
Reviewing the Debate for Sufis and Antinomianism

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explain the difference between the approach of Ulema and Sufis by juxtaposing it with Antinomianism of Christianity. This comparison with Christianity serves two purposes: first, it brings forth the fact that such scenarios are not peculiar to Islam. Second, it shows how, while labelling, the religious scholars of Islam assumed the role of religious authorities like the clergy in Christianity. The paper suggests that the basic difference between traditionalist Ulema and Sufis is of the manner in which they approach existence and reality; and that it would not have caused much trouble, had these Sufis were not critical of their contemporary political establishment.

Keywords: Antinomianism, Sufism, Shariah, Malamtiyya, Tariqah, Fiqh, Raqs, Sama.

Defining Terminology

Antinomianism is derived from the Greek word anti, meaning against and nomos, which means law.¹ Literally ‘antinomianism’ means against or instead of law, in this definition the usage of the word law refers to the ‘moral laws.’ Antinomianism is an essentially Christian theological term and is best understood in the very same context. Theologically antinomianism implies that there are no moral laws which God expects the Christians to obey. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines an antinomian as any individual ‘who holds that under the gospel dispensation of grace the moral law is of no use or obligation, faith alone is necessary to salvation.’² According to this doctrine the grace has freed all Christians from necessarily obeying the Mosaic Law. ‘The antinomians rejected the very notion of obedience as legalistic; to them the good life flowed from the inner working of the Holy Spirit.’³

It is seen by some as the opposite of the notion that obedience to a code of religious law earns salvation. While the charge of antinomianism can and often does apply to those who reject the keeping of any codified moral laws, antinomian theology does not necessarily imply the embrace of ethical permissiveness; rather it usually implies emphasis on the inner working of the Holy Spirit as the primary source of ethical guidance.⁴The antinomian debate revolves around certain questions. The basic question is whether moral law is a Christian's rule of life. Moreover, is the moral law the perfect rule of any Christian's conduct and what is the nature of continuity of Mosaic Law in today's world.⁵Law basically has three functions. Law must convict a sin or show a person their sin. Secondly, to maintain or regulate the life of a society. And finally the third function of law is to guide the life of all those whom God has saved by grace, that is the believers.⁶ The antinomians are primarily concerned with the third function of law, that is whether it reigns supreme in a believer's life and is the rule of life for the believer or not.

Although the concept of antinomianism has existed since the Classical Times, Martin Luther was the first person to actually coin the term during theological struggle with his former student, John Agricola.⁷ Agricola believed that salvation is a matter of faith, good works do not enhance it, and neither is it hindered by evil doings.⁸In the early days of the Reformation, Luther had taught that, after New Testament times, the moral law had only the negative value of preparing sinners for grace by making them aware of their sin. Agricola denied even this function of the law, believing that repentance should be induced only through the preaching of the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. This first major theological controversy in Protestant history lasted intermittently from 1537 to 1540.⁹ During this time Luther began to stress the role of the law in Christian life and to preach that it was needed to discipline Christians. He also wrote an important theological treatise to refute antinomianism once and for all: *Against the Antinomians* (1539). The whole matter was finally settled by the Lutheran Church with the Formula of Concord in 1577, which recognized a threefold use of the law: (1) to reveal sin, (2) to establish general decency in society at large, and (3) to provide a rule of life for those who have been regenerated through faith in Christ.¹⁰

Generally, antinomians are without law, however very few people actually hold this view true in the absolute sense. 'Limited antinomianism is more widely held. This is a form of ethical relativism that denies any objective, absolute or God-given laws.'¹¹ Antinomianism does not deny all laws; however, it does stand against all laws that might be imposed on others. Antinomianism denies the existence of any moral laws that have

divine sanction; it doesn't recognize any universal laws enjoined by God. Antinomianism holds that 'whatever laws there may be are relative to individuals who choose to live by them.'¹² While antinomians do not deny the reality that individuals can choose to live by some laws, they refuse to accept all those laws are binding on humanity at large. Another interesting feature of antinomianism is that it does not believe any moral laws to be timeless; all moral laws that may exist are temporal and not eternal. 'Morals are simple mores, and they change from place to place as well as from time to time.'¹³ Antinomianism does not mean to be against laws, rather to simply be without law. Antinomians do recognize that the society cannot exist without certain laws and accept positive social law, but they think that there are no objective moral laws.¹⁴ Antinomianism as a religious doctrine was aborted after a short period of revival. However, its more 'secular' counterpart still exists.

By upholding all such beliefs antinomianism places a lot of responsibility on the individual and argues that ethics is the ultimate matter of personal responsibility. Moreover, when in a group an individual avoids absolving their personal duty, neither can they blame the society for their own moral actions. Therefore, antinomianism presents a check on a person's morality by making him all the more conscious of and responsible for his personal conduct and actions. Another very useful feature of antinomianism is that it 'makes a contribution to ethics by stressing the relative dimension. Finite humanity does not have an infinite understanding of the infinite.'¹⁵ The basic ethical principles may be absolute but the human perspective of these is nowhere close to absolute verdict on them; we have a changing understanding of God's unchanging moral laws. 'The varied applications of positive antinomianism affirm the ethics transcend obedience to a code of law.'¹⁶

However, with all its positive impact antinomianism is severely criticized by theologians, especially. The primary premise of antinomianism – a denial of all moral values, is not possible to achieve. Relativism is not possible without assuming some absolutes. Moreover, while subjectivity may exist in case of most ethics and morals and may even be present in application of morals it has no part to play in the principle. For example, while the expansion of justice may vary from individual to individual across societies but itself justice is not changing. Since antinomianism does not believe in any external moral binding authority each individual is free to do as they see fit or what they perceive is right. Antinomianism leaves no room for any real responsibility for any individual, under the pretext of making each person responsible for their own selves. 'This means that there is no real community of value that

transcends the individual, no meaningful milieu for interpersonal relations. Each individual lives in a hermetically sealed moral vacuum jar perched on their own isolated shelf.¹⁷

Implications of antinomianism in Islam.

Antinomianism, with all its positivity and negativity is primarily seen as a Christian term, more in line with the theological beliefs and inclinations of the West. However, when terms are applied cross culturally it is important to develop an understanding of their implications on societies with varied realities and views of life. Antinomianism is a term that can be applied to the realm of Islam as easily and readily as it is applied to Christianity. However, it is very important to view antinomianism within the context of Islam, which is not merely a religion but an entire code of conduct for its believers and dictates, regulates and defines every aspect of its believer's life.

“Antinomianism is specifically religious behavior which is contrary to the law. It is related to the philosophical and religious antinomy or dualism because it makes an identity between good and evil and thus between what is permitted and what is forbidden... Antinomian sects exist in all religious climates; sometimes the antinomianism expresses itself only as a tendency which stops short of actually transgressing religious prohibitions; at other times it consists of deliberately violating religious prescriptions...”¹⁸

In Islam law does not only apply to religion, solely, rather dictates all areas of life from politics to sexuality. These general laws are called shari'ah. There are four primary sources of knowledge that formulate and constitute the shari'ah law of Islam. These are the Quran, Islam's central religious text, the sunnah, the practices of the Prophet [s.a.w] of Islam and his words, deeds and action, ijma, a consensus of scholars of Islam on various points of practice and qiyas, an analogical form of thinking conducted by the 'ulamā' upon specific laws that have arisen through appeal to the first three sources. All those actions, beliefs and behavior that violate these four sources of shari'ah can be considered antimony in Islam.

“Antinomianism could be said to be the Muslim counterpart of Western anarchism. Both are convictions to the effect that humans can live without authority, that they once did so, and that they will again, when they have perfected their nature (in this world or the next). Both typically see the individual as shackled and wish to liberate him/her. But anarchists are out to remove the law of the state, whereas antinomians wish to eliminate the law on which religious community is based.”¹⁹

The Prophet (s.a.w) said, “Submission is public and faith is in the heart.” Submission, which is Islam and faith that is iman go hand in hand with each other. The manifestation of one is the proof of the existence of

the other and none can appear in isolation or absence of each other. In this sense submission and faith are not only interconnected and complementary but also inclusive of each other. One arises from the other and neither can exist alone in an individual. During the time of the Prophet (s.a.w) and his companions one could easily observe such a relation between submission and faith; there was no dichotomy between the two. In his being the Prophet (s.a.w) represented the spiritual head of the Muslim ummah, all matters relating to faith and submission were referred to him and he was responsible for catering to the spiritual and mystical development of his people. With his demise this authority started to divide and eventually not only various individuals but also institutions adopted this role of guiding the spiritual development of the ummah.

Sufis represent one such group that oversaw the spiritual growth of the Muslim community. However, each of one of the Sufis had their own idea of how best to cater to the mystical needs of the people. The various reasons that led to the development of Sufism also explain, partially, the split between faith and submission, the inner and outward dimensions of faith. The roots of Sufism can be traced back to the times of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w). In fact, Sufis mention the Quran, hadith and the person of the Prophet (s.a.w) as the sources of Sufi doctrines. However, Sufis did not appear as an organized group until the expansion of the Muslim Empire during the Umayyad Caliphate.²⁰ The Umayyad Caliphs wanted to amass wealth, expand their empire and maintain a lavish lifestyle. The organized Sufis appeared as a reaction and protest against this worldliness of the Umayyad Caliphs. However, there were other very pertinent reasons for the rise of Sufi doctrine. Shi'ism which was also in its formative phase during the same time maintained that only the Imam had the authority to interpret the divine message. Similarly, the establishment of the Sunni schools of jurisprudence codified the outward manifestation of faith and submission leading to overemphasis on formalism. Moreover, there was an application of philosophy, chiefly inspired by the Greek philosophical works, on the issues of interpretation of Quran and other religious texts that led to the formation of variant groups of rational Islamic philosophy.²¹ All of these reasons combined in the institutionalization of Sufism over the stretch of a few centuries.

According to Abu'l Hasan Nuri 'Sufism is the renunciation of all selfish pleasures.'²² About Sufis Imam Ghazali writes that the 'gist of their knowledge is to mortify the self and acquire freedom from baser passions and evil attributes so that the heart may get rid of the thought of anything save God and to embellish it with Divine remembrance.'²³ In Mansur al-Hallaj's words a Sufi is 'singular in his being, he neither accept anybody

nor does anybody accept him. He feels the immediate Presence of God alone within and senses the Presence of God without and his mental faculty gets rid of the thought of anything save God and is totally captivated by God.²⁴ Sufi doctrine, thus, is not the rigid following of jurisprudence, but still, necessarily a path to achieve closeness to the being of God. Moreover, it is a lifestyle that is free from the bindings of physical and material pleasures spent in search of spiritual and hence more substantial, aspects of life. From these definitions it becomes clear that Sufism was in stark contrast to all the various reasons cited as the causal explanation for its development. However, this very choice of a lifestyle of the Sufis has been the cause of their undoing as well. Sufis, throughout history, have been criticized by various quarters, and sometimes from within their own circles, as being far too contrary to the basic Islamic teachings. Since Sufism was against strict codification of Islamic law and encouraged the spiritual development of the self it has been branded as antinomian, more often than not.

Antinomianism in the Sufi ranks.

Let us examine some of the various doctrines that have earned Sufism the title of antinomianism. The basic purpose that a Sufi makes his life goal is to achieve union with God. Through the process of faith and submission, all Sufis wish to not only find the being of the God, their beloved, but also realize the truth and nature of His existence. Sufi believes that the reality of the nature of God and human being is one and the same. They believe that the only reality that exists is nothing save Him, so all what exists is a manifestation of Him. God created the worlds to make Himself known, thus the universe is the mirror of God and human heart is mirror of the universe. He who wishes to know God, must look into his own heart.²⁵ Sufis hold that the attainment of knowledge brings one closer to God. This knowledge cannot be attained by simply following one's mental faculties only. The human mind can grasp the knowledge that is of lower levels and his place would be within those levels only. The soul which knows the Absolute Reality will merge into the Primal Spirit. Whereas religious accounts propound that the soul after separation from body, returns to a separate place.²⁶ This, then, presents the basic inference of Sufis with theologians on the nature of God and human beings.

As a result, Sufis are more concerned with the end and not the means used to achieve that end. While theologians prefer to live a life in accordance with the codified rules of conduct, Sufis have a different perception of how oneness with God can be achieved, since that is their ultimate goal. This is why Sufis have been widely condemned and Sufism frowned down upon, throughout the centuries. Theologians, the traditional

ulema, reject the Sufi practices and while some may believe in the ultimate goal as propounded by Sufi doctrine, have an objection with the methods adopted. Similarly, while Sufism is ready to include all variant doctrines to achieve nearness to God, theologians are more selective in this matter.

Further implication of this idea was that the creator and the creation have the same nature. This idea is best explained by Abd al Karim Jili by using the analogy of water and ice for referring to creator and creation respectively.²⁷ This idea proved to be very thought provoking. Since everything is the manifestation of the Creator, Satan should be no exception to it. This idea was overtly articulated by Ayn al-Qudat Hamdani. He defines God's attributes as the light of Muhammad (s.a.w) and Satan.²⁸ The underlying theme is that both of these are the part and parcel of God's will and plan of self-manifestation. This idea, that Iblis as an angel of Divine Will, is chamberlain to God is widely held by Sufis.²⁹

These delicate and intricate philosophical assumptions were not acceptable to traditionalist ulema, whose main concern was observance of external beliefs and rituals according to now codified rules of Shari'ah. It was highly objectionable to equate Iblis, Rajim – the condemned one, to Muhammad (s.a.w), the praised one, in the divine plan. Difference over the question of the nature of human beings, led to the difference in the ultimate goal of human beings. According to shari'ah the ultimate goal of a Muslim is Paradise, whereas for the Sufis the ultimate goal is union with God. Shari'ah does provide the way to acquire the goal of paradise, but what about the goal of union with God? Sufism claims to provide the answer to the question of union with God. As mentioned above it is all about knowledge; the higher an individual's knowledge of the Reality, the greater his chances of reunion with God. The basic purpose of man is to learn.³⁰ Ibn Al-Arabi describes three functions of knowledge and states, that only the third knowledge, the knowledge of Reality, is capable of connection the people with Reality. And all those who attain this third type of knowledge are the real Sufis.³¹ Sufis believe that the way to the attainment of union with God is 'beyond performing ceremonial acts of piety.'³² Sufis are less concerned about religions, because they believe that man's refinement is the goal and the inner and basic teachings of all religions aim at this.³³ As Hallaj said,

"I have pondered as how to give religious faiths an experimental definition. And I formulate it as a single principle with many branches. Do not command therefore your companion in discussion adopt this or that confessional denomination."³⁴

Rumi has also explained the same thing with the example of four persons who know four different languages, who start to fight with each

other to buy grapes. All of them wanted the same thing but a difference of name caused the tension. Sufis, on the other hand, are not concerned with the name rather with the thing itself.³⁵ Sufi stance is that union with God can be achieved irrespective of following a particular religion. This stance of the Sufis could not be accepted by the ulema who believed that God was their Quranic totem exclusive to them, alone.³⁶ Sufis made the concept of faith much more flexible and all-inclusive, as opposed to the exclusive approach of the ulema, believing that it would be kufr to cover up and confine the limitless bounties of God to a small portion of mankind.³⁷

Sufis believe that piety should be a personal matter; moreover, they thought that being held in high esteem in the world would lead to worldly attachment. Therefore, some of them, the Malamatis, concealed their knowledge and made sure that their faults were known to the world so as to earn the contempt of the people. Malamatis sought to bring blame on themselves by their apparently irreligious behavior and disrespect for piety.³⁸ They believed that in this way they will remain mindful of their own imperfections while their love would be preserved for God alone. According to Malamati Sufis a person can get much attached to his own personal piety, which proves to be a barrier on his way to self-realization. Not only is such a person attached to the reactions and perceptions of the people but involuntarily also continuously witnesses his own pious hypocrisy. Hence, by renouncing all outward shows of piety Malamati Sufis detach themselves from this hypocrisy. According to Ibn Al-Arabi Malamatiyya are the 'most perfect of gnostics' those who 'know and are not known.'³⁹ In this way all 'sins' are considered to be a merely outward shell of the Malamatiyya and hence he can concentrate on his ultimate goal. Whereas a pious, yet ignorant man sins with the very kernel of his being and can never achieve self-realization, and hence union with God.

On the path of achieving their personal goal, Sufis not only adopt outwardly 'sinful' behavior but also many other practices that may fall under the jurisdiction of 'lawful' and allowed in Islam but are widely frowned down upon and discouraged. Not only this, but Sufis believe that their tradition is far older than the religious systems one sees around today.⁴⁰ For its followers, Sufism is the secret tradition that is the underlying theme of all religions and philosophy. It is hard to explain in psychological or moral terms and can only be understood at an individual level. The Sufis believe that with the help of a conscious evolution, and with the effort of one's will an individual can develop new faculties, which lead to ultimate knowledge of Reality and realization of mankind's real goal. The core of Sufism is to leave the worries of the ordinary life and find nearness to God, truth and knowledge. In order to bridge this gap between

man and God, Sufis adopt many practices; one can adopt the more extreme methods of the Malamatiyya or various other techniques based on rhythm, repetition and endurance. This is the manifest use of chant, dhikr, music, sama and dance, raqs.

Through this dancing, music and songs a Sufi or a Sufi gathering achieves the state of ecstasy that is necessary to get nearer to God. Sama and raqs are two practices that help a Sufi, or a gathering, getting into the state of trance. High on the 'intoxication' of Divine Love the Sufis can tap into the knowledge of the Reality. This intoxication is a consequence of intense ascetic deprivations, meditation and rituals. 'These unusual states were sought after because they were seen as signposts or way stations on the path of the mystic's goal of divine unitary experience.'⁴¹ One of the more highly developed techniques to bring about this intoxicated state is sama. The aural stimulation, that is chanting, listening to music, poetry or the recitation of Quran, is one of the techniques to induce altered state. It can be defined thus,

"Sama, which literally means 'audition', denotes in the Sufi tradition, spiritual listening, and more particularly listening to music with the aim of reaching a state of grace or ecstasy, or more simply with the aim of meditating, of plunging into oneself, or as the Sufis say, to 'nourish the soul'. It thus operates in a mystical concert, in a more or less ritualised form."⁴²

Such a practice leads to a heightening of spiritual awareness. 'The physical and psychological impact of chanting and recitation, especially with the accompaniment of music, was powerfully effective, far beyond the semantic force of the words being heard.'⁴³ However sama has been frowned down upon by the more traditionalists of ulema, considering it as an unacceptable innovation in the practice of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w). But the Sufis believe that sama is an extension of dhikr and an extreme form of constant remembrance of God. Another such practice is that of raqs, which adds to the experience of altered state.

"Raqs properly speaking, is a stylized form of dance in which the Sufi turns more or less on the spot by alternately raising his feet, while his right hand may point upward. But raqs can also include walking, or any rhythmic movement along with gesticulation and vocalization. In the case of extreme self-abandonment jumps, falls, rolling and shouting may also occur."⁴⁴

Raqs is a state that is highly condemned by the traditionalist ulema, mostly because of its self-abandonment aspect. Moreover, raqs combined with an arrangement of music in a proper social gathering is seen as being contrary to the practices as adopted by the fiqh. The ulema are quick to

brand all such practices of Sufism as being against the spirit of Islam and its integrity.

It is clear, from the above account, that Sufism is a divergent pattern of thought and life. Falling in the preview of Islam its proponents have still maintain obvious practices that have come in clash with the more generally acceptable ways of 'religious' people. Moreover, their rituals are merely an expression of the ideas held dear by Sufis. The real clash lies not with a difference of practice and adoption of ritual, rather in a divergence in thought and aspiration of an end; the ulema with the view of maintaining hegemony over religion and its explanation have are fiercely opposed to all variant ideologies.

The Final Analysis.

It is a point of great importance that both shari'ah and tariq'ah are based on revealed text, that is Quran and on hadith and sunnah; then why is there such marked difference in the approach of these two dimensions of the same faith. One may approach this question in two ways. The first method can be called the dogmatic-legalistic approach. Once this approach is applied to the issue the root causes of the gulf between shari'ah and tariq'ah become obvious. In this regard the problem is ontological, as well as epistemological in its nature. Sufis have a different outlook to the issue of existence and reality, as elaborated above, than the ulema. And this problem is because of a difference in the interpretation of Quran and hadith. Ulema are concerned only with the exoteric interpretations of these sources, whereas Sufis' understanding of these holy texts is different.⁴⁵ This is why shari'ah focuses more on Islamic laws while Sufism's aim is inner spiritual development of human beings. But the ulema, being unconcerned and unaware of these inner dimensions, were quick to point out these Sufis and their rituals as unislamic.

Although that is one of the reasons, but not the entire truth. To have a better understanding of the nature of conflict, one needs to bear in mind the socio-political conditions under which these charges of heresy and antinomianism were leveled against the Sufis. As mentioned above Sufism as an institution emerged as protest against the religious and political authorities. Ulema were inducted by the Abbasid Caliphs and other subsequent rulers, as in charge of the administrative and juridical affairs. Once in power the ulema, not only supported the state, but also exploited their power to curb the influence of the Sufis, both in dogmatic and political spheres.⁴⁶

One can observe that the charges leveled against Sufis and their consequent execution were mostly politically motivated and not a result of any dogmatic conflict. As far as faith is concerned, there was no difference

between the belief of Junaid and Hallaj or Ghazali and Hamdani. The explicit expression of their belief as a cause of their execution can be rejected on grounds that other Sufis like Rumi, Ghazali, Attar, etc. also expressed their view in poetry or prose. It was not difficult for ulema, who themselves were well-versed especially in Kalam to understand and interpret these texts. It was far easier to do when they were part of the state power. In the light of this background, it is easy to comprehend the reason as to why Sufis and their rituals have been termed antinomian in their nature.

So, the question remains, is Sufism antinomian? The answer is no. Islam grants the right of difference of opinion. It is evident through the difference of Shi'i Islam and Sunni Islam; difference with Madahib and difference between Madahib over different issues. If Sufism based on the same sources of legitimacy on which these schools rely, takes the liberty of difference of opinion then what now, is the logic in calling Sufism antinomian?

Notes

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- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
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