

VOICES FROM THE VALLEY: Contemporary Kashmiri Sufi Perspectives (2001)

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Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, is the main form of Islamic expression in Kashmir today. No single definition of Sufism exists, and there are probably almost as many explanations of the term as there are practitioners of the Sufi discipline. Put simply, Sufism is the path of love, traversed in accordance with the Islamic law (shari'ah) through which the seeker (salik) attempts to live his or her life in accordance with the will of God, as laid down in the Holy Qur'an and as exemplified in the life of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Sufis of Kashmir have played an important role in promoting social reform and inter-communal harmony, besides contributing to the development of Kashmiri culture and identity. At a time when seemingly endless conflict rages in the region, and in South Asia as a whole, the voices of sanity and hope, as represented by the Sufis of Kashmir, cannot afford to be ignored. Unfortunately, the media has given almost no attention to the Sufis and to what they might contribute towards promoting peace and justice. This set of interviews presents the views of contemporary Kashmiri Sufis as well as writers on Sufism, exploring what resources Sufism may have to offer in helping to promote dialogue between different people of religious communities and faith traditions.

Barring the interviews of Ghulam Rasul Mallik, Ghulam Nabi Butt and Hamid Naseem Rafiabadi, all the interviews included here were conducted by Irfan Hamdani, and were then translated by me from Urdu into English. The interviews of Malik, Butt and Rafiabadi were conducted first by me, and then supplemented by a second interview conducted by Irfan. All the interviewees added the suffix *sal allaho aleihi wa sallam* ['may peace be upon him'] after taking the name of the Prophet Muhammad. For the sake of convenience, particularly for the non-Muslim reader not familiar with Muslim writings, I have not added this in the text.

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1.

Fida Mohammad Hassnain, a practising Sufi, is the author of several books on Kashmiri history and Sufism.

Tasawwuf or Sufism is the mystical dimension of Islam. A Sufi is one who annihilates his or her personality in the personality of the Prophet Muhammad, who is called in the Holy Qur'an as the 'Mercy of the Worlds' (rahmat al il 'alamin). He or she patterns his or her life on the model of the Prophet. Concern for the welfare of others is a cornerstone of Sufism, for the Prophet Muhammad has said: 'Anyone who eats while his neighbour is hungry is not a believer'. Among the writers and thinkers who played a leading role in Muslim history, particularly during periods of stress and decline, were the Sufis. Sufism is the antithesis of arrogance, orthodoxy, intolerance, demagoguery, corruption and inhumanity. The Sufis accepted poverty, hunger and ill-treatment, but refused to bow down before the cruel, the rich, the arrogant and the mighty.

The Sufis have played a central role down the centuries in preaching universal brotherhood and concern. When the great Sufi, Hazrat Bayazid Bistami, was asked what his 'sect' (maslak) was, he replied that he belonged to the 'sect of God'. This clearly suggests that the Sufis do not bother about sectarian conflict but, instead, swim in the ocean of love. They see God in every human being, and their mission is to bring unity, love and hope to the entire humankind. The Sufis do not hate anyone on account of his or her creed or status. 'Look into your heart, for God is within you', says Sa'di, the famous Sufi poet of Iran. As such, then, the Sufis believe that one must look within one's own heart to search for God. The Sufis have always held that the Truth is not the monopoly of any one particular religion. As Lal Ded, the famous Kashmiri woman mystic (1335-1400) says:

The Creator watches your thoughts and deeds.
Do not think in terms of Hindu or Muslim.
If you are conscious, understand your inner self.
Only thus can you develop an intimate connection with Him.

The indigenous Kashmiri form of Sufism is known as Rishism. There have been

Buddhist, Hindu as well as Muslim Rishis in Kashmir, and they have played an important role in our history. Buddhist Rishis left an indelible mark on the Kashmiris. The founder of Buddhism, Gautam Buddha, instructed his bhikkus thus: 'Travel to the four corners of the world and help those in distress and engage in works of public utility'. Buddhism was very popular in Kashmir from the first to the fifth century C.E.. Buddhist monks engaged in planting fruit trees, herbs and flowering plants for the benefit of society at large. It was they who inaugurated the tradition of laying out gardens, for which Kashmir is so famous even today. They preached a life of simplicity, and acted on their teachings, bringing about a radical transformation in the lives of ordinary people.

Kashmiri Hindu Rishis, such as Vasugupta, Abhinavgupta and others, preached an ethical monotheism, preaching the worship of transcendental Shiva as the single force behind the entire universe. Every creature, they taught, is linked to the same source, the one God, and to this one source every soul has to return. These ideas were a powerful source of inspiration for mystical poets who sang songs of the oneness of humanity.

Muslim mystics in Kashmir further enriched this philosophy of humanism. The earliest known Muslim mystic in Kashmir was Hazrat Bulbul Shah, who came to Kashmir in the reign of the Buddhist king Gyalpo Rinchen in the thirteenth century. So impressed was Rinchen with Hazrat Bulbul Shah's teachings and his simplicity that he, his family and his courtiers all voluntarily embraced Islam at his hands.

Kashmiri Sufism, or Rishism, owes much to the great contributions of one of the leading Sufis of all times, the fourteenth century Hazrat Nuruddin Nurani of Chrar-i-Sharif (1356-1440), who is also fondly remembered as Nunda Rishi or Sahazandana, and who is equally popular among Kashmiri Muslims as well as Kashmiri Hindus. To the Kashmiris he is also known as Shaikh-ul 'Alam or 'The Teacher of the World'. He trained a group of Rishis who travelled all over Kashmir preaching love, brotherhood and peace, speaking out against tyranny, arrogance and pride. Baba Nasibuddin writes in his Nur Nama that when Shaikh-ul 'Alam witnessed people reduced to a state of penury and groaning under oppression, he strongly admonished the king. Likewise, it is said that Shaikh-ul 'Alam expressed his strong displeasure with Sultan Sikander, perhaps on account of the forcible religious conversions attributed to the Sultan. In this, he was following in the footsteps of earlier Sufis, who did not hesitate to protest against injustice and inequities.

The noted fourteenth century Kubrawi Sufi, Hazrat Mir Sayyed Ali Hamdani, played a key role in the transformation of Kashmir. Besides preaching Islam here, he gave to Kashmir the arts and crafts, such as shawl- and carpet weaving, and calligraphy, for which it is justly famous down till this very day. He set up Sufi communes or khanqahs, where Sufis would work, earn and share their income to provide support to the poor. He also established several educational institutions, where students were taught the art of writing and reading, paper-making, calligraphy, book-binding and painting.

He taught stone cutters to chisel slabs into pillars and tombstones through which they could earn their livelihood.

There are scores of Sufi shrines (dargahs) in Kashmir today, a legacy of the region's rich Sufi past. Unfortunately, most of these shrines are controlled by mutawwalis or custodians for whom the considerable money that is given to the shrines as donations are their only source of income. Hardly any of this money is actually used for works of public utility, although the Sufis themselves spent their entire lives doing precisely this. Until the monopoly of the mutawwalis is broken, through appropriate legislation, the situation cannot be remedied. But since this is a religious issue, the government seems reluctant to interfere.

2.

Ghulam Qadir Bedar alias Abu Naim of Chrar-i-Sharif is the author of numerous tracts on the lives of various Kashmiri Sufi saints.

In Kashmir, Sufism has always been organically related to the larger society. In this sense it was never a world-renouncing way of life. Kashmiri history cannot be properly understood apart from its rich Sufi traditions. Sufism has a continuing relevance even in our own age. I believe that if people were to lead their lives in accordance with the teachings of the Sufis, conflicts in the name of caste and creed would vanish. True Sufism is nothing but leading one's life in accordance with the Holy Law (shari'ah), by purifying one's heart and obeying completely the commandments of the Prophet Muhammad. Sufism is another name for the Path (tariqat), and the Path is the way to God. A true Sufi is one who helps and lives for all people, irrespective of caste, religion and community. The one God has created all people, Hindu, Christian, Sikh and Muslim, and Sufis have always preached universal love and harmony. In this way, Sufism can play a major role in resolving conflicts between people even today.

The Sufis chose a life of voluntary poverty (faqr), identifying themselves with the poor and the downtrodden, and, while turning their backs on luxury, focussed their attention on the world to come, the life after death, which is eternal. A fundamental tenet of Islamic Sufism is helping the poor. Accordingly, the Sufis spent their lives preaching the truths of the Qur'an among the poor, often travelling to remote places to spread the Word of God. They did not only preach, but also acted upon what they taught, sharing in the sorrows and the plight of the poor. This is why you find that in Kashmir today most Sufi shrines are located in rural areas, including some places that are still barely accessible. They set up centres (khanqahs) where people were imparted Islamic knowledge and were guided in the path of the search for Truth (talash-i-haq). Here, the poor, travellers and faqirs were provided food free of cost at community kitchens, and children were provided free education.

Today, not many Sufi shrines carry on with this Sufi tradition of actively helping the poor. I feel that unless the custodians of these shrines are trained and given proper religious knowledge the situation cannot be remedied. In earlier times the Sufis spent their entire lives serving the

poor, but today I don't see anyone doing that. Only a messiah can revive that tradition today so that the shrines serve the function of helping the poor that they were originally intended for. There are, I admit, some shrines where the poor receive some amount of help, as, for instance, the dargah of Hazrat Baba Payamuddin Rishi at Tangmarg, the Dargah at Hazratbal and the shrine of Hazrat Sultan-ul 'Arifin Shaikh Makhdum Hamza in Srinagar, but this help should take more organised forms. A well thought-out action plan needs to be made for reviving the shrines as centres of social welfare, promoting education and helping the poor. I would say that well over half of the donations received by the shrines are wasted on unnecessary construction and other such things, while the need to use this money for providing religious and modern education to the children from poor homes, opening libraries, health centres, training centres and so on is almost completely ignored.

3.

Dr. M.A. Andrabi was the former director of the Iqbal Institute at the University of Kashmir, Srinagar.

Islam arrived in Kashmir at a time when Sufism had reached new heights in Iran and West Asia. Hence, Islam came to Kashmir along with Islamic Sufism, and the first missionaries of Islam here were Sufis of a high spiritual stature. Besides preaching the basic teachings of Islam, they also played a central role in popularising the teachings of Sufism. The fourteenth century Hazrat Mir Sayyed 'Ali Hamdani, who is fondly remembered as the 'founder of Islam' in Kashmir (bani-e-musulmani) was both an Islamic missionary as well as a leading Sufi. This was also the case with many of his companions.

These early Sufis arrived in Kashmir at a time when Kashmir was passing through troubled times, faced as it was with a general social, economic, cultural and political crisis. The poor were greatly oppressed, and society had fallen victim to numerous vices and superstitions. Political instability was playing havoc with the lives of ordinary people, who were as it is groaning under the oppression of the caste system. In this context, the Sufis, preaching Islam's message of social equality and justice, won the hearts of the masses. They taught a simple monotheism, love and brotherhood, in place of caste discrimination. Further, they stressed love for all human beings. In their eyes, all human beings were brothers and sisters to each other. Love for God and love for all of God's creatures were a central feature of their message. In their eyes, in their common status of human beings, as part of God's creation, there was no difference between Hindus and Muslims. They insisted that all religions call human beings to the path of the one God, and so, at this fundamental level, despite their other differences, all religions share a common base and a common quest. Besides spreading Islam, many Sufis also instructed their followers in new arts and crafts, providing the poor new opportunities for economic advancement. The centres that they established also served as free schools. In this way, they played a crucial role in social transformation. At the root of their teachings was an insistence on the need for the reforming and refining of one's character and educating people in the teachings of Islam.

Only when that occurred, they believed, would it be possible to reform society as a whole. They realised that no movement, no matter how lofty its aims, can ever succeed if its members lack character.

In today's context, too, Sufism can play a very important role. In particular, it can help turn people's attention away from crass materialism, which has brought in its wake problems of immense magnitude. The basis of genuine Sufism is love and compassion. Islamic Sufism insists that love for God must also translate into love for His creatures. One who sincerely loves God will sincerely love His creatures, and only on this basis can one be inspired to work for the welfare of others. Love for others must be expressed through service, helping the poor and the distressed. This is why serving God's creatures (khidmat-i-khalq) has always been the distinguishing feature of all genuine Sufis. Service of others is a wide field, which can take different forms, but underlying all of these is love for the creatures of God. Equally importantly, I feel that given the present situation in Kashmir, the message of Sufism can play a very important role in improving relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. If we were to act on the teachings of the Sufis, and, in the manner of the Sufis, instead of stressing what divides people, if we were to focus on what they hold in common, on what can help build love and friendship between them, we could go a long way in helping bring about peace and harmony. Hatred and conflict can be overcome only through love and compassion. A true Sufi would, in a situation of conflict, reach out to the victims of conflict, and help heal their wounds through love. A genuine Sufi would insist that Hindus and Muslims can overcome their conflicts if they were to turn their attention to their common humanity and to the one God who is the Creator of all. Islam teaches us that 'all creatures are members of the family of God' (al khalq ayal Allah), and this 'family' includes not just Hindus and Muslims but even atheists. We need to stress this, and in this way help play a role in resolving conflicts.

Today, there are hardly any genuine Sufis left among the custodians of the scores of Sufi shrines that are found all over Kashmir. Hence, almost none of these custodians are interested in helping the poor or providing education and instruction to the people. Most of the donations that these shrines receive from the public are either used for maintenance or construction work or else goes to fill the pockets of the custodians. The custodians have established a firm control over the shrines which they will not easily give up because they have made it their sole source of income. In fact, I know of no Sufi shrine in Kashmir where social work is being done in an organised manner. There are perhaps one or two shrines which maintain free community kitchens (langar) for the poor and for pilgrims, but that is all. In order to revive the tradition of helping the poor, I feel that all the shrines should be taken over by a single trust whose main agenda should be social welfare and uplift. The area of work of this trust should be much broader than that of the present Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Awqaf Trust, whose responsibility, as far as I know, seems to be limited to maintaining the shrines that are under its jurisdiction. As for the existing Awqaf Trust, I feel that social work should be its major concern. Its functioning must be

made more democratic and transparent and it should be fully accountable to the people. Presently, it is controlled by the government. This must be changed, and the Trust must be made into a people's organisation. Only after this is done can it seriously take up work among the poor.

4.

Ghulam Nabi Gauhar is a Srinagar based lawyer and has written numerous books, in Urdu and English, on Sufism in Kashmir.

Islamic Sufism is based on firm belief in the one God, love of his Prophet, Muhammad, voluntary poverty (faqr) and steadfastness (sabr). In Kashmir, the Sayyeds who came to the region from outside and the local Rishis and Shaikhs all worked to spread Islamic Sufism in their own ways. Their concern was to spread the message of Islam and thereby reform Kashmiri society. The Sufis proved immensely popular in Kashmir, and that is why Kashmir is commonly referred to as 'Sayyed Vaeri', 'Pir Vaeri' or 'Rishi Vaeri' or the Valley of Saints.

Service to others is a central tenet of Sufism, for as the saying of the Prophet Muhammad goes, 'the head (amir) of the community is the servant (khadim) of the community'. Sufi lodges (khanqahs) were not only centres of religious instruction and Islamic missionary work but also places where the poor, in addition to resident Sufis, were fed and those in need were helped. Some Sufis, as history tells us, also played a leading role in protesting against oppression, such as the custom of forced labour or begar, in which poor people were forcibly made to work for others without any remuneration. Some Rishis used to bring salt laden on their backs from Thana Mandi in Rajouri, carrying it all the way to Kashmir and would distribute it to not just to the poor but to animals as well, as salt was in short supply in those days. The Sufis also stressed love for all of God's creatures, and that is why they had a large following even among non-Muslims.

The system of traditional Sufi lodges has, however, almost completely disappeared today. As far as I know, there is just one such lodge in Pulwama run under the auspices of the Rahmat-ul il 'Alamin Trust, in addition to a takiya at Traal and another at Bandipora where traditional Sufi training of some sort is provided. The decline of Sufism in Kashmir owes to several factors. One was the onset of Sikh rule in the region, which was followed by a long spell of Dogra rule. Gradually, there was a decline in the moral standards of the custodians of the Sufi shrines, for whom they became a source of livelihood. Later, politicians also sought to use the shrines for their own political purposes, as was also the case with the Awqaf Trust. As for the latter, there is no democratic control over its functioning, although it derives much of its income from the donations of ordinary people. It has become a monopoly of a particular political party. Unless the Trust is freed from this monopolistic control, it cannot be expected to play a role in social and economic development, which it is actually meant to. Today, it spends much of its funds on constructing shops and buildings, whereas it should actually be working for the social, economic and

educational development of the poor, for that was one of the major concerns of the Sufis, as indeed it is of Islam itself. Likewise, most Sufi shrines have become personal fiefdoms of their custodians, and they seem, by and large, to have little interest in using the earnings from the shrines for socially productive purposes.

There is a pressing need to rewrite the history of Sufism and the Sufis, for most writing on the subject are heavily laden with stories of miraculous events. The intention should be to show the Sufis as they actually were. The fact that the Sufis led such pious lives is itself a miracle, and there is no need to concoct fanciful tales about them to increase their popularity, as unfortunately has been done by many writers.

5.

Altaf Hussain Tak teaches English at the University of Kashmir. He has written several books on Sufism in Kashmir, in addition to other subjects.

The known history of Islam in Kashmir begins with the advent of the first Sufis in the region. The first Muslim missionary to come to Kashmir was the fourteenth century Sufi, Hazrat Bulbul Shah, who settled down at Srinagar. After him came the great Iranian Sufi, Hazrat Mir Sayyed 'Ali Hamdani, along with seven hundred of his disciples. He was later followed by his son, Hazrat Mir Muhammad Hamdani. From then onwards, Kashmir emerged as a major centre for the Sufis, who played a leading role in the spread of Islam in the region.

To understand the historical role of the Sufis, in addition to their role as Islamic missionaries, one must keep in mind that in pre-Islamic times, Kashmiri society was faced with numerous crises. On the political front there was great instability and people were cruelly oppressed. Economically, people were crushed under heavy taxation. Socially, the great mass of the people laboured under severe disabilities, being condemned as 'low' castes. Then, there were a host of superstitious practices, such as human sacrifice, widows being forcibly immolated on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands, widespread prostitution etc.. It is known that the Sufis sought to crusade against all these ills. Thus, they were not world-renouncing mystics, unconcerned with the sufferings of others around them.

Love for all is a central tenet of Sufism, and it was because of this that the Sufis were held in high regard by both Muslims as well as Hindus, not just in Kashmir, but elsewhere in South Asia as well. For those who wish to travel on the Sufi path, it is necessary to purify the heart (tasfiya-i-qalb), and this means that one needs to treat other human beings like oneself, to see others as fellow creatures of God, and to make one a blessing (rahmat) for others. As the famous Persian poet Sa'di says, 'My Pir (spiritual master) gave me two instructions: not to take pride in myself and not to think evil about others'. This, in my view, is the basis of religion, which has been taught by all the prophets of God. Muslims believe that God has sent prophets to every nation, and that they all taught the same divine truth: the existence of the one God, who alone should be worshipped. And

that was the primary focus of the Sufis as well. They insisted that all human beings are fellow creatures of the one God, and, in that capacity, have a spiritual relationship with each other, as brethren, irrespective of religious differences. It was largely because of the great influence of the Sufis in Kashmir that in 1947, when India was partitioned, there was no violence in Kashmir against the Hindu minority, although in neighbouring Jammu, for instance, Muslims were killed in large numbers. In this way, I see Sufism as having the potential of playing a very important role in the world today, divided as it is by conflict, largely in the name of religion. But only Sufism as a practical guiding principle or code of conduct can play this role, not the form of Sufism that is commonly presented as a mystical, world-renouncing philosophy.

Sufism has a great relevance in today's world in yet another way, in helping the oppressed. As the Prophet Muhammad says, 'The chief of the community is the servant of the community', and, accordingly, Sufis have all along insisted that one's commitment to God must be translated into practical action to help the poor and the distressed. They have the best model in this regard in the Holy Prophet Muhammad. According to the Prophet, no one can be considered to be a true Muslim if he satisfied his own hunger but lets his neighbour go hungry. He also says that no matter how much time he spends on worship, a man has no faith if his neighbours are not free from his oppression. The Holy Qur'an repeatedly enjoins upon Muslims to help the poor and those in need, and this includes not just Muslims alone. In Kashmir, the Sufis played an immensely important role in helping the poor. The hungry were fed at free community kitchens (langars) attached to Sufi khanqahs, for instance. In order to provide the poor with a regular source of income, the great Sufi, Mir Sayyed 'Ali Hamdani introduced several new crafts into Kashmir, such as carpet- and shawl-weaving and papier mache. It must also be noted that the Sufis adopted voluntary poverty (faqr) and in this way identified totally with the poor. Several noted Sufis in Kashmir came from rich families, including some from royal families, but they gave up a life of luxury and lived with the poor.

Today, genuine Sufis are few in Kashmir, and Sufi shrines no longer play the role that they did in the past. Politicians have started using the shrines to serve their own political purposes, because they know that ordinary people have great faith in them. The custodians of the shrines have, by and large, made them into their own personal money-making businesses. They send their own children to modern schools, but tell others that they must not do so as that might lead them astray from the path of religion. They concoct all sorts of miraculous tales about the Sufis in order to increase their own popularity and income. They claim to be intermediaries between ordinary people and God, and thereby fleece the gullible. Such professional Pirs are a blot on Muslim society, and they have nothing to do with Islam or with genuine Sufism.

Reforming the dargah system is no easy task, as most of the custodians of the shrines have a vested interest in the way things are, for it guarantees them a source of easy income. Almost none of the very many dargahs in

Kashmir is actually engaged in social work in an organised way. Some years ago I made a proposal, suggesting that the donations received by the shrines should go to a Trust, which would use the money on the education of poor children, who could repay this later on, once they began earning. The professional, hereditary custodians, I suggested, should be removed, and the Trust should be democratically administered. At present, there is a trust-the Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Awqaf Trust-which administers the affairs of several dargahs in Kashmir. However, its functioning is completely undemocratic. It has become a means for generating funds for a narrow political elite, for people with the 'right' political connections, and it is characterised by considerable corruption, widespread mismanagement and lack of professionalism. Much of its resources are spent on construction of shopping complexes, which are leased at very low rents, generally to people who have political contacts. As I see it, it is a colossal and criminal waste of public money, but if you protest, then you are sure to be branded as an enemy of the saints!

For the Awqaf Trust to fulfill its actual purposes it must first be liberated from political control. It should be headed by a committee consisting of honest, dedicated non-political people. It should consist of several tiers, from the local to the tehsil to the district and finally the state level. All income received by its units should be deposited in a bank and should be properly accounted for. A major proportion of its income should be used on the poor, for their education and economic development. In a world of increasing conflict, I see Sufism has having a central role to play in helping defuse tensions and violence and bringing people of different religions, faiths and cultures closer to each other. But for this we need a new genre of literature on the Sufis, one that bases itself on the understanding that the true meaning of Sufism is 'purification of the heart', genuine spirituality and concern for all humanity. True Sufism, what the Holy Prophet Muhammad called the state of ahsan, is characterised by complete peace. In this state, one brings peace to others besides being at peace with oneself. And when this state is arrived at, one sees everyone as fellow creatures of God. The true Sufi realises, as the Holy Qur'an says, that all the many prophets of God have taught one and the same religion, of 'surrender' to the Will of God, which means following His commandments and helping others. It also means firm faith in the Hereafter, in a life after death where one will be accountable before God for all one's actions. When one is convinced about this one will desist from doing evil to others or harming them for fear of being punished in the Hereafter.

This, as well as the active involvement of the Sufis in promoting social reform and harmony, needs to be the primary focus of the new genre of Sufi literature that must be promoted. We need to liberate popular Sufism from fanciful tales that have been concocted about the Sufis that have turned them into 'superhuman' beings so that custodians of shrines and fake Sayyeds can cheat people by claiming to be intercessors with such powerful saints. The image that we get of the Sufis in these stories is absolutely different from the evidence that is provided by the Sufis in their own writings. The new sort of literature that I am talking about would seek to present Sufism

in its actual spirit: as 'purification of the heart', as true 'worship'. By worship is meant not just prayers and litanies but also active service of others. Service can take many forms. Thus, helping the poor is one form of service. Promoting better relations between people of different communities is another, for a true Muslim Sufi would respect all people as fellow creatures of God. He would recognise that the essence of all divine religions is the same: purification of the heart and control of the self (nafs). This is what a true 'Muslim' is: the word 'Muslim' means one who has surrendered himself or herself entirely to God's Will. A true Muslim Sufi is an embodiment of peace, for the word 'Islam' itself means 'peace'. And, as true Muslims and as embodiments of peace, over the centuries the Sufis have brought people of different faiths closer together. That is why you see that Hindus and Sikhs flock in large numbers to the shrines of these men of God. Hence, as I see it, today the message of the Sufis can play a vital role in healing wounds and bringing people of different communities closer to each other, uniting them on the basis of the essence of religion which all religions share in common.

6.

Shah 'Abdul Ahad Qasmi is the head of the Dar-ul Faruqia, an Islamic seminary (madrasa) in Srinagar.

Sufism is a method of personal and social reform which seeks to make people real human beings and to realise their true humanity. It is based on the Islamic understanding that calls for one to abide both by the duties that one owes to God (huquq allah) and the duties that one owes to all of God's creatures (huquq ul 'ibad). As for the latter, such duties are owed to all human beings, besides other creatures of God, irrespective of religion and community. As the saying goes, God loves him best who deals most justly with His creatures. Sufism is thus based on the understanding of serving others, even if this means pain or material loss to one's own self. The Sufis see the Holy Prophet Muhammad as the head of the Sufis, and in him the concern for the welfare of others is best epitomised.

In Kashmir, Sufism has played a very important historical role. Pre-Islamic Kashmir was characterised by numerous superstitions, by widespread oppression of the poor and the downtrodden, and besides preaching Islam, the Sufis also crusaded against all this. In earlier times, education was reserved for just the Brahmin caste, but the Sufis insisted that everyone could and should receive education. That is why you find that wherever the Sufis went, they set up schools and madrasas, and their khanqahs were also centres of education and instruction, besides being training centres for those who aspired to traverse the Sufi path. At the khanqahs people from various walks of life, rich and poor, would interact with each other as equals, and the rich would be taught to respect the poor. In this sense, the khanqahs were great social levellers. In another sense, too, the khanqahs played an important role in helping the poor-people who would stay there to train under the guidance of the Sufis would be taught how to control their own base instincts (tazkiya-e-nafs) in order to dedicate their lives to the service of others.

In Kashmir, and elsewhere, too, the Sufis played a leading role in building bridges between people of different communities and religions. They saw their principal task as making human beings realise their common humanness. For, Islam teaches us that we should all live together in harmony. It teaches us to love, rather than hate, others, irrespective of religion. That is why the Sufis showered their love on all-both Hindus and Muslims, and why Hindus, in addition to Muslims, also held them in great regard.

Today, there are hardly any khanqahs left in Kashmir where such spiritual instruction is imparted. The reason is that people have become materialistic and selfish, and have little concern for spiritual knowledge. The khanqahs and dargahs have, over time, deviated far from their original purpose. The vast sums of money that they earn from public donations, rather than being spent on the poor, are largely spent on construction of new buildings. The Awqaf Trust was set up in order to channelise these funds for socially productive purposes, such as helping the poor, orphans, widows, etc., but that is hardly happening. There is a need to raise public opinion about this.

Sufism is fully relevant in today's context, just as it was in the past. But, in order that people can come to know what role Sufism can play today, a new sort of literature about the Sufis is needed. It is true that miracles were wrought by the Sufis, but the focus in the available literature about them focuses almost entirely on this aspect of their lives, while their role as social reformers is generally ignored. A new sort of literature is needed, which, while not ignoring the role of miracles, also focuses on this vital social dimension.

7.

Nazir Ahmad Pampori, a social activist, is associated with the Shah-i-Hamdan Trust, Pampore.

The spread of Islam in Kashmir owes almost entirely to the work of the Sufis. The Sufis crusaded against oppression, superstitious practices and immorality, and thus won the hearts of the Kashmiri people. But today, there are few genuine Sufis left. I do not know if there are actually any, in fact. If there are at all, they must be somewhere in the caves up in the mountains or inside their homes, turning their backs to the world. But, be that as it may, Sufism is still of immense relevance in today's world. Sufism calls for the reform of the self, in order that one serve God with all one's heart and mind and follow all His commandments. It also teaches that one must dedicate oneself to the service of others. The Holy Qur'an is replete with exhortations to help others in distress, and this includes both Muslims as well as others. As the first line of the opening verse (surah al fatiha) of the Holy Qur'an says, God is the Cherisher of All the Worlds (rabul 'alamin). He thus provides for all His creatures, not just for Muslims alone. Elsewhere, the Holy Qur'an refers to the Prophet Muhammad as the Mercy of the Worlds (rahmat al il 'alamin), which means that the Prophet is a blessing for all people, not just Muslims alone. Inspired by this

Qur'anic vision, the Sufis sought to serve all of God's creatures, irrespective of religion, both rich and poor, trying to bring them to the path of God.

The social role of the Sufis in Kashmir can best be appreciated when examined in the light of the social conditions in Kashmir prior to the arrival of Islam in the area. As we know from various historical records, in those times the mass of the people were condemned to a life of slavery as 'low' castes and 'untouchables'. They were prevented by the Brahmin priests from acquiring education and even from entering temples. The Sufis, however, opened their khanqahs to all, treating them as equals, allowing all people to pray together in the mosques. One of the reasons for the mass conversions to Islam in the area was precisely this great egalitarian appeal of Islam. The Sufis would distribute whatever was given to them as offerings to the poor, and would treat the poor as equals, which was something quite novel for the Kashmiris. The Holy Qur'an insists that a person's merit in the eyes of God is measured not by his wealth or lineage but solely on the basis of his piety.

The central concern of the Sufis was to follow God's commandments and thereby establish a close bond of love with Him (taluq billah). Love for God implies love for all His creatures. Thus, the Sufis preached universal brotherhood, peace and tolerance. Today this message of Sufism has great relevance in a world marked by violent conflicts between people of different religions and communities.

8.

Maulana Asadullah Nizami Misbahi works at the Qazi Nisar Islamic Institute, Anantnag.

Islam's origins in Kashmir and its consequent spread in the region owe almost entirely to the peaceful missionary efforts of the Sufis and the Muslim Rishis. The Sufis and the Rishis preached an ethical monotheism, a simple life-style, and concern for others, which readily won over to Islam large numbers of people, particularly the poor and the oppressed. The Sufis lived according to what they preached. Thus, even if some of them came from wealthy families, such as, for instance, the seventeenth century Baba Daud Khaki (a royal instructor, who later became a disciple of the great Sufi, Shaikh Hamza Makhdum), they adopted a life of voluntary poverty. In that way they trained to conquer their desires (nafs) as well as to empathise with the poor and the suffering.

The word 'Sufi' derives from the term 'Ashab-i-Suffa' or 'The People of the Bench'. These, the first Sufis, were a group of some seventy followers of the Prophet Muhammad who would gather outside the mosque at Madina. They lived a life of voluntary poverty, having no home, and little to eat or wear. They would spend their time in prayer and meditation as well as helping those in need, in accordance with the Prophet's instructions. Thus, serving others has been central to Sufism right from its early origins. There is a well-known story that well illustrates how helping those in need

is so central to Sufism. It is said that once a man came to a group of Sufis, all of whom had not eaten food for many days. He presented some food to one of them. This Sufi politely declined the offer and told him to give the food to one of his companions instead, who, he said, was more hungry than he was. This companion also declined the offer and asked the man to give the food to a third companion, saying that he was even more hungry than him..And so on, till the food came back to the first Sufi. In the end no one ate the food. This story points to a central teaching of the Holy Qur'an: to place others above oneself. There's another story which contains the same lesson. It is said that one day, the Holy Prophet Muhammad saw an old non-Muslim woman struggling to carry a heavy load on her back. He went to her, took the load on his own shoulder and took it to her house. When they reached her home, she thanked him. Then, she said to him that there was a certain Muhammad in the town who was turning people away from their ancestral religion so he should be wary of him. The Prophet turned to her and said that he was Muhammad, whom she was so fearful of. So touched was the woman by the Prophet's example that she accepted Islam. This shows how helping even people of other faiths is also a duty binding on Muslims. And it is only by serving others in need that one can travel on the stages of the Sufi path. Hence, it would not be wrong to say that 'serving those in need' is another name for Sufism.

The Sufi khanqahs were once places of active social work, where the poor would be fed free of cost, where Sufis would provide moral and religious training and instruction to people and where poor children were provided free education and a place to stay. The Holy Qur'an says that acquiring education is the duty of every Muslim, male as well as female. The Sufi khanqahs were inspired by this Qur'anic commandment to provide education to the poor and the needy.

Today few khanqahs of this sort exist in Kashmir. Most dargahs have been taken over by a class of corrupt custodians who treat the shrines as their own personal property. In very few dargahs is arrangement for education made. I am aware of one such dargah-the ziyarat of Shah-i-Hamdan at Duru, which has started a school where religious (dini) as well as secular (duniyavi) disciplines are taught to children from poor families, and the shrine provides money for the school to function. Now, there are some shrines in Kashmir which earn several lakh rupees every year from public donations. Why can't they also start similar schools or even colleges? In this way, they can provide religious and secular knowledge to our children, who can grow up to be doctors and engineers, while at the same time being pious Muslims.

There is a pressing need to enlighten the public about what Sufism really is, which means clearing it away from the legends of miracles and superhuman feats that have been attributed to the Sufis. In today's context of conflict all over the world between people of different religious communities, people need to know that Sufism still has a continuing relevance. After all, the Sufis lived by the precept of the Holy Qur'an: 'There is no compulsion in religion' (la ikra fi din).

9.

Sayyed Liyaqat Hussain Hamdani is a Srinagar-based practising Sufi.

Sufism, or mysticism, is found in all religions. In pre-Islamic Kashmir, too, there were many Sufis (mystics) among the Shaivites and the Buddhists. Islamic Sufism shares much in common with other forms of Sufism, but it is based on the Islamic law or shari'ah. Just as the body needs food to survive, so, too, does the soul, and the food for the soul is what the Sufis provided the people with. Serving those in need is integral to Islamic Sufism, for Islam is a religion of helping the needy. The entire life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad exemplifies this in a most compelling way. Thus, it is said that while in Mecca, every morning a woman would throw rubbish on the Prophet as he passed by her house. One day she did not do so, and the Prophet wondered what the matter was. So, he went to her house to find out. When the woman saw him she was scared, as she thought that the Prophet had come to punish her. But, instead, the Prophet gently asked her if she was unwell because she had not appeared that morning, and, if she was sick, he enquired if he could help her. In this way the Prophet showed how we should deal with others and show concern for them even though they may be opposed to us.

For the Sufis, helping others can take various forms. The highest form is to help human beings turn from their basic animalistic impulses and make them true humans so that they can be useful to others. The Sufis not only preached but also practised what they preached. In Kashmir and in other places, too, the Sufis played an important role in spreading education, by setting up numerous schools and madrasas. We need to revive that system today, as it has almost completely died out. For this the dargahs need to be properly administered. A complete account of all the income that they receive from public donations needs to be maintained, and they should spend this money according to fixed rules. The money should be used for socially productive purposes, and for building institutions that are so badly needed in our society today, such as orphanages, schools, colleges, publishing houses for religious literature, research and so on. This also means that the functioning of the apex body that controls the major dargahs here, the Awqaf Trust, must be thoroughly revamped. Despite the vast assets that it controls, valued at several crores, it hardly does any social work. Not many of its large number of employees are actually interested in social work at all. I feel that unless those who control, the Trust are pious people, dedicated to the cause of helping the poor and the needy, things cannot change.

Sufism has an important message in today's world, for it tells us that people of different faiths can and must live together in harmony. A true Sufi is one whose first priority is helping others, irrespective of caste and creed. He sees all people as fellow human beings, not as members of this religious community or that. So, you have Kabir who preached the message of universal brotherhood, or Hazrat Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer, who continues to attract Hindus and Muslims in equal numbers. For the Sufis, the universal

brotherhood of human beings is a central tenet, and their love for all knows no religious boundaries.

10.

'Abdur Rashid is a bank manager based at Anantnag and is a disciple of a Sufi from Srinagar.

The message of Sufism is relevant for all times, but because people are so immersed in the material world today they have turned their backs to it. The primary message of the Sufis is total surrender to God, and doing His Will. It also means that the Sufis dedicate themselves to helping those in need, transcending barriers of caste and community, preaching love and universal compassion, social justice and equality. God says in the Holy Qur'an that He is closer to us than our own jugular vein. So, then how can we hate others? How can we then afford to ignore those who are suffering and are in pain? Again, the Holy Qur'an says that if you save the life of one person it is as if you have saved the lives of all people in the world, but that if you wrongly take the life of somebody it is as if you have killed all of humankind. As pious Muslims, the Sufis insisted that one should desist from causing harm to any innocent being. The word 'Sufi' itself means 'pure' (saf), and a Sufi is a person of whom no innocent creature has any fear. People seem to have forgotten this today. People talk so much about religion and spirituality nowadays, but few of them actually practise religion in its true spirit in their own lives. Because of this, there is bloodshed and conflict. Materialism has taken such a strong possession over many people that for them true religion has become a secondary issue altogether. That is why, for instance, you find that almost no rich people send their children to madrasas to study. Almost all madrasa students come from poor families, from families who have no other means to educate their children. I don't think most people today are at all serious in following the path of the Sufis, whose followers they claim to be, for this path requires you to give up many worldly pleasures, to control your desires and to go out of your way to help others even if this means causing pain to oneself.

11.

Ghulam Rasul Mullick is Head of the Department of English, Kashmir University, Srinagar.

The Sufis have played a seminal role in Kashmiri history. It was principally through them that Islam spread in Kashmir. They focused on the essential, universal aspects of Islam, and under their influence almost all Kashmiris embraced Islam, voluntarily. Muslims and Hindus have lived in harmony in Kashmir for centuries, and this is still the case even today. Whatever has happened in Kashmir in the last ten years-the conflict and the immense loss of innocent life-has been at the political level. It has nothing to do with the collective psyche of the Kashmiri people.

If you see the poetry of Hazrat Nuruddin Nurani and Lal Ded, who are still deeply revered by almost all the Kashmiris, both Muslims as well as Pandits, you can discern a strong element of protest against social oppression,

poverty and the marginalisation of the so-called lower castes. Both preached an ethical egalitarianism, the cleansing of the spirit, while crusading against caste and bringing about a veritable revolution in Kashmiri society.

Islam teaches us that all human beings have come from God, we are all children of Adam. There is a famous saying of the Prophet Muhammad that, 'All creatures are of the family of God, and God loves him most who most loves His family'. That was the basic message of Lal Ded and Hazrat Nuruddin Nurani and all the other great Sufis of Kashmir.

So, I see that the crusade against oppression that the Sufis launched in Kashmir as a very important

form of dialogue which has continuing relevance even today. People of all religions can, and indeed, must, work together for a better, more just world, but they must remember that the world is not an end in itself but a halting place after which one has to face eternal life after death. I feel that inter-religious dialogue is indispensable for the modern world. We must seek to focus on the one basic universal element of all religions--which is God, and Islam teaches that all creatures are part of God's family and that God favours him the most who best helps His family. Indeed, Islam goes so far as to say that one's prayers go waste if one does not engage in helping others when one can. The Qur'an also says that true piety consists not in praying in a particular direction, but in faith in God and performing good deeds. This is precisely what the Sufis tried to do in Kashmir, trying to bring Hindus and Muslims together on the basis of their common allegiance to the one God, so that people become a source of benefit for others. I think many Muslims will willingly come forward to join this venture of dialogue based on common belief in God and a shared commitment to building a better, more just, world, because that is what Islam teaches. This venture alone can save humankind today--not the worship of money or the nation-state, for that can only lead to more and more atom bombs and eventual universal destruction.

When I look at the history of Islam, I see that Muslims have had, broadly, two types of attitude, represented by two different kinds of people. Paradoxically, both have claimed their authenticity from the Holy Qur'an. On the one hand are people who have focussed on the universal teachings of the Holy Qur'an and its exegesis in word and deed by the Prophet Muhammad. The Holy Qur'an says that all divine religions in their original forms were revealed by God, and so a person is not a Muslim unless he believes in all the Prophets and in all that was revealed to them by God, in addition to what was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Muslim tradition has it that God revealed his religion [al-Islam or 'the Surrender'] to all the Prophets, starting with Hazrat Adam and ending with Hazrat Muhammad, and they were all Muslim or 'one who surrenders [to God's will]'. There are said to have been 1,24,000 prophets in all, and the Holy Qur'an tells us that there is no community or nation where God has not sent any prophet. So, from this you can see how really universal Islam is. This runs as a central thread throughout the Holy Qur'an. It transcends the limits of time and space, and is actually the essence of the Qur'anic teachings.

On the other hand, there are certain teachings of the Holy Qur'an that are

specifically related to the conditions and context of the Arabia of the Prophet Muhammad's times. For instance, when the Quraish of Mecca declared war on the Muslims, the Prophet was asked by God to take up arms and defend the Muslims, and certain Qur'anic verses were revealed on this occasion.

Now, those verses are not to be read outside their particular historical context. So, when the Holy Qur'an commands the Muslims to fight, it does not mean to say that they should go about killing all non-Muslims everywhere.

Rather, the verses commanding fighting have to be seen in the historical context in which they were revealed-the declaration of war on the Muslims by the Meccans and then God's command to the Prophet to take up arms to defend the Muslims. Hence, these particular verses are not universal. What is universal is that everyone has to believe in the one God and that some kind of revelation has come down from God from the very beginning of the world through different great human beings for all peoples. One such revelation, which Muslims believe to be the last revelation, is the Holy Qur'an.

Unfortunately, however, there are people who have got so enmeshed in those parts of the Holy Qur'an which are related only to a particular historical context, that they have tended to ignore the universal message of Islam, which, as I said, is really the essence of Islam. This situation needs to be carefully researched into historically, with reference to the Holy Qur'an.

The portions of the Holy Qur'an that need to be seen in their particular historical contexts do, however, have continuing relevance and applicability insofar as situations or contexts may arise and develop today or in the future similar to those that occasioned those revelations at the time of the Holy Prophet. Thus, a subtle distinction has to be made between the universal elements of the Holy Qur'an and those aspects that are related to a particular historical context. The former, as I said, are the pivot and the spirit of the Holy Qur'an, which are applicable to all situations. Now, if it is accepted that the universal teachings of the Holy Qur'an-belief in the one God and service to humanity-are indeed the basic foundation of the Islamic scripture, you can see how positively Islam views the project of inter-religious dialogue.

The problem with many of the traditional 'ulama today is that they seem to give so much stress to fiqh or Islamic jurisprudence that little attention is given to spiritualism or theology. And that is a very faulty and defective system, quite inappropriate for today's world. It may have been appropriate in the past, but not so today. I feel that many 'ulama in the madrasas lack the vision to look at the whole of human history dispassionately. I have been a humble student of the Holy Qur'an right from my youth and I have had the opportunity of studying various interpretations of the scripture that have been made from time to time.

I feel pained to say that most of these interpretations have been coloured by political or

economic circumstances and interests. Thus, if economics or politics was seen by the interpreter as the most important issue, an effort was made to give the Holy Qur'an an economic or political interpretation. This is indeed very unfortunate. No concerted efforts have been made to present the universal element of Islam or to see that the madrasas are brought in line with this way of thinking. I think you could trace the malaise to early Muslim history, after the age of the Prophet and the four rightly-guided

Caliphs. During the Abbasids, Harun al-Rashid and Mamun did try to open the windows to let new winds blow in and to let the universal teachings of Islam be properly understood, interpreted and applied, but the conservatives, unfortunately, have always reigned supreme thereafter. This, in fact, is true in the case not only of the Muslims but of all other religious communities as well. The conservatives say that if we open up to other people our own religion will be in danger. They have always shut the doors and windows and tried to build high walls around themselves. And that has happened in the case of all religions. See what those who claim to be true Hindus are doing in India today. For them, Hinduism seems to be synonymous with demolishing mosques, killing Muslims and burning Christian social workers alive. Some people might think that by focussing on the universal element of Islam and what it shares with other religions the distinctiveness of Islam will be marginalised. However, personally, I believe that such an approach will only strengthen the appeal of Islam if others were to come to know that Islam does have this message of universalism, and this could go a long way in promoting better relations between Muslims and people of other faiths.

12.

Ghulam Muhammad Butt is the Amir of the Jama'at-i-Islami of Jammu and Kashmir.

Sufism is the spiritual (ruhani) and esoteric (batini) dimension of Islam. It is primarily through the Sufis that Islam spread in Kashmir. Large numbers of downtrodden people were attracted by the message of equality that the Sufis preached and practised. They insisted, in line with the teachings of the Holy Qur'an, that they most exalted in the eyes of God is he who is the most pious, for it is faith and good deeds and helping others, not caste or wealth, that matters to God. At their khanqahs they taught the Holy Qur'an, the Traditions of the Prophet, morality and ethics (ikhlaq). This education was provided free. Often medical treatment was also provided at the khanqahs.

According to Islamic Sufism, man's actions [amal] consist of two parts--the external [zahir] and the hidden [batin]. Take the case of Islamic prayer or namaz. Namaz has both a zahiri as well as batini dimension. A person may perform the physical actions of namaz, and in the zahiri sense his namaz would be complete, but the Sufis would say that while the zahiri namaz is important, what is also indispensable is that the namaz should be said in such a way that the worshipper abstains from evil deeds because the Holy Qur'an says that namaz is that thing which stops you from doing evil. In other words, while engaged in namaz your mind and heart should be cut off from all worldly affairs and focussed only upon God, and in that way your actions will be purified. This is the inner or batini aspect of namaz. Unfortunately, a lot of corruption has entered into popular Sufism today, and many people wrongly think that a real Sufi is one who sits the whole day in the corner of his house and keeps chanting 'Allah !Allah!'. This is not Islamic Sufism. Islamic Sufism teaches us that we must remain in the world, fulfill our worldly responsibilities and our social relations and still walk

in the path of Islam.

As far as the relations between Hindus and Muslims are concerned, I think Islamic Sufism has a very crucial role to play today. Its focus on the cleansing of the inner self (islah-i-batin) and mutual respect (ehtaram) can go a long way in combatting conflict and strife that are now so endemic the world over. The Sufis of the past tried to promote love between Hindus and Muslims, considering all creatures of God as brothers to each other. Today, there is an urgent need for Hindus and Muslims to understand each other, and each other's beliefs and views, and this search must be conducted in an atmosphere of love and brotherhood. We must look for points on which we agree, or which can help us come closer to each other despite our differences. Even if we might think in very different terms on some matters, we should learn to tolerate these differences, agree to differ, and begin to break down the walls of hatred that divide us from each other. Differences have their limits and must not be allowed to descend into enmity. God willing, if this were to happen, Hindus and Muslims can come closer to each other, and the endless killings, destruction and spirals of violence that we see today can be put an end to.

For this, inter-faith dialogue is of great importance. Islam teaches us that in normal times relations between Muslims and others should, as far as possible, be brotherly and based on dialogue, so that we can understand each other and come closer to each other. Through dialogue we can weigh each other's points of view and co-operate with each other on issues of common concern. Obviously, this does not mean ignoring our differences. Where there are differences, dialogue assumes central importance. The Holy Qur'an specifically tells us that 'There is no compulsion in religion' [la ikra fi din].

A very important form of dialogue between people of different faiths is working with each other for establishing a better and more just society. Muslims and others can get together to struggle against social ills, against poverty and oppression, and for other issues of common concern. The Holy Qur'an is very emphatic about this. Social problems like drugs, crime and bribery affect all communities. When such evils enter society there is no distinction of religion. It may not be possible for each community to combat them individually, so they must all work together in this regard. And that, too, is a form of inter-faith dialogue. The Holy Qur'an says, 'Cooperate with each other in birr and taqwa'. Birr signifies good deeds and taqwa means piety, works which please God. The Holy Qur'an adds after this, 'but do not help each other in sin and oppression'. I know of some fine non-Muslim men and women in India who are deeply concerned about the growing rift between Hindus and Muslims and who are trying to promote better relations between them. I think this is a very important task and must be further encouraged.

The notion of dialogue in Islamic Sufism is intimately related to the Islamic concept of social service, service of all creatures of God [khidmat-i-khalq]. There is a famous Islamic saying, 'All creatures are of

the family of God', and the word 'creatures' includes human beings, both Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as animals. In accordance with this, Islam teaches us to serve [khidmat] others. It tells us that we have responsibilities vis-à-vis all creatures of God, and this includes non-Muslims as well. In fact, service of God's creatures had been made a duty [farz] binding on all Muslims, and they have been told that in this regard they should present the best possible model before the world. Those people who call themselves Muslim but neglect their duty of service of God's creatures cannot really be called Muslim in the true sense of the word. The word Muslim means 'one who surrenders [before God]', one who accepts and abides by the will of God, and, as I said, the will of God also includes serving His creatures.

Both the Holy Qur'an and the Traditions [Hadith] of the Prophet Muhammad stress this fundamental importance of serving God's creatures. Islamic tradition is replete with examples of the importance of serving God's creatures, even as far as non-Muslims are concerned. Unfortunately, today most Muslims lack this enthusiasm for service of God's creatures. People are now deeply immersed in worldliness. We need to revive the zeal for serving God's creatures.

13.

Mohammad Ishaq Khan teaches at the Department of History, Kashmir University, Srinagar. He is the author of several books on Kashmiri history, Sufism and Rishism.

The essence of Sufism is contained in the saying of the Prophet Muhammad that you should worship God as though you were seeing Him, and, if that is not possible, then as if He were constantly seeing you. This is what the Sufis call as ihsan, the highest stage of faith. In this stage, one gains control over the lower self (nafs) and devotes one's entire life to serving others. Indeed, one can say that helping the creatures of God is the central message of the faith. And so, if you read the biographies of the Sufis you would discover that they spent their entire lives serving others. If you carefully examine the stories that are told about the miracles that they are said to have performed, you can see that most of these miracles have to do with helping people in distress. Many Sufis did not hesitate to criticise the rulers, exhorting them to follow the path of faith and morality. More generally, the Sufis insisted that before seeking to reform others, one must first reform oneself. That is, the 'lower self' must be purified (tazkiya-i-nafs), by following in the path of love. The Sufis were sincere, practising Muslims, and because of their piety they attracted a large number of Hindus as well. They taught love for all and hatred for none, and in this way they helped bring Hindus and Muslims closer to each other.

The Sufis in Kashmir, as elsewhere, set up centres where people were given education free of cost. There the Sufis also taught ethics (ikhlaqiyat) and the basics of the faith, including the Qur'an and the Traditions of the Prophet. The khanqahs were also great centres of intellectual production,

for resident Sufis and their followers wrote books on a wide range of subjects. People, both rich and poor, came together at these centres, thus helping to promote a sense of social solidarity and fraternity. People gave money to the khanqahs, which the Sufis would distribute to the poor. In this way, they served an important economic function, promoting the circulation of money.

In other words, khanqahs were centres of education and social service. Their modern form should, in my view, be colleges and social work centres, but this is not the case today. Dargahs have unfortunately degenerated into centres of superstition, being controlled by exploitative elements, social parasites, a class of hereditary custodians which has no sanction in Islam. They spend the money that they receive from pilgrims in constructing big houses or shops which they give out on rent, but little at all on social work. In any case, in today's context I think the traditional concept of social work needs to be revised. Merely giving the poor food twice a day, as was the custom earlier, is not going to solve the problem of mass poverty. Instead, dargahs should use the money that they earn from the public on building schools and providing education to the poor. Since most of the Sufi shrines in Kashmir are under the Awqaf Trust, I think change can only come about if there is a thorough transformation of the Trust. At present the Trust is linked to a particular political party and so most of its beneficiaries are supporters of that party. The Trust is run by bureaucrats and retired people, who do not seem to have a proper vision. If it is to serve the people who need help most, it should have educationists, social workers, economists and other such people in it to help run it on more professional lines.

14.

Bashir Ahmad Nahwy is the Director of the Iqbal Institute, Kashmir University, Srinagar.

The word Sufism or, in Arabic, tasawwuf, is not mentioned as such in the Qur'an, but it refers to the Islamic concept of tazkiya-i-batin ('purification of the inner life') and tazkiya-i-qalb ('purification of the heart'). Ascending the stages of the Sufi path, the seeker (salik) realises himself, and sees himself in the mirror of his own light. At this point, he realises the Truth and colours himself in the colour of God.

Popular Sufism, in several respects, has deviated from true Islamic Sufism, but still the basis of Sufism everywhere is the same: the acknowledgement in the heart of the Islamic creed la ilah ilallah or the Unity of God. From this stems the quest to purify the self and to lead a life in accordance with the will of God. God's will for man also includes helping and serving those in need, and so you find that the Sufis spent their lives helping those in distress and guiding people to the path of God, following the Holy Qur'an and the path (sunnat) of the Prophet Muhammad. Sufism is, as such, based on the understanding that all creatures are from God, and that the duty of a true believer is to strive to bring peace and comfort to all.

In Kashmir, the Sufi khanqahs played a major role in social reform as well

as in promoting education. The word *khanqah* is a corruption of the Persian term *khwan-gah* which means 'place of learning'. It was here that people were taught to read and write, trained in the art of calligraphy, besides receiving knowledge of the Qur'an, all this free of cost. Baba Nasibuddin Ghazi, a famous Sufi from Bijbehara, where I come from, had a community kitchen at which 1400 people were fed daily. But today, there are almost no Sufi shrines in Kashmir which offer education or any sort of service to the poor. Although the shrines receive large sums of money from pilgrims, this money, which should be used for helping the poor, is used for constructing shops and buildings. The Awqaf Trust is meant to use this money for general social welfare, but it does not. It presents a glaring contrast to Christian and Hindu trusts, which have set up social work centres, schools, colleges and hospitals. There are the sorts of activities that the Trust should actually be engaged in.

In today's context of pervasive violence, Sufism has an important role to play. The Sufis taught that all people, irrespective of religion, are brothers, creatures of the one God. It is on the basis of this common humanity that the Sufis strove to bring Hindus and Muslims together. For, as the Prophet Muhammad declared during his last pilgrimage to Mecca, in the eyes of God, a person's worth lies not in his caste, colour or wealth but in his piety.

15.

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Sufism, the mystical path of Islam, has been an important vehicle for social reform in Kashmir. The Sufis believed that one of the means to attain closeness with God was through serving others. Thus, they built not only mosques and schools, but also bridges, wells, roads, canals, inns and even planted fruit-bearing trees for the benefit of the public. Today, this spirit of social reform is no more, and in place of the social-worker Sufis we have a class of hereditary, parasitical custodians who live off the money that pilgrims donate to the shrines. These custodians pose as mediators between ordinary believers and God, as veritable dictators. They live like nawabs and maharajas, not doing any productive work themselves.

The Qur'an tells us that he is truly blessed who works for the benefit of others. The Prophet Muhammad is said to have stated that the angel Gabriel, through whom the verses of the Qur'an were revealed to him, so stressed the importance of the obligations that one has towards one's neighbours that he feared that he might be asked to provide a share in one's inheritance for them as well. True Sufism thus stresses the duties that one has towards all creatures of God, irrespective of religion. Unfortunately, today, few people concern themselves with this at all. They are content with visiting shrines, giving money to self-styled faqirs in the fond hope that thereby their wishes will be granted. In this way, the importance of good deeds ('amal) in earning God's pleasure is totally ignored.

The very first verse of the Qur'an revealed to the Prophet was 'read' (iqra). From this one can gauge the importance that Islam gives to education, both spiritual as well as worldly. It is because of this central importance of education in Islam that many early Muslims were pioneers in the fields of astronomy, mathematics, geography, physics and the like. This also explains why so many Sufis were also great scholars and teachers. The Qur'an exhorts us to ponder over all of God's creation, for these all are said to be his signs (ayat). In this way, Islam gave a great boost to the search for knowledge. But today's custodians of Sufi shrines totally ignore this Islamic commandment. Instead, they rest content with propagating false stories about the Sufis to fool the credulous. In actual fact, these superstitious practices and beliefs have nothing to do with Islam. It is only through good deeds-not through filling the pockets of self-styled faqirs and pirs-that one can earn God's pleasure.

There are very few genuine Sufis left today, for we are living in a grossly materialistic age. I remember a well-known Sufi who had a large number of Hindu followers. He was indeed a mercy (rahmat) for all. That is how a true Sufi should be. Islam teaches us that we should help all people in need, irrespective of religion, and share in their sorrows. One should serve the cause of justice and not support someone simply because he belongs to one's own community even if he is in the wrong. The story is told of how once the Prophet Muhammad gave a verdict in favour of a Jew in a case involving the Jew and a Muslim man, as the latter was guilty of violating the rights of the former. And so it should be with us, for it is the cause of justice that should constantly guide us in our actions and in our dealings with others.

16.

Mir Ghulam Naqib is a practising Sufi, based in Srinagar, and is associated with the Da'wat al-Islami movement.

Sufism is that knowledge that helps man to realise himself, for, as the Prophet Muhammad said, the path of realising oneself is the path of realising God. Respect for others is central in the Sufi path. By traversing this path, one realises that all people, irrespective of religion or caste, are fellow creatures of God, who are deserving of our love and respect, for God is the sustainer of all. As the Holy Qur'an says, God is the Sustainer of All the Worlds. Hence, the Sufis stress the oneness of the human self, from which follows the understanding that one's welfare cannot be separated from the welfare of others. As the Prophet Muhammad put it, the best person is he who provides benefit to others. Today, we have become enemies to each other, because we have forgotten this basic principle and because we have not truly cared to realise our own selves.

The Sufis of Kashmir, as elsewhere, saw piety as inseparable from serving the needy. Theirs was no world-renouncing mysticism, but a socially involved understanding of religion. That is why you find that they were in the forefront of the battle against caste and untouchability, because of which thousands of downtrodden people accepted Islam at their hands. They spent

their lives serving others, providing them education and food and, above all, spiritual guidance and comfort. They insisted that people must have love for others, and that they should live, despite differences of religion and caste, as brothers. As my own spiritual master used to say, one should have love for all, just like the sun which provides light and heat to all without discrimination. The Sufis taught the poor that they too were creatures of God, and they told the rich that the poor were not their slaves. Many Sufis came from rich families, but when they embarked on the spiritual path they adopted a life of voluntary poverty, giving away their wealth to the poor. The Prophet Muhammad said that a true believer has no lust for the things of the world, and the Sufis truly abided by this. But today I don't think most of the custodians of the shrines of the Sufis follow this principle. Look at the many trusts that the Sikhs run for the poor of their community. The Vaishno Devi Temple Trust in Katra, Jammu, has even started a university. But the Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Awqaf Trust, with large funds at its disposal, has done nothing of the sort. How, then, can one say that true Sufism is still alive in Kashmir?

17.

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A Sufi is but another term for a true Muslim, for Sufism cannot be separated from Islam. The Holy Qur'an refers to the 'cleansing of the self', which is really what the Sufi discipline is all about. Sufism is a socially engaged quest for God, for there is no monasticism in Islam. In other words, in Islam social service is inseparable from piety, and this is why the Sufis of Kashmir came to play such an important role in reforming society. The early Sufis, like the Prophet Muhammad, engaged in earning their own livelihood, and did not live off the labour of others. Thus, for instance, Mir Sayyed 'Ali Hamdani would sew caps and distribute the money he earned to the poor, while Batamaloo Sahib traded in salt and would, out of his income, feed the poor. Some Sufis, like Mir Sayyed 'Ali Hamdani, also sought to guide rulers. In his *Zahirat-ul Muluk* Mir Sayyed 'Ali Hamdani provides detailed instruction for how a pious Muslim ruler should administer his state for the benefit of his subjects.

I think one of the greatest needs of the hour is dialogue between people of different faiths, something that the Sufis of Kashmir also attempted to do in their own way. There has always been interaction and dialogue between Muslims and people of other faiths in Kashmir ever since Islam made its entry into our land. One of the pioneers of this process were the fourteenth century female mystic Lal Ded, whom the Kashmiri Hindus revere as Laleshwari. Although she was born and brought up in a Brahmin family, she came under the influence of renowned Muslim scholars and mystics. She is best remembered for her crusade against Brahminical hegemony and the oppression of the so-called lower castes. In her poetry, or *Vakh*, she addresses both Hindus as well as Muslims, and talks forcefully about social equality and the oneness of God. Lal Ded was followed by Hazrat Nuruddin

Nurani, commonly remembered as Nund Rishi, who carried forward this dialogue process, as a result of which many Hindu sadhus later became his disciples.

The story is told of Bam Sadh, the priest of a temple, meeting Hazrat Nuruddin and asking him, 'Who is a true Muslim?'. Hazrat Nuruddin answers, 'A true Muslim is one who thinks he is even lower than a leper, one who spends his entire life serving the poor'. What is this but a process of dialogue.? It is said that on hearing Hazrat Nuruddin's reply Bam Sadh became a Muslim and Hazrat Nuruddin gave him the name of Baba Bamuddin. The theme of inter-religious dialogue is also very visible in much of Kashmiri poetry and the works of other Kashmiri Sufis. Unfortunately, however, we have not as yet started dialogue in an organised way, in the form of a movement. I often quote Jesus' famous saying, 'Love thy neighbour as thy self', and I add that when we do not even know our neighbours how can we love them? Thus, the first need is to know your neighbour, his culture, his ethos, history, sensitivities and religious beliefs. Such knowledge is a prerequisite for organised dialogue initiatives. While in Kerala recently, I had the chance to address a gathering of Muslims, including students and ulama. There I made the point that dialogue is in fact a religious duty for Muslims. I said that many centuries ago, Shankaracharya came from Kerala all the way to Kashmir to study Buddhism in order to know what challenges Brahminism faced from the Buddhists, as at that time Kashmir was a great centre of Buddhist learning, but now I had come to Kerala from Kashmir to impress upon them the need for Muslims to dialogue with others. I told the 'ulama who were present there that although it was their Islamic duty to enter into dialogue with others they were doing little in that regard. I said that if they were not able to initiate such work on their own, at least they should cooperate with non-Muslims who are making efforts in this field.

I strongly believe that the madrasas, which produce our 'ulama, need radical reform. They may have been well suited to the conditions of a previous age, but now times have changed and they must reform themselves if they are to fulfill the demands of the fast-changing times. In the medieval ages, the madrasas did produce some great 'ulama who played a significant role in initiating a process of dialogue between Muslims and others, but where are such 'ulama today? Take, for instance, the renowned medieval Muslim scholar, philosopher and mystic, Imam Ghazali, who wrote extensively on Christianity. Some two thousand books have been written on him, mainly by Western scholars. We, today, have abandoned the dialogue process that Ghazali carried forward, and as a result the 'ulama are not able to play their role of explaining Islam to non-Muslims and of clearing their misunderstandings about the faith, which is really necessary in order to promote better relations between Muslims and others. For that the 'ulama need to reach out to and interact with people of other faiths, but, sadly, barring a few notable exceptions, that is not happening today. Islam needs to be expressed in accordance with the changing times. The Prophet Moses resorted to miracles because in his age faith in miracles and magic was very deeply-rooted. In today's age the greatest miracle is to help people cope with the problems of life. Hence, our 'ulama must try to show what relevance Islam has in today's world, and how it can help solve

problems related to conflict, poverty, pollution, consumerism and so on. Muslims must learn that their religion positively commands them to work with all people of goodwill, irrespective of religion, to solve common problems.

There is ample evidence in the Holy Qur'an of the need for Muslims to attempt to build bridges with people of other faiths. The Holy Qur'an tells us that we should not abuse the idols or deities worshipped by others, otherwise they would react and, in turn, abuse God out of ignorance. It commands us to call others to Islam, but there is to be no compulsion at all involved. If someone listens to that call and decides to become a Muslim, well and good. If, on the other hand, he chooses not to accept Islam, that is his own concern, and then, as the Holy Qur'an says, 'to them their religion and to you your religion'. The Holy Qur'an very clearly tells us that we should present the 'invitation' [da'wa] to Islam to others with 'wisdom' [hikmat] and words of 'beauty' [hasanah]. What this suggests is that besides the content of the message what is equally important is the style of communicating that message. We believe that the content of our message-as contained in the Holy Qur'an-is perfect, but we have not adopted the proper means and style of presenting that message. There is presently such a communication gap between Muslims and others that they cannot understand each other. Further, much misunderstanding has been created about Islam but Muslims have not been able to dispel these wrong notions. I see that as a crucial element in the dialogue process. What is more, I believe that through dialogue others may see how Islam has an answer to many of the ills plaguing the world today--the collapse of morality, alcoholism and world debt, for instance.

The 'ulama must play a central role in this venture, but I do not see that happening in any major way today. The problem with most 'ulama is that they have divided knowledge into water-tight categories of 'religious' [dini] and 'worldly' [duniyavi], even though in Islam there is no such distinction actually. Islam tells us that acquiring knowledge of the world, of God's creation, for the sake of religion [din] is a religious duty [farz] binding on all Muslims. Further, Islam tells us that since God has created the world, knowledge of the world, too, must be acquired by every believer, for knowledge of the world is part of the knowledge of God. As Sayyed Ahmad Khan, the founder of the Aligarh movement, used to say, there cannot be any contradiction between the word of God [the Holy Qur'an] and the work of God [the world]. I am convinced that until and unless we get rid of this artificial distinction that has been created between dini and duniyavi knowledge, we cannot make much headway in promoting not only the dialogue process but also the social, economic and educational betterment of the Muslim community itself.

Besides the 'ulama of the madrasas, I see our other intellectuals as having a crucial role in promoting dialogue between Muslims and people of other faiths. But here too we find 'modern', Western educated Muslims hardly doing anything to carry forward this mission. The education system that they have gone through is so thoroughly westernised that they have little knowledge of Islam and the legacy of their ancestors.

Explaining the teachings of one's own religion and understanding the beliefs of others is, of course, a central element of the dialogue process. But there is another level of dialogue which Islam teaches us about--the need for people of different religious communities to act together to attain certain desirable social goals. This is dialogue at the level of social action. Thus, when the Prophet Muhammad arrived in Medina, he entered into a pact with the Jews of the town. This pact is remembered in Islamic history as the Misaq-i-Medina or 'The Treaty of Medina'. According to this treaty, the Muslims and the Jews were to help each other in times of need and in defending Medina from outside attack. It is on the basis of this pact that some Indian 'ulama called for a united struggle of Muslims, Hindus and others against British imperialism. What we learn from the example of the Treaty of Medina is that for the sake of common goals, Muslims can certainly cooperate with others.

The Holy Qur'an explicitly commands us that we should help each other in doing good and in pious deeds and in fighting oppression, but not in assisting each other in sin and oppression. We have an ideal model in this regard in the Holy Prophet Muhammad, who, even before God had announced his prophethood, had set up an organisation of poor youth in Mecca, called the Half-i-Fuzul, to help the poor and the needy. Now this was at a time before the announcement of Muhammad's prophethood, so the other members of the Half-i-Fuzul were all non-Muslims. When the first revelation from God was delivered to the Holy Prophet by the angel Hazrat Jibrail [Gabriel] on Mount Hira, the Prophet was taken aback and he related the incident to his wife, Hazrat Khadijah. She told him not to worry and that God would protect him as he had always helped the oppressed, the poor, the orphans and widows. Now, at that time, there were no other Muslims in Mecca, and all these people whom the Prophet used to help were, of course, non-Muslims. So, this very clearly suggests that Muslims can and must help the poor and the suffering whoever they might be, and for that they can cooperate with people of good will from other communities. This, too, is a form of dialogue, and it must also be part of any inter-religious dialogue process that Muslims might initiate with others.

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