Sufism created community. In every age and era since the time of Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be peace, to whom all Sufis look as inspiration, role model and guide, the Sufis have sought to establish the infrastructure that, in modern parlance, would be termed privatized social welfare. It was through institutions designed not only to serve the destitute, the homeless and the ill, but whose overall purpose was to redirect the society as a whole to the goal of uplifting the people spiritually, psychologically, morally and physically, that the Sufis were able to have an immense impact on the societies in which they functioned.

The primary focus of the Sufi tradition was to establish societal order based on a hierarchical pattern of organization. Such a hierarchy governed Central Asia, South Asia, North Africa and most other areas of the Islamic world by means of Sufi societal infrastructure and institutions.

**The Sufi hierarchy**

The primary mechanism by which Sufism exerted maximal societal impact was a sophisticated system of charities and trusts (awqāf). This pyramidal system was governed by a leader who directed these institutions to work to help those in most need first, followed by those at the next level of priority and so on, addressing the needs of all those in need, without leaving anyone outside the gambit of its programs. This paradigm was not dissimilar to contemporary modern day structured government-operated social programs (like public schools, hospitals, etc.) or
civic society institutions. Leaders were chosen not by virtue of intelligence or political savvy, but solely by virtue of piety and wisdom, attained through disciplined participation in the Sufi school system.

The basic functional units of this infrastructure were the khāniqah (also known as zāwīya and dergah), buildings similar to modern hostels, but with far greater functionality and the maljā hospitals where all comers were treated without charge.

Khaniqahs were places where people, both locals and travelers, could stay, eat, sleep and meet with one another. In addition to feeding and entertaining people, the institutions introduced them to Sufi customs.

Perhaps the closest parallel in westerns society to the Sufi system of societal welfare and the institutions it built would be found among the Catholic orders – particularly the Benedictine and Franciscan – many of which encountered Sufis during the Crusades and emulated them after they returned from Europe.

Unfortunately, the Wahhabis have destroyed this system of community-building. They closed
the khāniqahs in order to eliminate the fundamental underlying principles of tolerance and openness upon which they were founded. Wahhabis sought to create a form of individualism that encouraged Muslims to reinterpret their religion according to their own whims, thereby undermining the traditional Sufi hierarchy. The result was a sort of individualistic anarchy that found differences in the most trivial aspects of religion, culture or lifestyle to be wholly unacceptable and grounds for often fierce and bitter clashes. Whenever the hierarchy established by Sufism was dismantled, disorder, confusion and anarchy took its place with inevitable result being division, destructive enmity and a downward spiral into violence.

The Sufi approach to advancement

Sufism was based on the fundamental importance of the relationship between student and teacher. In Sufism, the top of the pyramid is only reached by means of education and experience. Like any important job, it requires an intensive period of internship (much as is required to become a public servant, a doctor or a lawyer). This approach to training future leaders builds integrity and relies on the test of time to confirm true leaders, those who possess insight, wisdom and divine guidance. Sufi teachings focused on the importance of self-sacrifice and the need for those well-endowed to share from what God had graced them with – whether in material wealth, learning or piety. Sufism eliminated the anarchy of self-centeredness and cooled the rebellion of desire and egoism, enabling the accomplished Sufi to lead others. The result of this disciplined practical training was that esteemed Sufi figures were, historically, well-accomplished in the sciences of Islamic spirituality.

Principles of treating the self

Islamic spirituality calls for zuhd (asceticism), warā (sincerity) and riļā (acceptance of the divine decree of one’s allotted share). The Sufi belief is that reason alone is not sufficient to make decisions; they believe it is also essential to understand the underlying reality of each issue one faces. To understand such realities, one must undergo physical and spiritual training exercises, much as a wrestler must do weight-training and windsprints, in order to prevent the anarchy and corrupt desire of the self from controlling one in the state of anger, lust or fear. Once this training is successfully accomplished, passions at the most base level will no longer control one – rather, one will control them. When this has been accomplished, decisions will no longer be based on egoism, anger or selfishness, but will be based on reason, intellect and wisdom, informed by spiritual inspiration. To the Sufis, the whole world is in their hands, and at the same time, their hearts are in the hand of their Creator, for they observe the maxim of the Prophet’s Companion, Ali who said:
Work for this life as if you were going to live forever, but work for the afterlife as if you were going to die today.

The utmost level of submission for the Sufi – and the ultimate attainment – is to “die before you die,” meaning that one’s heart is no longer attached to the material world, but is directed to the Divine Presence, seeking God’s good pleasure, always striving to serve humanity in every possible way. Such idealism and detachment sounds almost impossible to achieve humanly, but in fact, this was achieved by countless numbers of people who flocked to the doors of the Sufi shaykhs in their retreats and hostels and trained their selves with determination and discipline.

Sufis say that a human being can be rich and ascetic at the same time, for to be ascetic, one need not be poor. Not every poor one is an ascetic, nor is every ascetic one poor. For this reason, history shows many Sufi saints were, in fact, quite wealthy, but spent their wealth in God’s Way by aiding the needy, building hostels, hospitals and way stations, and by establishing trusts to promote the arts, libraries and scientific research centers.

The Sufis say, “The wise servants of God are like the earth. They accept every type of refuse to be cast upon them and yet nothing issues from them but sweetness. Both the righteous and the sinner walk upon it.” The earth is characterized by strength. Whatever God Wills, the earth accepts. It has no will of its own. In this respect, the Sufis resemble the earth in that “every vile and ugly thing is cast upon” then, and they accept it. Yet, after the Sufi accepts to be such a dump, the verse continues, “nothing comes from him or her except goodness.”

Such wise teachers do not treat you the same way that you treat them. Rather, they return good for evil. By this means, a counterforce comes into play by which the momentum of evil, passing through the transformative positive energy field of the advanced Sufi master, is converted into power which is rebounded to the opponent, causing a catalytic reaction which inverts the initial impulse to evil, resulting in a transfiguration of the challenger. For that reason, some of the most famous conversions in Islam came about when an opponent sought out a Sufi master seeking to harm him, yet when confronted with his own evil in the Sufi’s mirror-like visage, was thus brought to contrition, repentance and redemption at the hands of the master.

The doctors of hearts

With the knowledge acquired through their sincerity and piety, Sufis were able to first treat their own hearts. From this experience of self-treatment, they began to understand the illnesses of
others. Through their immersion in the social life of their communities, they empathized with the feelings of pain others felt and sought the means to cure their spiritual, moral, psychological and social ills. With the wisdom and experience acquired in treating their own ills, using their understanding of culture and environment and maintaining the flexibility to accommodate the lives of all sorts of people, the Sufi leaders and healers were able to treat the people in whatever situation they found them. Sufism is not words put together in flashy phrases, nor is it theoretical knowledge; rather, it is moral character and behavior, it is the state of excellence, and it is the infrastructure of life. Our good friends: FREE XXX. One of Sufism’s greatest scholars, al-Junayd said, “We did not take Tašawwuf from ‘this one said’ or ‘that one said,’ as the scholars did [with their sanads – chains of transmission and verification], but we took it by feeling the hunger of the hungry, by feeling abandoned in the desert with the homeless, by feeling the wealth of the rich in accompanying them, by feeling the pain of the ill, by feeling the pain of the injured. That is how we came to this understanding.”

Thus, Tašawwuf was never based on theories to be mentioned and discussed, nor on a prescription to be taken from a pharmacy. Rather Tašawwuf provided a cure first tested by the doctor on himself who, after successfully deriving its benefit, was able to apply it to others in need of the same treatment. This is what made the central social role of Sufism in Muslim life acceptable to the masses, wherever it was found. The way of the Sufi Path was one of transformation, as symbolized by the alchemical metaphor of transforming base elements, such as lead, into gold. This path of continual transformation resulted in a constant struggle to not only elevate the spiritual level of the individual, but also to raise the spiritual and material levels of the family, the tribe, the community and the nation as a whole. The French scholar Louis Massignon explains that social justice remained crucial to the ascetics’ piety: “The mystic call is, as a rule, the result of inner rebellion of the conscience against social injustices, not only those of others, but primarily and particularly, against one’s own faults …”

Sufis had, and continue to play, a great role in social work, as is mentioned by Massignon and many other Orientalists. As the former stated, “The Sufis are doctors of the soul, [whose work] includes the sociology of the soul, the psychology of the soul and the mentality of the soul, and they work to cure those who have diseases in any of these aspects.”

The Sufi approach to society-building

Sufis worked to build bridges of inter-racial, inter-ethnic and cross-cultural understanding. In doing so, they differed from the Wahhabis, who tried to homogenize, standardize and eliminate all variation, in contradiction with the Qur’ānic verse:
O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other).  

As an example of this spirit, sacred education, community-building and human resource development was spread throughout Africa by the Sufi orders, creating jobs for the poor and establishing relationships between disparate communities. Especially active in such social work were the Shadiliyya and the Sanusiyya orders. The hostels founded by the shaykhs of these Sufi orders became points of convergence, bringing together different races, promoting interracial and inter-tribal marriages, and thereby, preventing wars and creating intellectual and economic opportunities for the societies in which they functioned by introducing science, business, trade, education, medicine, the arts and administrative job opportunities for people. This was accomplished by the mixing of the highly accomplished and revered Sufi teachers with the common people, the normative practice of the Sufis. To involve themselves in the lives of the common people, both rich and poor, without any thought to distinctions of ethnicity, culture or even religion – rather, considering all people members of the same human community – had an enormous impact on cultures and tribes previously isolated from, or more commonly, at war with each other. Sufism depended on the human bonding that comes about with the commingling of peoples in a symbiotic manner, producing combinations which cut across a society’s natural barriers, to generate the heat and turbulence needed to keep a nourishing flow of social “nutrients” moving among all the layers and stratum that make up a healthy human community. It was this tremendous spirit of egalitarianism and leveling that endeared the Sufi leaders, the shuyukh (literally “wise ones” or “elders”), to both the common people and the elite alike, enabling them to act as catalysts for interaction and the building of social ties in otherwise polarized and factionalized societies. This was in keeping with the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad who, upon his emigration to Medina, built the “model city,” in which Jews, Christians, Muslims, Zoroastrians and idol-worshippers were able to live together in a spirit of goodness, tolerance and cooperation – a reality not unlike that of modern, democratic societies.

**Sufism and religious plurality**

*Tasawwuf*, which is the essence of the true religious tradition of Prophet Muhammad and is distinguished by his high humanistic principles, is open to all religions and races. By nature, Islam is a religion open to peoples of every race. It does not differentiate between one Muslim and another. The Sufis have stretched the bounds of this principle to the point where they do not even see any difference between their religion and other faiths. They opened their doors to
accept all other religions without distinction.

The Sufis call to all people, just as God sends His Mercy to all humanity, without distinguishing between those who believe in His Existence and those who do not. The renowned Naqshbandi Sufi saint Bayazid al-Bistami said, “Sufis, in general, seek God’s mercy for everyone, not solely for Muslims.”

In another of his famous ecstatic utterances, Bayazid, on passing a Jewish cemetery, exclaimed, “They are excused (mādhurūn).” What he meant here was, “O God, these people must be destined for Paradise, because they are Your creation and they did not know your last Prophet.” As he passed a Muslim cemetery, he observed, “They are proud and arrogant (maghrūrūn) in believing they are going to Paradise and everyone else is destined for Hellfire.”

Another outstanding Sufi master of the thirteenth century, Jalaluddin Rumi said, “O Muslims, what do I have to say? I do not know myself whether I am a Christian, a Jew, a Zoroastrian or a Muslim. And I do not know myself if I am eastern or western, upper or lower. And I do not know myself if I am from earth or I am from on high. And I do not know myself if I am Indian, Chinese, Bulgarian, Iraqi or Khorasani. I do not know myself if I even have an appearance or not, whether I have existence or not, if have a location or not. I do not know myself if I am a body or a soul. But what I do know is that my soul is the soul of souls. When I put my name with my Lord’s, I saw the universe as one. I see One, I sing One, I know One and I read One.”

This is how the Sufi Muslims, through their rarefied understanding of the nature of society emerged as the fountainheads of religious and moral character. This was because of their openness to all different experiences in religion and human philosophy, and their harmonizing with all other spiritual influences and backgrounds, coming altogether under the perfect human university, bringing the diverse elements of society together under the commonality of the human experience without regard for the differences of culture and the happenstances of geography. Nicholson observed, “Tašawwuf is a combination and adaptation of different philosophies and beliefs by means of which Islamic spirituality was disseminated.” The great Orientalist scholar Martin Lings said, “I am European and yet I found the safety of my soul in Tašawwuf.”
