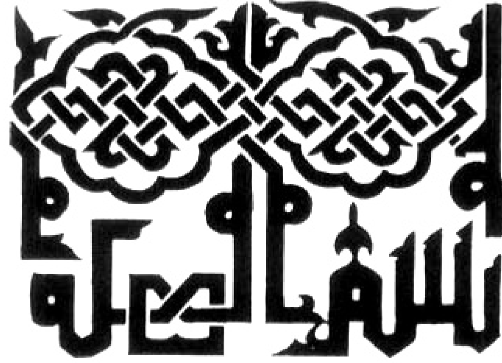
I. WHAT IS SUFISM?



In recent years many books have been published on Sufism and the spiritual life in Islam. Each of them has touched upon a different facet, for the phenomenon usually called Sufism is so broad and its appearance so protean that nobody can venture to describe it fully. Like the blind men in Rūmī's famous story, when they were made to touch an elephant, each described it according to the part of the body his hands had touched: to one the elephant appeared like a throne, to another like a fan, or like a water pipe, or like a pillar. But none was able to imagine what the whole animal would look like (M 3:1259–68).[1]

Such is the case with Sufism, the generally accepted name for Islamic mysticism. To approach its partial meaning we have to ask ourselves first, what *mysticism* means. That *mysticism* contains something mysterious, not to be reached by ordinary means or by intellectual effort, is understood from the root common to the words *mystic* and *mystery*, the Greek *myein*, "to close the eyes."

1. See Fritz Meier, "Zur Geschichte der Legende von den Blinden und dem Elefanten," in "Das Problem der Natur im esoterischen Monismus des Islams," *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 14 (1946): 174. "The Blind Men and the Elephant," a Hindu fable by John Godfrey Saxe. Shāh Walīullāh of Dehli speaks of the blind who tried to describe a tree according to the part their hands touched; see Shāh Walīullāh, *Lamaḥāt*, ed. Ghulām Muṣṭafā Qāsimī (Hyderabad, Sind, n.d.), p. 4.

Mysticism has been called "the great spiritual current which goes through all religions." In its widest sense it may be defined as the consciousness of the One Reality—be it called Wisdom, Light, Love, or Nothing.[2]

Such definitions, however, merely point our way. For the reality that is the goal of the mystic, and is ineffable, cannot be understood or explained by any normal mode of perception; neither philosophy nor reason can reveal it. Only the wisdom of the heart, *gnosis*, may give insight into some of its aspects. A spiritual experience that depends upon neither sensual nor rational methods is needed. Once the seeker has set forth upon the way to this Last Reality, he will be led by an inner light. This light becomes stronger as he frees himself from the attachments of this world or—as the Sufis would say—polishes the mirror of his heart. Only after a long period of purification—the *via purgativa* of Christian mysticism—will he be able to reach the *via illuminativa*, where he becomes endowed with love and gnosis. From there he may reach the last goal of all mystical quest, the *unio mystica*. This may be experienced and expressed as loving union, or as the *visio beatifica*, in which the spirit sees what is beyond all vision, surrounded by the primordial light of God; it may also be described as the "lifting of the veil of ignorance," the veil that covers the essential identity of God and His creatures.

Mysticism can be defined as love of the Absolute—for the power that separates true mysticism from mere asceticism is love. Divine love makes the seeker capable of bearing, even of enjoying, all the pains and afflictions that God showers upon him in order to test him and to purify his soul. This love can carry the mystic's heart to the Divine Presence "like the falcon which carries away the prey," separating him, thus, from all that is created in time.

One can find these essentially simple ideas in every type of mysticism. The mystics of all religions have tried to symbolize their experiences in three different groups of images: The never-ending quest for God is symbolized in the "Path" on which the "wayfarer" has to proceed, as in the numerous allegories dealing with Pilgrim's Progress or the Heavenly Journey. The transformation

2. The best introduction to mysticism is still Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1911; paperback ed., New York, 1956).

of the soul through tribulation and painful purification is often expressed in the imagery of alchemy or similar processes from nature and prescientific science: the age-old dream of producing gold from base material is realized on the spiritual level. Eventually, the nostalgia of the lover and the longing for union was expressed by symbols taken from human love; often a strange and fascinating combination of human and divine love permeates the verses of the mystics.

Notwithstanding similarities of description of mystical experiences, it is advisable to distinguish between two main types, which have been classified as Mysticism of Infinity and Mysticism of Personality. The former type has found its highest and purest expression in the system of Plotinus and in the Upanishads, particularly as elaborated in Shankara's *advaita* philosophy. Sufism comes close to it in some of the forms developed by the Ibn ʿArabī school. Here, the Numen is conceived as the Being beyond all being, or even as the Not-Being, because it cannot be described by any of the categories of finite thought; it is infinite, timeless, spaceless, the Absolute Existence, and the Only Reality. By contrast the world possesses only a "limited reality," which derives its conditioned existence from the Absolute Existence of the Divine. It may be symbolized as the boundless ocean in which the individual self vanishes like a drop, or as the desert, which shows itself in ever new sand dunes that hide its depths, or as the water out of which the world is crystallized like ice. This type of mysticism was often attacked by prophets and reformers, because it seemed to deny the value of the human personality and to result in pantheism or monism, thus constituting the greatest threat to personal responsibility. The idea of continuous emanation in contrast to the unique divine act of creation was considered, by both Muslim and Christian mystics, to be incompatible with the Biblico-Koranic idea of a *creatio ex nihilo*. In the so-called Mysticism of Personality, the relation between man and God is perceived as that of creature and Creator, of a slave in the presence of his Lord, or of a lover yearning for his Beloved. This type is more commonly found in earlier Sufism.

These two types of mystical experience, however, are rarely met with in their purest forms. Especially in mystical poetry, an author may describe God in terminology taken from a pure love relation

and a few lines later use language that lends itself to an exclusively "pantheistic" interpretation.

A differentiation between the "voluntaristic" and the "gnostic" approaches to mystical experience is somewhat easier. The mystic of the voluntaristic type wants to "qualify himself with the qualities of God," as the Prophetic tradition says, and to unite his own will completely with God's will, thus eventually overcoming the theoretical difficulties posed by the dilemma of predestination and free will. This mysticism can be seen as a practical life process. The mystic of the gnostic type strives for a deeper knowledge of God: he attempts to know the structure of His universe or to interpret the degree of His revelations—although no mystic could ever dare to "know" His Essence. Did not Dhū'n-Nūn (d. 859), usually regarded as one of the founders of speculations about *maʿrifa*, or gnosis, warn his fellow mystics: "To ponder about the Essence of God is ignorance, and to point to Him is associationism (*shirk*), and real gnosis is bewilderment" (N 34)? Despite this bewilderment, the gnostic approach often led to the building of theosophical systems with its adherents tending to interpret every aspect of mysticism in the light of their own particular theories, sometimes even denying the simple experience of loving submission. In Islamic mysticism, both aspects are equally strong, and in later periods they are intermingled.

In their formative period, the Sufis admitted of a twofold approach to God. As Hujwīrī (d. circa 1071) says in his discussion of the states of "intimacy" and "respect":

> There is a difference between one who is burned by His Majesty in the fire of love and one who is illuminated by His Beauty in the light of contemplation. (H 367)

> There is a difference between one who meditates upon the Divine acts and one who is amazed at the Divine Majesty; the one is a follower of friendship, the other is a companion of love. (H 373)

One might also recall the distinction made by Jāmī in speaking of the two types of advanced Sufis: some are those

> to whom the Primordial Grace and Lovingkindness has granted salvation after their being submerged in complete union and in the wave of *tauḥīd* [unification], [taking them out] of the belly of the fish "Annihilation" on the shore of separation and in the arena of permanent subsistence, so that they might lead the people towards salvation.
>
> The others are those who are completely submerged in the ocean of

Unity and have been so completely naughted in the belly of the fish "Annihilation" that never a news or trace comes to the shore of separation and the direction of subsistence . . . and the sanctity of perfecting others is not entrusted to them. (N 8–9)

The distinction that modern history of religions makes between the so-called "prophetic" and the "mystic" spirit is clearly visible in Jāmī's description of the two types of mystics—those who practice complete reclusion (*Weltabkehr*) and are solely concerned with their own salvation in the first "flight of the one toward the One," and those who return from their mystical experience in a higher, sanctified state of mind and are able to lead other people on the right path.

Approaches to the phenomenon "Sufism" are manifold. To analyze the mystical experience itself is next to impossible since words can never plumb the depths of this experience. Even the finest psychological analysis is limited; words remain on the shore, as the Sufis would say. It would be easier to understand Sufism through an analysis of given structures: the French scholar Henry Corbin, in his book on Ibn ʿArabī, has shown to what depths such a study of structure underlying a specific mystical-philosophical system can lead. Analyses of the language of mysticism and the development of the "mystical lexicon" (Louis Massignon and, more recently, Paul Nwyia) can help illuminate the formative period of Sufi thought. The study of symbols and images used by the mystics and of the degree of their interdependence belongs to this field; it opens the way to an examination of the contribution of Sufism to the development of Islamic languages, literatures, and arts.

Since Sufism is to a very large extent built upon the principle of the disciple's initiation, the different methods of spiritual education, the exercises practiced in the Sufi orders, the psychological phases of the progress, the formation of orders, and their sociological and cultural role are rewarding fields of research. Of prime importance here are the penetrating studies of the Swiss scholar Fritz Meier.

European scholars have responded to the phenomenon of Islamic mysticism in different ways, as can be understood from these remarks. Europe's first contact with Sufi ideas can be traced back to the Middle Ages: the works of the Catalanian mystic and scholar Ramon Lull (d. 1316) show a remarkable influence of Sufi litera-

ture.[3] The first figure from the history of Sufism to be introduced into European literature was Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, the great woman saint of the eighth century; her legend was brought to Europe by Joinville, the chancellor of Louis IX, in the late thirteenth century. Rābiʿa's figure was used in a seventeenth-century French treatise on pure love as a model of Divine love,[4] and her story has been retold more than once in the West, the latest echo being a contemporary German short story (Max Mell, "Die schönen Hände").

Travelers who visited the Near and Middle East in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries brought back information about rites of the dervishes, with both the ritual dance of the Whirling Dervishes (Mevlevis) and the strange performances of the Howling Dervishes (Rifāʿī's) attracting casual visitors. In 1638 the learned Fabricius of Rostock University edited and translated, for the first time, a poem by the great Egyptian mystic Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1235).

Most of the information about oriental spirituality, however, was derived from the translations of Persian classical poetry—Saʿdī's *Gulistān* has been one of the favorite books of European intellectuals since Adam Olearius produced its first complete translation into German in 1651. A century later, Sir William Jones at Fort William, Calcutta, fostered the study of Persian poetry, among other subjects, and as a result the first translations of Ḥāfiẓ became available in the West. His ideas about Sufi poetry have influenced many English-speaking orientalists, although one may find, in some works on Sufism written during the nineteenth century, rather absurd views in wild confusion. Ḥāfiẓ's poetical imagery—unfortunately mostly taken at face value—has largely colored the Western image of Sufism.

In the nineteenth century, historical sources and important Sufi texts were made available in print both in the Middle East and in Europe, so that scholars could begin to form their own ideas about the origin and early development of Sufism. Yet most of the sources available were of rather late origin and rarely contained reliable information about the earliest stages of the mystical movement in Islam. That is why the interpreters usually agreed that Sufism must be a foreign plant in the sandy desert of Islam, the

3. Annemarie Schimmel, "Raymundus Lullus und seine Auseinandersetzung mit dem Islam," *Eine Heilige Kirche*, fasc. 1 (1953–54).

4. Henri Bremond, *Histoire du sentiment religieux en France*, vol. 9 (Paris, 1928).

religion that was so little known and even less appreciated and that could not possibly be related to any finer and higher spiritual movement.[5]

A German professor of Divinity, F. A. D. Tholuck, produced the first comprehensive book on Sufism in 1821, called *Ssufismus sive theosophia persarum pantheistica*, and four years later an anthology called *Blüthensammlung aus der Morgenländischen Mystik*. Amazingly enough, Tholuck—himself a good Protestant and therefore not at all prone to mystical ideas—understood that "the Sufi doctrine was both generated and must be illustrated out of Muhammad's own mysticism." This statement is all the more surprising in view of the miscellaneous character of the manuscripts and printed books at his disposal.[6]

During the following decades, several theories about the origin of Sufism were brought forth, as A. J. Arberry has shown in his useful book *An Introduction to the History of Sufism*.[7] It will suffice to mention a few of those theories.

E. H. Palmer, in his *Oriental Mysticism* (1867), held that Sufism is "the development of the Primaeval religion of the Aryan race"[8] —a theory not unknown to some German writers during the Nazi

5. Basic sources are: A. J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London, 1950), which deals with the history of the classical period of Sufism; Marijan Molé, *Les mystiques musulmans* (Paris, 1965), the best short introduction to Sufism, its history and meaning; G.-C. Anawati and Louis Gardet, *Mystique musulmane* (Paris, 1961), a fine study of the early period of Sufism and of Sufi practices, mainly *dhikr*, "recollection," as seen by Catholic theologians. See also Louis Gardet, *Expériences mystiques en terres nonchrétiennes* (Paris, 1953). Cyprian Rice, O. P., *The Persian Sufis*, 2d ed. (London, 1969), is a lovable and understanding booklet about mystical experience. Fritz Meier, *Vom Wesen der islamischen Mystik* (Basel, 1943), is a small but weighty book that stresses the importance of initiation in Sufism; it contains rich source material. Seyyed H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London, 1966; New York, 1967), contains a number of important remarks about the Iranian aspect of Sufism, which is dealt with more fully in the same author's *Sufi Essais* (London, 1972). Inayat Khan, *The Sufi Message*, which has been reprinted many times, is a modern and subjective, yet impressive interpretation. Idries Shah, *The Sufis*, as well as his other books, should be avoided by serious students.

6. Friedrich August Deofidus Tholuck, *Ssufismus sive theosophia persarum pantheistica* (Berlin, 1821), and the same author's *Blüthensammlung aus der Morgenländischen Mystik* (Berlin, 1825), are still quite revealing.

7. The history of Sufi studies in Europe has been discussed by A. J. Arberry in *An Introduction to the History of Sufism* (London, 1942).

8. E. H. Palmer, *Oriental Mysticism: A Treatise on Sufistic and Unitarian Theosophy of the Persians* (1867; reprint ed., London, 1969), is immature but has some good points; John P. Brown, *The Dervishes* (1868; reprint ed., London, 1968), gives much important material, though it is not scholarly.

period. In any case, Sufism has often been considered a typically Iranian development inside Islam. There is no doubt that certain important Iranian elements have survived through the ages beneath its surface, as both Henri Corbin and Seyyed H. Nasr have recently emphasized.[9]

Many eminent scholars, mainly in Great Britain, have stressed the importance of Neoplatonic influences upon the development of Sufism. Nobody would deny that Neoplatonism had deeply permeated the Near East—the so-called "Theology of Aristotle" (which is, in fact, Porphyry's commentary on Plotinus's *Enneads*) was translated into Arabic as early as 840. Neoplatonism was "in the air," as Reynold A. Nicholson pointed out in the famous introduction to his selection from Jalāluddīn Rūmī's lyrical poetry in 1898—the first book in the long list of his still unrivaled publications in the field of Sufism.[10] Nicholson, however, understood that the early ascetic movement can be explained without difficulties from its Islamic roots and that, therefore, the original form of Sufism is "a native product of Islam itself." Since Islam grew out of a soil in which ancient oriental, Neoplatonic, and Christian influences were strong, a number of secondary influences may have worked upon Islam even in its earliest phase.

It is only natural that the Christian influences should have interested many European scholars (Adalbert Merx, Arend Jan Wensinck, Margaret Smith),[11] who mainly tried to explore the relations of Muslims with the Syrian monks. The best studies in this field have been written by the Swedish Bishop Tor Andrae, to whom we also owe the classical discussion of the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad in mystical Islam.[12]

The problem of influences becomes more difficult when one thinks of the relations with religious traditions outside the Near

9. See also Emil Brögelmann, *Die religiösen Erlebnisse der persischen Mystiker* (Hannover, 1932); a short survey is given by A. H. Zarrinkoob, "Persian Sufism in Its Historical Perspective," *Iranian Studies* 3 (1970): 3–4.

10. Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (1914; reprint ed., Chester Springs, Pa., 1962), is still a classic, though it is outdated at certain places. His *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (1921; reprint ed., Cambridge, 1967), contains three excellent studies on outstanding personalities (Abū Saʿīd, Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Jīlī); and his *The Idea of Personality in Sufism* (Cambridge, 1923) is a collection of lectures.

11. Adalbert Merx, *Ideen und Grundlinien einer allgemeinen Geschichte der Mystik* (Heidelberg, 1893). Arend Jan Wensinck, *Abūʾl-farağ Bar hebreaus, The Book of the Dove* (Leiden, 1919).

12. Tor Andrae, *I Myrtenträdgården* (Uppsala, 1947). For his other works see the Bibliography.

Eastern world.[13] Many scholars were, and some still are, inclined to accept Indian influences on the formative period of Sufism, beginning with Alfred von Kremer (1868) and Reinhart P. Dozy (1869). But even Max Horten's numerous articles in this field could not bring any stringent proof of such influences[14] in the early period; for later times, the situation is slightly different.[15]

For the earliest period, influences from Turkestan are much more important, as Richard Hartmann has shown; Ignaz Goldziher had already pointed out parallel traditions in Islamic mystical tales and Buddhist stories, but this kind of parallelism can be easily traced back to the common sources, e.g., the Indian fables of the Hitopadeśa and Panchatantra, which were translated into the Near Eastern languages before and shortly after the advent of Islam. And the miracles of saints are the same all over the world. The Turkestani contribution is, however, highlighted in our day by some Turkish mystics who show a tendency of speaking of a typically "Turkish" type of mysticism that comprises a strict Mysticism of Infinity, which describes God as "positive Not-Being." But such generalizations are dangerous.

Even the rather far-fetched possibility of early Chinese—i.e., Taoist—influences on Sufism has been discussed (first by Omar Farrukh). For the later period, the Japanese scholar Toshihiko Izutsu has drawn some interesting parallels between Taoist structures of thought and Ibn ʿArabī's mystical system.[16]

The study of a single mystic's life and work can occupy a scholar throughout his life: Louis Massignon's research into the personality of al-Ḥallāj, the "martyr of divine love," is the best example for this approach; Hellmut Ritter's masterly book on ʿAṭṭār, *Das*

13. See Ignaz Goldziher, "Materialien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Sufismus," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 13 (1899). Reynold A. Nicholson, "A Historical Enquiry concerning the Origin and Development of Sufism," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1906, p. 303; Richard Hartmann, "Zur Frage nach der Herkunft und den Anfängen des Sufitums," *Der Islam* 6 (1915); Annemarie Schimmel, "The Origin and Early Development of Sufism," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, 1958.

14. Max Horten, *Indische Strömungen in der islamischen Mystik* (Heidelberg, 1927–28); like his article "Der Sinn der islamischen Mystik," *Scientia*, July 1927, this book should be used with caution.

15. Robert C. Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (London, 1960), is well documented and thought-provoking, though it overstresses the Indian elements.

16. Omar Farrukh, *At-taṣawwuf fiʾl-Islām* (Beirut, 1957). For parallels see Toshihiko Izutsu, *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts of Sufism and Taoism*, 2 vols. (Tokyo, 1966–67).

Meer der Seele (The Ocean of the Soul), is the result of an ideal combination of strict philology combined with aesthetic and religious understanding. On the other hand, an investigation of a particular mystical attitude, like Benedikt Reinert's study of *tawakkul,* "trust in God," reveals the various facets of one single stage of the Path and sheds light on many kindred problems.

Whether we concentrate upon the history of Sufism, by using a vertical cut, or upon its methods, expressions, and experiences, by taking a cross section, the main problem is the fact that previously unknown manuscripts frequently come to light.[17] The libraries of the Islamic countries, and those in the West, still contain many works that may shed new light upon any of the problems at stake. Even now there is so much material available in the different languages of Islam that any generalization seems impossible.[18] That is why this book can give only a glimpse of a few aspects of Sufism; even this will, probably, be tinged by a personal predilection for mystical poetry derived from the large area of Iranian cultural influence.

How did the Sufis themselves interpret the meaning of the word Sufism?

In interpreting Islamic mystical texts, one must not forget that many sayings to which we give a deep theological or philosophical meaning may have been intended to be suggestive wordplay; some of the definitions found in the classical texts may have been uttered

17. For this problem see Fritz Meier, "Ein wichtiger Handschriftenfund zur Sufik," *Oriens* 20 (1967).

18. As an antidote to the large amount of Arabic and Persian sources, one should consult Ibn al-Jauzī, *Talbīs Iblīs* (Cairo, 1340 h./1921–22), translated by David Samuel Margoliouth as "The Devil's Delusion," *Islamic Culture* 12 (1938), a poisonous book attacking the degeneration of Sufism in the twelfth century. Oriental scholars have published a number of general studies on the history of Sufism in the last twenty years, during which there has been a growing interest in the spiritual life of Islam. Abūʾl-ʿAlāʾ ʿAffīfī, *At-taṣawwuf: ath-thaurat ar-rūḥiyya fīʾl-Islām* [Sufism, the Spiritual Revolution in Islam] (Cairo, 1963); Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ḥilmī, *Al-ḥayāt ar-rūḥiyya fīʾl-Islam* [Spiritual Life in Islam] (Cairo, 1954); M. Qāsim Ghanī, *Taʾrīkh-i taṣawwuf dar Islām* [History of Sufism in Islam] (Tehran, 1330 sh./1951). Among the anthologies of Sufi texts produced in the West, the following useful collections should be mentioned: Johannes Pedersen, *Muhammedansk mystik* (Copenhagen, 1923); Margaret Smith, *Readings from the Mystics of Islam* (London, 1950); Margaret Smith, *The Sufi Path of Love* (London, 1954); Martino Mario Moreno, *Antologia della Mistica Arabo-Persiana* (Bari, Italy, 1951); Émile Dermenghem, *Vies des saints musulmans* (Algiers, 1942); Virginia Vacca, *Vite e detti di Santi Musulmani* (Torino, n.d.). Specialized studies and anthologies will be mentioned in relevant places.

by the Sufi masters as a sort of *ko'an*, a paradox meant to shock the hearer, to kindle discussion, to perplex the logical faculties, and thus to engender a nonlogical understanding of the real meaning of the word concerned, or of the mystical "state" or "stage" in question. The resolution of apparent contradictions in some of these sayings might be found, then, in an act of illumination. This is at least one possible explanation of the fact that the masters give many different answers to the same question. This "willful paradox" and "pious highfalutin" was perhaps "intended to make their flesh creep a little for their health's sake," as W. H. Temple Gairdner puts it, who with full right asks: "Do we not take their language too seriously? It parades as scientific; it is really poetico-rhetorical."[19] Indeed, one aspect of mystical language in Sufism that should never be overlooked is the tendency of the Arabs to play with words. The structure of the Arabic language—built upon triliteral roots—lends itself to the developing of innumerable word forms following almost mathematical rules. It might be likened to the structure of an arabesque that grows out of a simple geometric pattern into complicated multiangled stars, or out of a flower motif into intricate lacework. A tendency to enjoy these infinite possibilities of the language has greatly influenced the style of Arabic poets and prose writers, and in many sayings of the Sufis one can detect a similar joy in linguistic play; the author indulges in deriving different meanings from one root, he loves rhymes and strong rhythmical patterns—features inherited by the mystics of the Persian, Turkish, and Indo-Muslim tongues. But this almost magical interplay of sound and meaning, which contributes so much to the impressiveness of a sentence in the Islamic languages, is lost in translation. So also are the numerous hidden allusions inherent in every root of the Arabic tongue, which point to the whole range of historical, theological, and poetical experiences that may have been present in the mind of the author of an apparently simple statement or an easy-flowing verse.

Another problem is posed by the fondness of many Sufi authors for inventing classifications, usually tripartite, to define certain mystical states; they often press the meaning of a word rather than explain it. The titles of the books composed by Sufis, particularly

19. W. H. Temple Gairdner, *Al-Ghazzālī's "Mishkāt al-anwār": The Niche for Lights* (London, 1915), p. 71.

in the postclassical centuries, show the same peculiarities; they allude to mystical states, to technical expressions, and often contain in themselves a whole spiritual program; other authors may give, by the numerical value of the title, the date of its composition.

What, then, did the Sufis say about the origin of the name *taṣawwuf*, which we translate as Sufism (or, the older form, Sufiism)?

Their definitions go back to the earliest period and thus defy the tendency of some modern Western writers to apply this name only to the later "theosophical" aspect of Islamic mysticism. Some of the pious would even ask the Prophet when he blessed them with his appearance in their dreams: "What is Sufism?" (N 255) Hujwīrī, in the mid-eleventh century, summed up the discussion:

Some assert that the Sufi is so called because he wears a woollen garment (*jāma-i ṣūf*), others that he is so called because he is in the first rank (*ṣaff-i awwal*), others say it is because the Sufis claim to belong to the *asḥāb-i Ṣuffa* (the people of the Bench who gathered around the Prophet's mosque). Others, again, declare that the name is derived from *ṣafā* (purity). (H 30)

Another—Western—definition, namely the derivation from Greek *sophos*, "wise," is philologically impossible. The derivation from *ṣūf*, "wool," is now generally accepted—the coarse woolen garment of the first generation of Muslim ascetics was their distinguishing mark. Kalābādhī, one of the early theoretical writers on Sufism (d. ca. 990), says in this respect:

Those who relate them to the Bench and to wool express the outward aspect of their conditions: for they were people who had left this world, departed from their homes, fled from their companions. They wandered about the land, mortifying the carnal desires, and making naked the body; they took of this world's good only so much as is indispensable for covering the nakedness and allaying hunger. (K 5)

But Sufism is more. Junayd, the undisputed leader of the Iraqian school of mysticism (d. 910), wrote: "Sufism is not [achieved] by much praying and fasting, but it is the security of the heart and the generosity of the soul" (QR 60). Junayd is also credited with a definition in which he sees the prototypes of the Sufis in the prophets as mentioned in the Koran (in later times the ascent through the different stages of the prophets, or the identification with the spirit of one of them, is one aspect of certain Sufi schools):

Sufism is founded on eight qualities exemplified in eight apostles: the generosity of Abraham, who sacrificed his son; the acquiescence of Ishmael, who submitted to the command of God and gave up his dear life;

the patience of Job, who patiently endured the afflictions of worms and the jealousy of the Merciful; the symbolism of Zacharias, to whom God said "Thou shalt not speak unto men for three days save by signs" (Sūra 3:36) and again to the same effect "When he called upon his Lord with a secret invocation" (Sūra 19:2); the strangerhood of John, who was a stranger in his own country and an alien to his own kind amongst whom he lived; the pilgrimhood of Jesus, who was so detached therein from worldly things that he kept only a cup and a comb—the cup he threw away when he saw a man drinking in the palms of his hand, and the comb likewise when he saw another man using his fingers instead of a comb; the wearing of wool by Moses, whose garment was woollen; and the poverty of Muhammed, to whom God Almighty sent the key of all treasures that are upon the face of the earth, saying, "Lay no trouble on thyself, but procure every luxury by means of these treasures," and he answered, "O Lord, I desire them not; keep me one day full fed and one day hungry." (H 39–40)

Some of Junayd's contemporaries emphasized the ascetic side of Sufism, a complete break with what is called "the world" and egotism: "Sufism is to possess nothing and to be possessed by nothing" (L 25).

"Sufism is freedom and generosity and absence of self-constraint" (L 57). Ruwaym's (d. 915) advice to young Ibn Khafīf, "Sufism is to sacrifice one's soul—but do not occupy yourself with the small-talk of the Sufis!" (X 90) shows that the danger of talking too much in a sort of technical and quasi-esoteric language was felt quite early. The Sufi should rather insist upon "faithfulness with the contract" (N 226) and should be free, "neither tired by searching nor disappointed by deprivation" (L 25). "The Sufis are people who prefer God to everything and God prefers them to everything else" (L 25). Some decades after Dhū'n-Nūn (d. 859), who is credited with the last sayings, Sahl at-Tustarī defined the Sufi: "It is he whose blood is licit and whose property is allowed [i.e., he who can be killed and whose property can be legally given to the faithful] and whatever he sees, he sees it from God, and knows that God's loving-kindness embraces all creation" (B 370).

The social and practical aspect of Sufism is understood from definitions like those of Junayd and Nūrī, according to whom "Sufism is not composed of practices and sciences, but it is morals" (H 42), and "who surpasses you in good moral qualities surpasses you in Sufism" (N 311). It means to act according to God's orders and laws, which are understood in their deepest spiritual sense without denying their outward forms. This way of life is possible only through loving devotion: "Sufism is the heart's being pure from the pollution of discord"—a sentence which Hujwīrī (H 38) ex-

plains as follows: "Love is concord, and the lover has but one duty in the world, namely to keep the commandment of the beloved, and if the object of desire is one, how can discord arise?"

The Sufis have spoken of the threefold meaning of *taṣawwuf* according to the *sharīʿa*, the Muslim law, the *ṭarīqa*, the mystical path, and the *ḥaqīqa*, the Truth. It is a purification on different levels, first from the lower qualities and the turpitude of the soul, then from the bondage of human qualities, and eventually a purification and election on the level of attributes (L 27–28).

But there are also warnings against "Sufism." Shiblī (d. 945), as was so often the case, wanted to shock his audience when he asserted: "Sufism is polytheism, because it is the guarding of the heart from the vision of the 'other,' and 'other' does not exist" (H 38). He thus attacks the ascetic who closes his eyes to the created world and wants to concentrate exclusively upon God—but since God is the only Reality, how can one think of "otherness" and so try to avoid it? Therefore, "a true Sufi is he who is not," as Kharaqānī says, with a paradox that has been repeated by other mystics (N 298, 225).

The Islamic mystics enjoyed the play with the root *ṣafā*, "purity," when they discussed Sufism and the qualities of the ideal Sufi: "He that is purified by love is pure (*ṣāfī*), and he who is purified by the Beloved is a Sufi" (H 34), i.e., he who is completely absorbed in the Divine Beloved and does not think of anything but Him has attained the true rank of a Sufi. It is not surprising that the Sufis made attempts to designate Adam as the first Sufi; for he was forty days "in seclusion" (like the novice at the beginning of the Path) before God endowed him with spirit; then God put the lamp of reason in his heart and the light of wisdom on his tongue, and he emerged like an illuminated mystic from the retirement during which he was kneaded by the hands of God. After his fall he performed acts of penitence in India for 300 years until God "elected" him (*iṣṭafā*; see Sūra 3:25) so that he became pure (*ṣāfī*) and thus a true Sufi.[20]

Even a poet who cannot be called exactly a mystic, namely Khāqānī, the greatest panegyrist of Iran (d. 1199), claims: "I am pure since I am a servant of the purity of the Sufi"; and in one of the long chains of oaths that he likes to insert in his *qaṣīdas* he swears "by the Sufis who love afflictions and are enemies of wellbeing." He is thus close to Rūmī, who a century later defined Sufism in this way:

20. Quṭbaddīn al-ʿIbādī, *At-taṣfiya fī aḥwāl aṣ-ṣūfiyya, or Ṣūfīnāme*, ed. Ghulām Muḥammad Yūsufī (Tehran, 1347 sh./1968), p. 27.

"What is Sufism? He said: To find joy in the heart when grief comes" (M 3:3261). Khāqānī alluded to the Sufis

> who carry in their waterbowl the water of life, like Khiḍr,
> and whose rods are as miraculous as the rod of Moses.[21]

Later Persian, Turkish, and Urdu literature abounds in poems that praise the wonderful qualities of this or that Sufi saint or describe the miracles worked by a mystical leader.

Sufism meant, in the formative period, mainly an interiorization of Islam, a personal experience of the central mystery of Islam, that of *tauḥīd*, "to declare that God is One." The Sufis always remained inside the fold of Islam, and their mystical attitude was not limited by their adherence to any of the legal or theological schools. They could reach their goal from any starting point—neither the differences between the legal *madhhabs* nor theological hairsplitting was, basically, of interest to them. Hujwīrī sums up the early Sufi attitude toward science and theology when he poignantly observes: "Knowledge is immense and life is short: therefore it is not obligatory to learn all the science . . . but only so much as bears upon the religious law" (H 11). That means: enough astronomy to find the direction of Mecca as required for the correct performance of prayer, enough mathematics to figure out the legal amount of alms one has to pay—that is what the Sufi, like every good Muslim, should know. For God has condemned useless knowledge (Sūra 2:96), and did not the Prophet say: "I take refuge with Thee from knowledge that profiteth naught" (H 11)?[22] *ʿIlm*, "knowledge," the pursuit of which is incumbent upon every male and female Muslim, is the knowledge of a Muslim's practical duties: "Do not read *ʿilm* except for the true life. . . . Religious science is jurisprudence and exegesis and tradition—whoever reads anything else, becomes abominable" (U 54). True gnosis, namely the gnosis of the One, is not attained through books, and many a legend tells how a Sufi who had reached, or thought he had reached, his goal threw away his books, for: "Books, ye are excellent guides, but it is absurd to trouble about a guide after the goal has been reached" (NS 21).

"To break the ink-pots and to tear the books" was considered by some mystics the first step in Sufism. The great saint ʿUmar Suhrawardī, who studied scholastic theology in his youth, was blessed by

21. Khāqānī, *Diwan*, ed. Sajjādī (Tehran, 1338 sh./1959), qaṣīda p. 250, 51, 369.
22. N 32 attributed to Abū Hāshim aṣ-Ṣūfī.

a saint who put his hands on his chest and made him forget all he had studied, "but he filled my breast with the *ᶜilm ladunnī*" (Sūra 18:65), the "knowledge immediately derived from God" (N 515). ᶜAbdu'l-Qādir Gīlānī performed a miracle by suddenly washing away the text of a philosophy book he considered dangerous to his disciple (N 517); other Sufis were urged by dreams to cast their precious collections of books into a river (N 432).

This predilection for immediate knowledge as contrasted with legalistic scholarship was expressed in later times by many poets and mystics who ridiculed the founders of the great law schools, especially Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767) and Shāfiᶜī (d. 820). Sanā'ī's verse (attributed to both ᶜAṭṭār [AD 100] and Rūmī [D 498]) is a case in point:

> Abū Ḥanīfa has not taught love,
> Shāfiᶜī has no traditions about it.
>
> (SD 605)

Sanā'ī (d. 1131) has often contrasted the *Sufi* with the *Kūfī*, the learned lawyer Abū Ḥanīfa from Kufa, and still in eighteenth-century Sindhi mystical poetry the Sufi is called *lā-kūfī*, "non-Kūfī," i.e., not bound to a particular religious rite.[23]

The Sufis claimed that the whole wisdom was included in the letter *alif*, the first letter in the alphabet and symbol of God (see Appendix 1). Are not many scholars who rely upon books "like the donkey which carries books" (Sūra 62:5)? Did not Noah live for nine hundred years, with only the recollection of God? And, as Rūmī adds with a slightly ironical bent, "he had not read the *risāla* nor the *Qūt al-qulūb*" (M 6:2652–53), the two handbooks of moderate Sufism. For although the Sufis often condemned the bookishness of scholars and admonished their disciples to "strive to lift the veils, not to collect books,"[24] it is a fact that they themselves were among the most productive writers in Islamic history. And many of their theoretical works are no more readable or enjoyable than the dogmatic treatises that they attacked in their poems.

The main target of Sufi criticism was philosophy, influenced by Greek thought: "There is nobody more distant from the law of the

23. For the whole complex see Annemarie Schimmel, "Shah ᶜAbdul Laṭīf's Beschreibung des wahren Sufi," in *Festschrift für Fritz Meier*, comp. Richard Gramlich (Wiesbaden, 1974).

24. Maulānā ᶜAbdurraḥmān Jāmī, *Lawā'iḥ* (Tehran, 1342 sh./1963), no. 24, p. 40.

Hashimite prophet than a philosopher" (U 54; see also MT 291), says ʿAṭṭār, echoing Sanāʾī's sentiments when he wrote:

> From words like "primary matter" and "primary cause"
> you will not find the way into the Presence of the Lord.[25]

The whole "Universal Reason" is nothing in the presence of a single divine order, "Say!" (U 45)—a fine pun on *kull*, "universal," and *qul*, "say," the divine address to the Prophet. The "little philosopher" is both the laughing stock and the scapegoat for the mystics. Strangely enough, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 1037) has become the representative of dry rationalism, although he was as much of a mystical thinker as some of those classified as Sufis.[26] Perhaps the Sufi aversion to him, though already visible in Sanāʾī's poetry (SD 57), was fostered by a story about Majduddīn Baghdādī (d. 1219): "He saw the prophet in his dream and was informed by him that 'Ibn Sīnā wanted to reach God without my mediation, and I veiled him with my hand, and he fell into the fire' " (N 427).

Such an anti-intellectualism, as it was sensed by the orthodox, could lead to dangers for the communal life. One might mention the type of the "wise idiot,"[27] represented in Islamic lore first by Buhlūl, a strange character who lived during the caliphate of Hārūn ar-Rashīd (d. 809). To him, as later to many unknown and unnamed mentally deranged persons, are ascribed sayings in which they give frank expression of their criticism of contemporary life. But since they were insane they escaped punishment: "God has freed them from order and prohibition" (N 296). They are set free by God from their normal state as "slaves" and live in perfect loving union with Him, as ʿAṭṭār points out (MT 245). The type of the *majdhūb*, the "enraptured one" who, under the shock of a mystical vision or any psychological experience, is bereft of his senses and walks around in a fashion prohibited by the religious law (i.e., stark naked) belongs to the darker side of the Sufi world. Many a mystical leader has complained about simpletons who attracted, by their strange behavior and their alleged miracle mongering, the interest of the crowd, who took them for representatives of true spirituality.

25. Abūʾl-Majd Majdūd Sanāʾī, "Sanāʾīʾābād," in *Mathnawīhā*, ed. Mudarris Raẓawī (Tehran, 1348 sh./1969), line 42.

26. Henri Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (New York and London, 1960).

27. Paul Loosen, "Die weisen Narren des Naisaburi," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 27 (1912), deals with this type of mentally deranged "wise" man or "saint."

In the introduction to his *Nafaḥāt al-uns,* Jāmī poignantly criticizes the imitators of the different Sufi types and their vain and dangerous attitudes. The innumerable verses of Persian poets who juxtapose *mollā* and lover, pulpit and gallows, and claim that true love is the greatest enemy of reason and that the lover should be comparable to *Majnūn,* the demented lover who was the laughing stock of children, may have enhanced the importance of this class of illiterate, crude, and sometimes even very nasty "saints."

Comparatively harmless types, living on the charity of the pious, did not really endanger the Sufi movement; but the degeneration of the wandering dervishes or *faqīrs,* the "poor," who performed miracles and were beyond the law (*bī sharᶜ*), has done much to bring Sufism into discredit. It was such people whom European travelers in the East met first, so that one of the honorific names given to the genuine mystic, *faqīr,* "poor," has become, in German, the designation of a mere trickster.

From the very beginning, the mystics strictly distinguished between the true Sufi, the *mutaṣawwif* who aspires at reaching a higher spiritual level, and the *mustawif,* the man who pretends to be a mystic but is a useless, even dangerous, intruder. They knew well that the spiritual path is "hard to travel except for those who were created for that purpose" (H 4), and that it is impossible to become a true Sufi if one is not born that way: "This patched frock must have been sewn in pre-eternity," for, as much as a person may strive to reach the rank of a Sufi, "no ass can turn into a horse by energy and zeal" (U 70–71). Therefore, the complaint about the decline of Sufism almost coincides with its beginning; a saying of the ninth-century mystic, the Persian Yaḥyā ibn Muᶜādh, warns his fellow mystics: "Avoid the society of three classes of men—heedless savants, hypocritical Koran-readers, and ignorant pretenders to Sufism" (H 17; cf. B 411). Poets have satirized the self-styled Sufi (S 666), and in the eleventh century it was repeatedly said: "Today Sufism is a name without reality, but formerly it was a reality without name. . . . The pretence is known and the practice unknown" (H 44). People were content with empty confession, and "blind conformity has taken the place of spiritual enthusiasm" (H 7). The mystical concerts in which the Sufis might become enraptured and begin to spin around their axis were taken, by many, for the essence of Sufism. And to pretend mystical knowledge and experience was—and still is—quite easy. The stock of delightful stories and the legends of

ancient saints could always attract people; well-recited verses might move the listeners to tears; and it was certainly easier to beg food at the doors of the rich and give a blessing in exchange than to pursue a normal profession. Thus a saint of the eleventh century angrily declared: "I looked into Hell, and I saw that most of its inhabitants were those donning a patched frock and carrying a food-bowl" (B 309). These accursed people are, as Baqlī explains the saying, the traitors to mysticism, those who claim gnosis but have only the external color of truth, because they lack knowledge of the Muhammadan religious law. "Their prayer-direction is the charming beloved [*shāhid*], the candle [*shamᶜ* at joyous meetings] and the belly [*shikam*]" (SD 82). As time passed the complaints about the degeneration of Sufism became more eloquent. ᶜUrfī, one of Akbar's court-poets (d. 1591), says in a quatrain:

> The Sufi is busy with deceiving men and women,
> The ignorant one is busy with building up his body,
> The wise man is busy with the coquetry of words,
> The lover is busy with annihilating himself.[28]

He thus attributes to the lover the quality that should be that of the Sufi: namely, to annihilate himself in the Beloved.

The word *Sufi* became a pejorative expression; the great mystic of Delhi in the eighteenth century, Mīr Dard, insistently repeated that he did not want to be called a Sufi, but rather "a true Muhammadan." He did not hesitate to call the representatives of mystical doctrines opposed to his stern, law-bound mysticism "pig-natured," and he often expressed his contempt for the "shopkeeper sheikh," the "seller of patched frocks" who was found everywhere in the country. He would have agreed completely with his Arabian contemporary al-Badr al-Ḥijāzī, whose satire on the decline of Sufism Arberry has translated:[29]

> Would that we had not lived to see every demented madman held up by his fellows as a *Pole*!
> Their *ulema* take refuge in him, indeed, they have even adopted him as a Lord, instead of the Lord of the Throne.
> For they have forgotten God, saying "So-and-so provides deliverance from suffering for all mankind."

28. Muhammad ᶜUrfī Shīrazī, *Kulliyāt*, ed. Ali Jawāhirī (Tehran, 1336 sh./1957), p. 448.
29. Arberry, *Sufism*, p. 128.

When he dies, they make him the object of pilgrimage, and hasten to
his shrine, Arabs and foreigners alike;
Some kiss his grave, and some the threshold of his door, and the dust . . . .

Ḥijāzī has put his finger on the danger of the exaggerated veneration of the spiritual master, the sheikh or *pīr* (see chapter 5), what Muhammad Iqbal has called "pirism," which means the absolute sway of the leader over his followers and the attendant exploitation of ignorant peasants and villagers.

In their criticism of saint worship and pirism—a facet of popular Islam the danger of which one can scarcely realize without having lived in the East—Muslim modernists and moderate Sufis are united. But to reach this point, we have first to travel the long road through the outward history of Sufism. We shall see how this movement has assumed various shapes appropriate to the times and the personalities of its leaders, though its substance has remained the same.