic, or true seeker of God, there has to be a point when the intellectual faculties are transcended, to be able

to really experience the spiritual, divine world (Shah xxiii-xxiv).

When the Sufi engages in meditative practices, fasting or silence, he must perform *jihad* over and over with himself to have the strength and fortitude to continue until the mystical transcendental state is reached. The Sufi will battle against his own desires to leave the meditation, to rest and eat, but for the Sufi that would mean defeat in his struggle, and a return to the prison of this world (Friedlander 38). Contemporary Sufi teacher and author Idries Shah writes that it is a mistake for an individual to believe that the transcendental state can be found “...merely through the exercise of the faculties with which he finds himself endowed” (xxiii). The seeker of the mystical state must strive to perceive that which is beyond his normal faculties, and therefore Sufi teachings are often expressed in parables and metaphors in order to impact the mind in a deeper psychological way and transcend the intellect (Shah 53).

It is the psychological and meditative approach toward understanding of the religious doctrines that defines Sufism as having very different goals and methods to reach those goals than Islam. Because of the Sufi’s more pious and quietist approach, Sufism existed independently from Islam as a religion for the masses, and as a conquering power of much of the Eastern world. We can delineate Islam as a religious and political force, based in the *Quran* and the *Hadith*, but with emphasis on theology and doctrine, and therefore disagreements about the doctrine. Sufism, on the other hand, maintained a focus on internal spiritual development, and ignored opportunities for spreading the religion (Sedgwick 12-13). By virtue of not partaking in political expansion, Sufism defined itself as having goals that were not based in worldly power.

The Sufis always channeled their effort and force into their inner *jihad* to bring justice and order inside themselves first, and to pass on the wisdom from teacher to disciple. Islam defined itself as a great religious and political power that swept over much of the non-European world. The emphasis was on bringing justice and order in the form of the Islamic religion to unconquered lands (Sedgwick 49-50).

It is written in the *Hadith* that Mohammad returned from a battle against oppressors of the early Muslims to say, “We return from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad” (Armstrong 168). Karen Armstrong, biographer of Mohammad explains the greater jihad as being, “the more difficult and crucial effort to conquer the forces of evil in oneself and in one’s society” (168). Here Mohammad distinguishes between the lesser *jihad*, the physical battle for freedom and safety, and the greater *jihad*, the struggle to reach the internal equilibrium that leads to spiritual attainment (Sedgwick 9). The greater battle is an internal process to overcome one’s lower nature, the lesser battle is an external one for social justice or political and religious freedom. This shows us that far from blanket consent to wage war against all non-Muslims, *jihad* actually has several facets.

There was a point in the delivery of the *Quran* to Mohammad, which happened over the course of 20 years, that permission was granted to the early Muslims to fight against the severe political and religious oppression they were experiencing from tribal leaders at that time. This pivotal line from the *Quran* states, “Sanction is given unto those who fight because they have been wronged; and Allah is indeed able to give them victory” (Ali, “Holy” 22:39-40). Tariq Ramadan, Professor of theology at Oxford University, comments about this part of the *Quran* which came to Mohammed after years

of persecution and exile for the early Muslims: “This verse gave permission to Muslims to defend themselves in armed struggle, and not just resist passively” (99).

Mohammed and the early Muslims fought to preserve their way of life in a lesser *jihad* only after they were given consent from their God, through his mouthpiece or prophet Mohammad (Nicholson 4). Before this consent they had not been actively waging battle, yet they knew this constituted an inferior battle, and was necessary only to make possible the continuation of the superior struggle for spiritual progress, by allowing the Muslims to practice their religion freely (Ramadan 99).

Anyone with this delicate understanding of the inner *jihad* and outer *jihad* from Sufism and the early days of Islam, would not fall into the error of terrorism, or would not justify terrorism as a holy war (Ali, “Rumi”). Intellectualized and orthodox interpretation of *jihad* as a righteous battle against any powers outside of Islam opens the door for even more extremist visions of hegemony. Johns Hopkins University professor Mary Habeck describes the extremist outlook as a fulfillment of the so-called destiny of Muslims to rule the world, as set down in the *Hadith* and *Quran*. A destiny that is thwarted by the overarching power of the West, particularly of the U.S. control of Israel (8-9). Some of the extreme Islamic outlooks were first articulated and widely spread from a man named Ibn Taymiyya, who belonged to the orthodox Islamic school of Hanbali in 13th century Turkey. Taymiyya “supported the resumption of armed struggle against anyone outside the fold of Islam. He would, in fact, become known as one of the foremost proponents of the Islamic duty called ‘jihad’” (Habeck 20). Another adherent of Hanbali in 18th century Saudi Arabia named Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, spread a fundamentalist message of rejection of human rulers, as opposed to

only God ruling. Wahhab heavily condoned the use of violence against those who did not share his same perspective (Habeck 24-5).

The teachings from both these men have laid the foundation for many terrorist groups who interpret *jihad* in an entirely literalist and intolerant way; that the *Quran* condones violence against all non-Muslim political powers in order to establish, by force, an orderly Islamic nation (Habeck 8). “Al-Qaida believed that the United States, as the greatest representative of ‘unbelief’ had to be struck a stunning blow, killing as many Americans as possible to frighten the U.S. government into submission” (Habeck 14). John Perazzo quotes the Saudi ambassador to London who, “praises *jihadists* who become suicide bombers on the grounds that ‘in the Koran...it is written that anyone who dies for the sake of Allah is a martyr’” (1). This is how the literal interpretation from the orthodox perspective can de-emphasize, and even completely negate *jihad* as an action based in genuine spiritual yearning for the purpose of mystical connection with God (Sedgwick 9).

It is worthwhile to point out here that the term holy war is somewhat of a misnomer, as these words never actually appear in the *Quran* or the *Hadith* (Tabrizi). “the root ‘JHD’ implies more than ‘holy war’. It signifies a physical, moral, spiritual and intellectual effort, There are plenty of Arabic words denoting armed combat such as *harb* (war), *sira’a* (combat), *ma’awaka* (battle), or *qital* (killing), which the Quran could easily have used if war had been the Muslim’s principle way of engaging in this effort. Instead it chooses a vaguer, richer word with a wide range of connotations” (Armstrong 168). By using the term for striving and struggling rather than the words specifically meaning combat or killing, the *Quran* reveals itself to be a doctrine able to be interpreted at

different depths. As well as meaning ‘to submit’, the word Islam is also related to the word *salaam*, meaning peace. The greater *jihad* means a struggle for the true Islam, which is a state of peace, of submission to God, or the mystical state of knowing God.

There is an apparent paradox that the Sufi mystic practices meditation, fasting, and *zikr* as ways to wage an internal battle against his *nafs*, in order to become a more compassionate, spiritual being. The Sufi’s understanding of life as a psychological prison really means that he is trapped by his own appetites and desires (Tabrizi). For example the Sufi can overcome his desire for physical comfort he can meditate all night and have more of a chance of achieving mystical union than if he has to interrupt his practice to eat and sleep. “there is in man an element of evil- the lower or appetitive soul. This evil self, the seat of passion and lust is called *nafs*” (Nicholson 28). Louis Massignon, expert on Sufi mysticism comments on the Sufi’s motivation to work against his own shortcomings out of compassion for humanity: “The mystic call is as a rule the result of an inner rebellion of the conscience against social injustices, not only those of others but primarily and particularly against our own faults: with a desire intensified by inner purification to find God at any price” (Armstrong 261).

In order to return to the divine spiritual realm which the Sufi believes he has originated from, there must be a rigorous purification process, a conquering of the *nafs*, which are all the classically negative psychological qualities such as anger, greed and hatred (Tabrizi). “The Sufi attempts to regain his initial purity while fighting against bodily and worldly attachments. For this purpose, the Quran and the Prophet frequently put the believer on guard against the snares that his carnal soul (*nafs*) sets for him” (Michen 56).

A very dramatic example of a Sufi who achieved dominion over the *nafs* is Husayn ibn Mansur, known as Al-Hallaj ‘the wool-carder.’ Al-Hallaj declared “*Ana l’haqq!*” which means “I am Truth,” and was equivalent to saying “I am God.” This did not go over well with the religious leaders of his day and he was dismembered and killed, but as history tells it, maintained serenity and bravery all the way (Shah 424-5). This story illustrates a Sufi ideal, a mystic who had achieved divine union, who was steeped enough in the spiritual world that he was able to declare he was of that world, and even the most extreme physical torments of this world could not break his mystical state.

Speaking as someone who has practiced meditation for the past seven years, although not in a Sufi tradition, I can verify that going inwards to find peace and centeredness is a constant struggle, and I would not say that it is an exaggeration to call it war or a battle. The term *jihad* resonates with me as a very accurate term to portray the difficulties in overcoming distractions, appetites, desires, and inner vendettas. With my own commitment to a daily meditation practice I discovered the *nafs* that I never really knew about: intense hatred, anger, anxieties, and jealousies, to name a few aspects, just from sitting down every day and being still and giving these things a chance to show themselves. I also have found immense peace and silence that I never thought possible with this simple practice. So I understand, in a small way at least, the motivation for struggling to overcome the habitual and egotistical side of myself as a way to improve my life, my relationships and ideally society and the world.

The *Quran* and Mohammad in the *Hadith* urge Muslims to be vigilant against the *nafs*, which the Sufis have taken to heart with the dedication of their lives to spiritual practices such as silence, solitude, fasting and prayer in the effort to experience that

“dying to self” is really “living in God” (Nicholson 29-30). Here we see that violent or death-oriented imagery, when taken as a psychological and spiritual teaching means conquering the *nafs*, in order to ‘live in God,’ to exist in the blissful mystical state of the spiritual world. The teaching from Mohammad of the greater *jihad* against the *nafs* as distinct from the lesser *jihad* is known to Sufis and to Muslims but with different degrees of importance: “All Muslims agree in the need to subdue the *nafs*, but the emphasis given to the struggle with the *nafs* is distinctively Sufi” (Sedgwick 9).

When we look at Islam from the time and circumstances in which it was produced, we see the reality is that Islam did bring a widespread peace between warring factions that led to a rich and advanced civilization, much more than that of Europe at the time (Armstrong 11). People were able to benefit from the orderliness of Islam, and the *Shari‘ah* brought much peace and order to the areas that were conquered (Sedgwick 49-50). Importantly, as all this conquering was happening the Sufis were quietly and secretly performing their internal *jihad*, conquering themselves, and passing on spiritual wisdom in the form of poetry, dance, music, and philosophy. They read the *Quran* and saw all the references to the call for ‘struggle against the unbelievers’ as an invitation to have more faith inside themselves; less of the ‘unbelievers’ inside.

Sufism, as a philosophy rooted in practicality, in other words in spiritual practice is able to uphold certain moral essences given in the *Quran*, but lost in the complexity of orthodox Islam (Bakhtiar 23). The Sufis, as mystics, are after the direct experience of a divine revelation like Mohammed had (Nicholson 18). In his classic introduction to Sufism, The Mystics of Islam, Islamic scholar R.A. Nicholson writes, “Sufism is not a system composed of rules or sciences but a moral disposition

...according to the saying, ‘Form yourselves on the moral nature of God’” (17-18).

Nicholson continues, “Creeds and catechisms count for nothing in the Sufi’s estimation. Why should he concern himself with them when he possesses a doctrine derived immediately from God?” (16). The Sufi values his own direct experience of the spiritual state more than any doctrine.

The Sufi rejects the rules of religious dogma and yet seeks out rigorous spiritual discipline, and ultimately engages in an intense inner struggle for self-knowledge and self-development. R.A. Nicholson implies the rigors of a discipleship with the *sheikh* Junayd of Baghdad, “I need not dwell on the details of this training- the fasts and vigils, the vows of silence, the long days and nights of solitary meditation, all the weapons and tactics, in short, of that battle against one’s self which the Prophet declared to be more painful and meritorious than Holy War [sic]” (26). Here Nicholson shows some of the practices a dedicated Sufi might take on, for the purpose of self-knowledge and spiritual discipline, and that this, according to Mohammed, is a more valuable undertaking than physical battle (Ramadan 99). American-Iranian writer Laleh Bakhtiar explains this struggle further: “One’s urges are [naturally] stronger toward outwardness and thus all the methods of Sufism seek the centre. Without the ability to meditate or contemplate, it is impossible to control the urges of the soul” (23).

The Sufi ascetic practices may look and sound very unusual from the literalist perspective since they are coming from a motivation for more direct mystical experiences rather than to just be a righteous person. An excerpt from a poem by Rumi illustrates this approach of Sufi spirituality: “It’s the old rule that drunks have to argue and get into

fighters. The lover is just as bad. He falls into a hole. But down that hole he finds something shining, worth more than any amount of money or power” (Barks 8). The ‘lover’ here means the lover of God, and the Sufis will often refer to God as the Beloved. Being drunk is also a metaphor for inebriation on the spiritual bliss of God (Sedgwick 7). This type of spontaneity is not something necessarily understood or accepted as valid religious pursuit by the Islamic orthodoxy, but it represents a connection to the original message of Islam (Nicholson 15). A spontaneous approach toward spirituality in this case means a natural drive coming from within and not influenced externally, as opposed to implying a random or undisciplined approach. As we have seen the Sufi must be dedicated and disciplined to perform constant *jihad* against his egoic self, and from here he is prepared to experience the inebriation of the mystical state (Shah 46).

Sufi philosophy and teachings have been largely transmitted in forms such as poetry, dance, music and calligraphy more than in formal doctrines and dogma, which according to Idries Shah, is the only way the esoteric wisdom can be transmitted with integrity, short of an actual teacher-disciple relationship (xxiii-xxv). “Dance was practiced by the Sufis from early days; in the late ninth century when the first *semahanes* were founded” and here Sufis practiced the *sema*, the whirling dance that imitates the movements of the planets around the sun, and can bring its participants into mystical states of rapture (18-19 Friedlander). Dance was one way to bring the Sufi into a transcendental state, to experience the spiritual world, or the reality beyond his psychological prison, because it bypasses intellectual understanding.

Poetry was another means of transmission of wisdom for many Sufi luminaries even if they were accomplished scholars and theologians, including Rumi, Al-Ghazzali, and philosopher and Sufi cosmologist Ibn al-Arabi (Shah 47). Poetic imagery was used to deliver messages about spiritual states that could not be explained literally or scientifically. Even the *Zikr*, the repetition of the affirmation of God, can be a practiced at deeper levels: “There are some Sufis who only repeat “*Allah*” because they know man can die at any moment and they want only the name of God on their lips and in their hearts” (Friedlander 32). There is a story about this devotion to continual spiritual practice with the Sufi who worked as a spinner of wool. As he passed the wool from one hand to the other and stretched it out into thread he recited “*La Illaha la'Llah*” to himself every time he passed the wool from one hand to the other. He used his prayer to remain perfectly present to the task at hand. If he lost his awareness the wool would break, and the Sufi ideal is to approach life in every moment with this level of awareness of the present moment (Friedlander 25). This is not an easy state to achieve, and the Sufi must overcome distractions and impatience within himself. Again, the *jihad* exists whenever there is a process of inner striving for perfection (Ali “Rumi”).

Seyyed Hossein Nasr elucidates on the problems inherent in ignoring the inward struggle for self-improvement: “What is tragic today is that there is a number of Muslims who think that all the solutions are to be found simply by external actions. They don’t have to do anything within themselves. This is...where you try to improve the world without improving yourself” (Ali, “Rumi”). Within Sufism we see the real meaning of *jihad* as the voluntary dedication to wage battle on one’s own selfish attributes. This shows us the great disservice of a superficial understanding of *jihad* as an external holy

war. The Sufi sees it as his duty to himself, to society and to God to channel his force into self-improvement, the rewards being escape from the prison of his own compulsions and shortcomings, and the entrance into a spiritual understanding guided by tranquility and compassion. We can all benefit from seeing the dangers of blind belief in external authority, be it religious or otherwise, and know that we all have the ever-changing passions and desires inside as well as the immovable mountain of our original spiritual essence.

From Rumi: *“Learn from Ali¹ how to fight without your ego participating. God’s Lion did nothing that didn’t originate from his deep center...When a wind of personal reaction came, [he did] not go along with it. There are many winds full of anger, and lust and greed. They move the rubbish around, but the solid mountain of our true nature stays where it’s always been...”* (Barks 224).

¹ Son-in-law of Mohammad

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