A Glossary of Islam

Printed in the Spring 2016 issue of Quest magazine.

Citation: Smoley, Richard. "A Glossary of Islam " Quest 104.2 (Spring 2016): pg. 62-63

By Richard Smoley

A list of this length obviously cannot be comprehensive. It is designed principally to explain the Islamic terms most commonly used in this issue. Unless otherwise noted, the language from which these words are derived is Arabic.

Arabic words are often transliterated using diacritical marks: e.g., á¸¥adÄ«th. These have been left out of this glossary and this issue.

Allah. God.

Baraka. Also barakah. Grace or blessing. A spiritual influence or energy infusing the universe. Saints, spiritual teachers, Sufi orders, and the tombs of saints are considered to be conduits of baraka.

Dervish. A member of a Sufi order. From a Persian root meaning “needy” or “beggar.”

Dhikr. Also zikr. Literally, “remembrance.” Usually refers to a spiritual practice involving repetition of one of the names of God. Sometimes used to characterize a state of mystical contemplation.

Five Pillars. The five essential practices of Islam: shahada, salat, zakat (charity), sawm (fasting during the month of Ramadan), and hajj.

Fiqh. The body of Islamic jurisprudence.

Hadith. (Plural ahadith). Literally, “report.” Reports of the deeds and utterances of the Prophet Muhammad not contained in the Qur’an.

Hajj. The pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, obligatory (if financially possible) once in a lifetime for Muslims.

Hijra. Also Hegira. The flight of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in AD 622. It marks the first year of the Islamic calendar.

Islam. Literally, “submission” or “surrender.” 1. The surrender of the individual human will to God. 2. The faith proclaimed by the Prophet Muhammad, or Mohammed (AD 570–632). An adherent of Islam is called a Muslim (in an older form, Moslem).

Jihad. Literally, “struggle.” The obligatory effort to sustain the Muslim faith. The “greater jihad” is regarded as the inner spiritual struggle within the believer. The “lesser jihad” is the struggle against enemies of Islam. Jihad, often translated as “holy war,” usually has the second meaning in the Western media. One who carries out a jihad of either sort is a mujahid or (in Western media) a jihadi.

Jinn (singular and plural); occasionally djinn. Invisible spirits, mostly malevolent, created from “smokeless fire” (Qur’an 55:15). The English derivative is genie.

Kaaba. A cuboid structure, made of hollow granite bricks, located in Mecca. It is the focal point of Muslim worship. Muslims worldwide are required to perform daily salat in the direction of the Kaaba.

Khalifa. Literally, “successor.” 1. The successor of the Prophet Muhammad. The correct line of succession is a source of dispute between Sunnis and Shi’ites. Anglicized as caliph. 2. In Sufism, the representative of a master, or sheikh.

Pir. (Persian, “old one.”) In Sufism, an elder or guide; the equivalent of sheikh.

Qur’an, Quran. Also Koran. The holy book of Islam. According to Muslim belief, the Qur’an was revealed in verses by the angel Jibril (Gabriel) to the Prophet Muhammad over the period AD 610–32.

Salat. The daily prayer, obligatory five times a day for Muslims.

Shahada. The attestation of faith: “There is no god but God [Allah], and Muhammad is the Prophet of God.” One must recite this statement in front of two witnesses in order to be acknowledged as a Muslim.

Shari‘a. Also shariat. The exoteric rules, or law, of the Muslim faith.

Sheikh. Also shaikh. In Sufism, the designated head of a Sufi tariqah or order.

Shi’a, Shi’as, Shi’ite. One of the two largest Islamic sects, comprising some 10–13 percent of the world’s Muslims. Shi’as hold that Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, was his true khalifa, or successor. Most Shi’ites are found in Iran and Iraq. Shi’a can apply to the sect as a whole or to individual believers, who may also be known as Shi’ites.

Silsilah. Literally, “chain.” The line of succession in a Sufi order.

Sufi. A term generally applied to Islamic mystics. The name is usually said to be derived from the Arabic suf, “wool,” referring to a particular type of garment believed to be worn by Sufis, or from the Persian saf, “pure.” Another theory holds that it is derived from the Greek sá½¹phoi, “wise ones.”

Suhbat. Literally, “companionship.” The practice of keeping company with a Sufi sheikh in order to gain his baraka.

Sunna. The exemplary behavior of the Prophet Muhammad, expressed in the ahadith.

Sunni. The largest sect of Islam, comprising about 85 percent of the world’s Muslims. Sunnis holds that Abu Bakr, the father-in-law of the Prophet, was his true khalifa or successor. The word Sunni applies both to the sect and to individual believers.

Sura. Also sura. A chapter of the Qur’an.

Tariqa. Literally, “path.” A Sufi order or brotherhood.

Ummah. The community of Muslims worldwide.

Zikr. See dhikr.

The author wishes to thank Robert Frager, Jay Kinney, and Kenneth P. Lizzio for their helpful comments on this glossary.

Sources

Frager, Robert. Sufi Talks: Teachings of an American Sufi Sheikh. Wheaton: Quest, 2012.

Glassé, Cyril. A Concise Encyclopedia of Islam. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.

Kinney, Jay. A Glossary of Sufism. Gnosis 30 (winter 1994), 13.

Lizzio, Kenneth P. Embattled Saints: My Year with the Sufis of Afghanistan. Wheaton: Quest, 2014.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, ed. The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary. San Francisco: Harper One, 2015.

Toussulis, Yannis. Sufism and the Way of Blame: Hidden Sources of a Sacred Psychology. Wheaton: Quest, 2010.