

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH
“1 DECEMBRIE 1918” UNIVERSITY OF ALBA IULIA
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Sufism and Christian Mysticism
A Comparative Theology

SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

PhD Supervisor:

Rev. Univ. Prof. Dr. Emil Ioan Jurcan

PhD Candidate:

Rev. Dorin Ursu

Alba Iulia

2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

• Keywords and specific terms of Islamic mysticism.....	5
• Research topic and justification for its choice.....	10
• Objectives, methodology, scope, and research difficulties	11
• State of research on the topic.....	13

Chapter 1. PRELIMINARIES

1.1. Etymology / terminological distinctions.....	23
1.2. Definitions.....	28
1.3. Particular features.....	38
1.3.1. The relationship between science and knowledge (gnosis)	45

Chapter 2. HISTORICAL AND DOCTRINAL LANDMARKS OF ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

2.1. The beginnings of Sufism / proto-Sufism.....	58
2.1.1. Muhammad.....	59
2.1.2. Ali and “the people of the portico in Medina”	60
2.1.3. Hasan al-Basri and other early mystics	62
2.1.4. Fudail ibn ‘Idad	65
2.1.5. Rabi‘a al-Basri	67
2.1.6. Ja‘far as-Sadiq	70
2.2. Mystical teachers of the 9th century	
2.2.1. Dhu’n-Nun	72
2.2.2. Abu Bayezid Bistami (d. 874/875)	76
2.2.3. Yahya ibn Mu‘adh ar-Razi	82
2.2.4. Qasim al-Junaid	87
2.2.5. Abu’l-Husayn an-Nuri	90
2.2.6. Sumnun al-Muhibb	93
2.2.7. al-Hallaj – the martyr of mystical love (857–922)	100

Chapter 3. THE PERIOD OF SUFI DOCTRINAL CRYSTALLIZATION

3.1. Bakr ash-Shibli (d. 945)	104
3.2. Ruzbihan Baqli	107
3.3. Abu Nasr al-Sarraj	108
3.4. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali	110
3.5. Abu Sa'id ibn Abi'l-Khayr	119
3.6. al-Hujwiri	123

Chapter 4. THEOSOPHICAL SUFISM

4.1. Suhrawardi Maqtul – the master of illumination	127
4.2. Ibn 'Arabi – <i>magister magnus</i>	130
4.3. Ibn al-Farid – the mystical poet	143
4.4. The evolution of Ibn 'Arabi's mysticism (or on his followers)	55

Chapter 5. ISLAMIC MYSTICAL THOUGHT, EXPERIENCE, AND POETRY

5.1. Sana'i and Attar	152
5.2. Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi	158

Chapter 6. SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS AND PARALLELS BETWEEN SUFISM AND CHRISTIANITY: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

6.1. The Virgin Mary – comparative reflection (Qur'anic and Biblical), Sufi interpretation	178
6.2. The status of Sufi women	190
6.3. Jesus, the son of Mary, in the Islamic context, especially in the thought of Ibn 'Arabi	192
6.4. Comparison between <i>dhikr</i> and the Prayer of the Heart	197
6.5. The path and the abode of virtues (<i>tariqa</i>) and the Ladder of Divine Ascent	205
6.6. Saints in Islam and in Sufi mysticism	216
6.7. Jihad – a controversial aspect of Islamic doctrine and peace from a biblical perspective...	222
6.8. Sufism and Christianity: intersections and mutual influences	231
6.9. Interreligious dialogue – specific features, premises, and perspectives	240
6.10. Actualization.....	249
6.11. Relations between Sufis and other Muslims	255

FINAL CONCLUSIONS	259
BIBLIOGRAPHY	263

Keywords: *Sufism, dervishes, mysticism, Muhammad, Islam, Qur'an, prophet, asceticism, theosophy, Rumi, dhikr, jihad, Sharia, umma, tariqa, Sufi saints, interreligious dialogue.*

This doctoral research focuses on the distinctive characteristics of Islamic mysticism, with a particular emphasis on Sufism, without being confined to a specific historical period. While seeking to rediscover the mystical-ascetic experience of the first Sufis and to identify their sources of inspiration, the study also considers the broader historical, geographical, and cultural contexts that have shaped this spiritual movement. Sufism is a vast and complex phenomenon, transcending temporal and spatial boundaries. Its origins are to be found in ancient Persia and in Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates. From this environment emerged a powerful mystical current, initially influenced by Christian ascetics and preachers, who perceived the spiritual approach to God as an unceasing ascent sustained by faith and love.

Given the complexity of the topic, the methodology adopted is extensive and interdisciplinary. Religious elements related to Islam and Sufism appear dispersed throughout various studies and articles, and in most cases Sufism is addressed only tangentially in relation to broader themes such as Islam, Eastern religions, or the concept of holy war (*jihad*). Most specialized studies belong to Catholic and Protestant theologians, as well as non-theologians. This interdisciplinarity places the research at the intersection of the history and philosophy of religions, dogmatic theology, and Oriental studies.

Sufism, described succinctly by Professor Annemarie Schimmel as “the mystical dimension of Islam,” shapes not only the inner spiritual life of its adherents but also their social existence. No longer confined to the Middle and Near East, it now influences people worldwide. Contemporary works on Sufism draw inspiration from classical sources, often using translations produced over the past century. Orientalists have continued to translate the works of Sufi masters, while historians have closely examined the development of Sufism in modern contexts. The creation of new chairs of Islamic Studies at major Western universities has opened fresh perspectives for the academic study of Sufism.

In the contemporary geopolitical climate, marked by conflicts such as Afghanistan, the ongoing Israel–Palestine dispute, the Gulf and Syrian wars, and a series of terrorist attacks in the West, interest in Sufism has grown. This is largely because it represents the pacifist and mystical-ascetic dimension of Islam, counterbalancing its fundamentalist and often violent expressions.

Historically, in ancient Persia (modern-day Iran), Sufis were called *dervishes*, a term later adopted into Turkish and spread across all Turkic peoples in Asia, as well as throughout the territories once under the Ottoman Empire (the Near East and the Balkans). In the Arab world, Sufis were referred to both as *dervishes* and *fakirs*. Initially, *fakir/faqir* denoted ascetics who voluntarily embraced poverty, renouncing worldly pleasures. Such a person was considered “poor in material things, yet rich in heart.” In the Near East and Arabian Peninsula, Sufis were also known as *muridyya* (“disciples” or “apprentices”), reflecting the idea that their entire life was a process of learning, formation, and spiritual perfection.

Defining the Sufi — the follower and preacher of this mystical movement — is challenging, for the focus lies more on the path itself and its spiritual aims. While modern Sufism seeks to attract both Muslim and non-Muslim adherents, adapting to Western contexts, in the eighteenth century it became known in Europe through the distinctive poetry, music, and whirling dances of the dervishes.

Today, some argue that “Sufism” is an inadequate translation of the original Arabic and Persian terms, as it does not designate an ideology (something theoretical and external), but rather an inner transformation — a spiritual path that is practical and experiential. In brief, Sufism may be defined as a path of inner and spiritual metamorphosis rather than as a formal religious identity. Authentic Sufism does not ideologize or indoctrinate; it offers a way toward spiritual perfection grounded in deep mystical experience.

The Sufi premise holds that one cannot attain knowledge without first submitting to it, and that the knowledge of God requires a personal experience of the mysteries of the universe. As a microcosm, the human being opens himself to knowledge in order to receive revelation; thus, the Sufi mystic stands between the desire to seek and the will to attain. By knowing himself as he truly is, he comes to know God — and he knows himself through God, who is closer than anything else to human understanding.

In Sufi schools, both men and women are taught to explore the mysteries of the Qur’an. Unlike mainstream Islam, Sufism recognizes both male and female teachers. Women in Sufism are even permitted to preach, disseminate, and interpret Qur’anic teachings. —

For this reason, Sufi mosques are often referred to as “women’s mosques.” Generally, in conventional mosques, women are allowed access only to the back of the worship space, whereas in Sufi communities, women may participate directly in prayer or even lead it. In some Sufi

mosques, children are allowed to walk around and play, and in the courtyards of these sacred places or around the tombs of Sufi saints, families may gather to discuss everyday matters or even share meals. Among the distinctive features of women's religious life in Sufism is their right (and duty) to learn and even to teach, to preach within ascetic communities and in schools composed of Muslim mystical women. Chronicles highlight the fact that over time, especially in the 12th century, numerous pious and learned female ascetics emerged as leaders (sheikahs) of Sufi monastic communities. The number and influence of these centers of female asceticism, as well as their spiritual prestige, steadily increased, eventually leading to the establishment of female Sufi communities in cities and villages, where prayer, study, singing, and pilgrimages to the tombs of Sufi saints were cultivated.

Given the way Islamic mystics have defined and understood Sufism, it is not surprising that some scholars consider Adam to have been the first Sufi. Some Islamic mystics state that Adam received from the Lord the lamp of reason, which he placed in his heart. Adam came into the world as an enlightened mystic, and in his primordial solitude, he contemplated the greatness of the Lord. Muslim mysticism emphasizes that after the Fall, Adam withdrew into the wilderness of India, where for three centuries he repented bitterly until the Lord (Allah) forgave him, thus becoming a true Sufi. As a movement of mystical revival, Sufism promotes a direct, spiritual knowledge/gnosis based on the heart rather than on reasoning, logical deductions, or philosophical concepts, whereas conventional Islam advocates rational knowledge and the juridical exposition and understanding of the faith.

From the time of Muhammad to the present day, Sufi works have been written predominantly in Persian and Turkish. Initially, their influence was limited to a narrow area, but through various translations or the fact that some Sufis wrote in other languages (e.g., Rumi), their sphere of influence expanded exponentially. However, Arab Muslims remained reticent toward Sufis and their ideas, rarely adopting and deepening their thought, often failing to understand their poems, music, or ritual dance. As professors Eliade and Isopescu have often emphasized, the Qur'an (like Islam itself) has a strongly syncretic character. The Qur'an was inspired not only by biblical texts (Old and New Testament) but also by non-biblical sources and post-biblical apocryphal literature. Thus, we find many references in Sufism to passages from Orthodox Christian teaching, such as Qur'anic mentions of the childhood and life of Mary, or Jesus being called the son of Mary—though in Sufism, emphasis is placed more on Mary's piety and humility,

and consequently her obedience, than on her role in preparing the world for the coming of the great Prophet Muhammad. Sufis also emphasize the circumstances of Jesus' birth (in the wilderness, in silence and purity, far from the tumultuous cities dominated by sin and worldly concerns) to show that Mary and Jesus valued the asceticism and austerity of the desert more than the pleasures and restlessness of city life.

Another parallel can be found between the hesychastic mystical path and the way of Muslim ascetics (tariqa), as well as between the "prayer of the heart" in Orthodox mysticism and dhikr (the Sufi contemplative prayer), which, according to Muslim teachers and practitioners, can be recited with the mouth/lips or with the heart, but is fruitful and uplifting only when it springs from the heart. Lip prayer may be a beginning on the path toward God, but if it remains merely verbal, it is insufficient and sterile. It is also worth noting that in Sufi writings and doctrine, the term "spiritual ascent" or "ladder" (suluk) appears, meaning a ladder of perfection, similar to the steps of spiritual progress found in the work of Saint John Climacus, representing the Sufi mystic's ascent through various stages and states.

Sufism also preserves the idea of sainthood. Saints are almost always associated with asceticism, with intense spiritual life in the solitude of the desert or the mountains, far from the noise and vanity of the cities. The saint is one who renounces the world (wealth, fame, honors) and is capable of abandoning even a palace to dwell in a cave or hut. Since the ideal model of Sufis and all Muslims has been and remains the Prophet Muhammad, Sufi mystics value the intensity of prayer, ascetic effort, fasting, and visions as signs and proofs of holiness. From the Sufi perspective, holiness involves piety, fasting, meditation, a withdrawn and ascetic life, but also inspiration, contemplation, vocation, revelation, illumination, and ultimately union with Allah. In the Sufi environment, the concept of pilgrimage has always held great significance, as human life itself is conceived as a journey. Regarding jihad (holy war), it should be noted that both traditional Islam and especially Sufism affirm that "Peace is better!"

The relationship between Sufism and Christianity naturally fits into the broader and more complex relationship between Islam and the Church. In Sufi legends, numerous Christian hermits appear who strove in the desert and in isolated places, were guided by heavenly voices, and inspired the admiration of all—even if they did not believe in Muhammad. Jesus, who in the Qur'an appears as a great prophet, living a virtuous life before the time of Muhammad, impressed Sufis especially because He was a perfect ascetic, full of sacrificial love. Jesus is admired by Sufis

because, throughout His earthly life, He was a pilgrim, a tireless traveler who did not know where He would rest, where He would spend the night, or what He would eat along the way. For Sufis, Jesus remains the model of the tireless seeker of truth and a complete example of humility, peace-loving spirit, good deeds, and charity. Thus, in the Islamic world, there are many accounts in which Jesus is described as a perfect Sufi, a moral model, and an example of gentleness, inner balance, and forgiveness.

Through these common elements, Sufism resembles Christianity to some extent, yet the similarities are relative and, in many cases, superficial—connected more to ritual and morality (e.g., prayer, virtues) or to social life than to doctrinal principles. However, we also note fundamental differences in Christology, the doctrine of the Incarnation, and in views concerning the divinity and Cross of Christ or the Theotokos of the Mother of God. Therefore, the most significant parallels that can be drawn between Christian and Islamic mysticism are related to the spiritualization of the believer's life and the confirmation and demonstration of his strong faith through deep spiritual experience and good works.

Whether it appears and develops within Christianity or within Islam, mysticism fascinates us all equally. Undoubtedly, we can draw parallels, but we can also mark lines of separation. Between Sufism and Christianity, we identify similarities as well as clear distinctions. We can speak of convergences, but also of significant divergences. In both Christianity and Islam, we find numerous forms of mystical life—mysterious for our times, for an era of evident and intense informational and technological progress, but unfortunately, highly secularized.