

## **Chapter X**

### **Sufism**

Even if all religions have some mystical elements in their tradition, many Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus are not mystics. Their aims and intents are turned mainly towards external forms of religion. Their practice of religion is based on performing a series of good actions in this world in order to achieve salvation. Many mystics, however, believe that Paradise is nothing more than an image of this world; since the spiritual world is also limited. The real Freedom is beyond Paradise and granted when the mystic is united with the Beloved. Like Plato, many mystics hold that all creation refers to an idea of the higher realm. God has established religion at the image of His creation, in order that man may understand religion as a proof of His Unity. Hence the mystics are wholly absorbed in the search of truth beyond the higher realm. They follow an austere path in order to overcome all worldly obstacles. The mystics regularly practise contemplative meditation; their real aspiration is turned towards the higher realm. By following this type of praxis, the mystic adheres to a universal religion, which he or she experiences as personal. This universal religion tends to isolate the individual by placing him in a private relationship with God, whom he then knows less by rites than by an overflowing Divine intimate Light. The inner aspects of spiritual life become more important than any forms of legalistic worship. The mystics give more importance to a deep level of inner consciousness than to external appearance and ceremony. They follow the path of Love and dedicate themselves to the quest of mystical union with their Beloved.

In this chapter, we do not claim to be exhaustive, we wish to briefly introduce the reader to essential Sufi concepts by examining the following topics: i) the mystical roots of the Qur'ān, ii) mystical sayings attributed to Muhammad, iii) Muhammad's night journey, iv) an historical survey of some great Sufis, and v) some Sufi orders. There are a few possible etymologies of the term Sufism:

The Sufis were only named Sufis because of the purity (*safā'*) of their hearts and the cleanliness of their acts (*āthār*). [...] The Sufi is he whose conduct towards God is

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sincere, and towards whom God's blessing is sincere. [...] They were only called Sufis because their qualities resembled those of the people of the bench (*suffa*), who lived in the time of God's Prophet. [...] They were only named Sufis because of their habit of wearing wool (*sūf*). Those who relate them to the bench and wool express the outward aspect of their conditions [...] Now these were in fact the conditions under which the people of the bench lived, in the time of Prophet: for they were strangers, poor, exiles, having been driven out of their abodes and possessions. (Kalābādhī, 5-7)

Modern scholarship is inclined to derive the origin of *tasawwuf* (Sufism) from *sūf* (wool), since the early ascetics used to wear woollen garments to show their rejection of the world. The word could possibly come from *saff* (row) connoting that the Sufis are an elite; they were always supposed to be in the first row because of their constant practise of Divine worship. The People of the bench (*suffa*) refer to the ascetics of Muhammad's time whose gathering place were the benches in the Mosque of Madīna. Another possible origin could be *safā'* (purity) referring to the moral integrity of Sufis. Abū al-Hasan al-Hujwīrī gave a more precise explanation: "Sufis are those who have 'cleansed' (*safat*) their spirits and thus entered the first 'row' (*saff*) before the Truth." (al-Hujwīrī, 37)

The concept of *Tawhīd* (Unity of God) is a central theme of Muslim faith and consists in witnessing that "There is no god but Allāh (*Lā ilāha illā Allāh*)." Each Sufi wants to realise this truth during his physical existence. *Tawhīd* came to mean the knowledge that there is nothing existent but God. God and creation are not distinct but only one and the same reality, reflecting each other. The mystic realises that beyond all physical sciences, intuitive knowledge is a prerequisite to Divine illumination. *Dhawq*, direct "tasting" of experience, is essential for him.

The spiritual knowledge includes the discovery of the mysteries of God's creation, and the inner meanings of the religious law. It is important to develop a sense of the mystical discourse in order to grasp the spiritual realm. The Prophet had to speak in a human language in order to be understood. Outwardly, he may seem contradictory. However, the meanings are often not primarily literal. The Messenger is frequently investing the words with a meaning that may inspire a profound existential reflection. The teachings of the Prophets are gradual, so that any individual may climb from one spiritual level to another. Knowledge has two aspects: physical and spiritual. The investigation of natural phenomena allows mankind to explore the physical sciences; likewise the discovery and realisation of spiritual truths gives access to the Divine

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science. Humanity must acquire both kinds of knowledge and it is important to realise that there is a continuum between the material and the spiritual worlds.

### *Mystical Roots in the Qur'ān*

Prophet Muhammad addressed mankind in a human language. Yet, outwardly, in order to instruct the believers in the essential truth underlying exoteric appearances, he spoke in a terminology specific to a particular time and place. Beyond all these linguistic limitations, the inner meaning of the revelation brings the disciple into an encounter with God. In that respect, whatever the Prophet tells us, when he speaks according to the Divine Will, is eternal and as such, transcends all situational contingencies.

Moreover, the words used by the Prophet should be regarded as being beyond the rational level and as symbolic vehicles building bridges between individuals. His intent was to transform all society by increasing the awareness of the inner world through metaphors. The primary meaning of revelation is always symbolic. Even where there is a literal referent, such as the laws, the main goal is to reach God. Therefore, praxis and ritual are best seen as spiritual means to uplift the human soul to the heavenly levels of Paradise.

Although the prophetic language conforms to all languages, the Divine mysteries are concealed in the revelation. For one who is initiated into the hidden meaning of revelation and the exegesis of the Prophet, the creation slowly starts to unveil its secrets. Like all Prophets, Muhammad revealed the mysteries of existence, the nature of the soul, and the dynamic transformation of the self along the spiritual worlds. The primary goal of the prophetic revelation is to unite diverse peoples and to evolve spiritually. All language is meaningless without concrete examples. The human being comprehends abstract notions with the help of physical concepts. So, the Prophet took words that, outwardly, pertain to physical phenomena and, through them, demonstrated the analogical nature of the physical world.

The Sufis believe that the Qur'ān has both outer (*zāhir*) and inner (*bātin*) meanings. The Qur'ān focuses on the Transcendence of God but also on His Immanence; God is present both in the world and in the hearts (*qulūb*, sing. *qalb*) of believers. He breathed His own Spirit into Adam (XV: 29; XXXVIII: 72) and He says that He is closer to man than his own jugular vein

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(L: 16). God's presence is all-pervasive (II: 115): "To God belong the East and the West: whithersoever Ye turn, there is the presence of God. For God is all pervading, all-knowing." The Sufis' goal is to achieve their total annihilation (*fanā'*) in God. They derive this concept from the Qur'ān (LV: 27): "Whatever exists is perishing, except His face" and from a prophetic saying "Take over the qualities of God." The *fanā'* becomes an ethical concept of annihilating one's own qualities and gradually develops into a complete extinction of the personality. When the Sufi succeeds in annihilating his human attributes; the Divine attributes, through the Grace of God, are revealed to him and he reaches the more exalted state of *baqā'* (subsistence) in God. The Union with God is described poetically in many ways such as the burning of the moth in the candle or the submersion of the drop in the ocean. God, in the Qur'ān, is described as the Light who illuminates the path of the Sufi. (XXIV: 35): "God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp. The Lamp enclosed in glass. The glass as it were a brilliant star, lit from a blessed Tree, an Olive, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it. Light upon Light! God doth guide whom He will to His Light."

The Qur'ān encourages every Muslim to practice *dhikr* (remembrance of God) (XXXIII: 41): "Remember Me and I will remember you" (II: 152). *Dhikr* is superior to *salāt* (canonical prayers) (XXIX: 45): "Perform the prayers (*salāt*) because it prevents from evil deeds but the remembrance (*dhikr*) is greater indeed." Among Sufis, *dhikr* is the most common reminiscence practised daily to glorify God and achieve spiritual perfection. The most beautiful Names of God (the Beneficent [*al-Rahmān*], the Merciful [*al-Rahīm*], etc.) are recited by Sufis to the rhythm of prayer beads. God reveals Himself as the Lord of the primordial covenant alluded to in the Qur'ānic phrase (VII: 172): "*Alastu bī Rabbikum?* Am I not your Lord?" In this covenant the pre-existing souls of all men had acceded to the Lordship of God before the creation. Through *dhikr* the Sufis recollect this moment in life. Humanity heard their first *dhikr* when God asked them: "Am I not your Lord?"

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### ***Mystical Sayings attributed to Muhammad***

After the Qur'ān, the Sufis inspired themselves from the sayings attributed to Muhammad. He is also reported to have said, "Poverty is my pride". Thus the concept of poverty became important among the Sufis, who are renowned as *faqīr* or *darwish*, both terms meaning "poor." The poor were sometimes viewed as those who had no interest in anything apart from God, who was considered the only Rich One. The Prophet used to distinguish between the "little struggle" (*al-jihād al-asghar*) against the enemy and the "great struggle" (*al-jihād al-akbār*) against our own lower selves. This is why the Sufis by ascetic introspection and exertion try to purify their lower selves to attain *ikhhlās* (absolute purity of intention and act). The lower soul is often symbolised by a black dog which must not be killed but simply tamed to walk in the path of God.

God manifests his beauty through his creation more particularly through handsome youths; in Persian poetry this *hadīth* (saying attributed to Muhammad) is often cited: "I saw my Lord in the shape of a youth with a cap awry." There are several apocryphal traditions used by the Sufis such as "Heaven and earth do not contain me, but the heart of my faithful servant contains Me;" the proximity of God to humanity is also explained by the traditional idea: "He (God) created Adam in His image."

For many Sufis, the imitation of the Prophet is essential to progress on the spiritual path. Beginning in 900 AD, the figure of Muhammad became central. This *hadīth qudsī* (holy tradition where God speaks directly) became widespread "If thou hadst not been I had not created the worlds." Muhammad was considered to be "Prophet when Adam was still between water and clay." Muhammad's spiritual nature was also understood as a Light from Light, and from his Light all the Prophets were created, constituting the different facets of his Light. According to an apocryphal tradition, God said: "I am Ahmad (= Muhammad) without 'm' (i.e. *Ahad*, One)."

### ***Muhammad's Night Journey***

Muhammad's night journey becomes the archetypal example of the journey to God through the seven heavens. The Qur'ān (XVII: 12), in a rather unclear way, relates the ascent of the Prophet, but Muslim traditions offer more details. Muslim philosophers and Sufis have

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highlighted its symbolic and mystical importance. According to several Muslim traditions, there would have been two journeys of the Prophet: the night journey from Makka to Jerusalem (*isrāʾ*) and the other where he rose to the seventh sky (*miʿrāj*) (Steigerwald, 1997b, 95-109). On the night of the *miʿrāj*, the Prophet revisited his original abode.

According to a tradition, Muhammad was sleeping close to the Kaʿba when the Angel Gabriel appeared to him and made him ride on a winged Mare (Burāq) who transported him to Jerusalem. During his spiritual journey, Muhammad met Prophets at different heavens before coming into the presence of God. This visit in spirit of Muhammad to Jerusalem leads, according to mystical commentators, to a kind of circumvolution by Muhammad to the burning bush; Muhammad did not try to enter into the personal life of God; He was hesitant and stopped halfway. The constant concern of the Sufis is to find, rectify or exceed the highest point reached by the Prophet during his night rise (Steigerwald, 1997b, 95-109).

Several Sufis seek to internally revive the stages of the mystical ascent of Muhammad. The experience of the Prophet is used as model, but some Sufis want to go further and become one with God. It is only in ecstasies that Muhammad had been able to reach the Heavenly Jerusalem. Several mystics like Ibn ʿAtaʾ (d. 709/1309) and al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) admit that there are three levels in the human experience of the Divine. The first level consists in a seizure which affects only man's bodily nature. The second level is a rapture of man's spiritual nature, in which only the intellect and not the external senses function. The third is a transforming union with God. Several Sufis interpret this meeting of Muhammad with God as corresponding to the second level of experience (Steigerwald, 1997b, 95-109).

The Sufi Mansūr al-Hallāj (d. 309/922) tried to revive the stages of the mystical ascent of the Prophet. At the time of his ascent towards the skies, the Prophet stopped at the threshold of God without daring to penetrate into the burning bush of Moses. Al-Hallāj identified himself with Muhammad and exhorted him to penetrate into the fire like the mystical butterfly which consumes itself in the flames. Muhammad at the threshold of his ascent did not try to advance in the Divine Light and to enter into the personal life of God. Certain Muslim lawyers regard as scandalous the mystical vocation of these Sufis. According to them, one should not go beyond the threshold where Muhammad stopped, nor penetrate into this holy Light. To want to follow to

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its end the night time ascent initiated by Muhammad, is to transgress the religious law (*sharī'a*). This is why al-Hallāj, who affirmed that he was Truth, was condemned by the lawyers in Baghdad in 922. For the Sufis, Muhammad began his journey in Makka at a certain spiritual level but when he reached Jerusalem, he arrived at a higher spiritual level. The sacred Mosque of Makka represents the station of the heart (*qalb*) which one cannot associate with bodily faculties. The one who is at this spiritual level perceives the signs of the Lord. The Mosque al-Aqsā of Jerusalem represents the station of Spirit which is the most distant from the earthly world. One reaches this spiritual level by contemplation. The one who is on this level perceives and understands the real meaning of the Divine signs (Steigerwald, 1997b, 95-109).

For the Sufis, Jerusalem holds a privileged position. It is the first and last *qibla* (pole of prayer), the city of supreme Hegira. It represents the place of origin and the place of return to the house of God. It is the station of spiritual ascent. The Mosque al-Aqsā (most distant) represents the station of the Spirit (*maqām al-Rūh*). On the Day of Judgment (*Yawm al-dīn*), all men and women will be brought back to Jerusalem, and the gate of Paradise will open there. Several traditions report the ascent of the Prophet and there are many versions of this event, to which Muslim mystics give different interpretations. The dominant position considers that Muhammad rose towards the skies with his spirit and his body. Certain mystics prefer to see only a spiritual ascent. (Steigerwald, 1997b, 95-109).

### *Historical Survey of some Great Sufis*

A strong Sufi tradition links the origin of Sufism to the Prophet through his cousin and son-in-law 'Alī Ibn Abī Tālib. Muhammad invested 'Alī with a cloak (*khirqā*) on initiating him into the esoteric secrets. In his turn, 'Alī invested his followers, and through them the *silsila* (chain of affiliation) passed on the inner knowledge to succeeding generations. 'Alī used to meet the Prophet regularly in private. He is reported to have said:

And whenever I would visit him at some of his resting places, he would arrange for being alone with me and ask his wives to leave, so that no one would remain except he and I. And when he would come to me in private, he would ask everyone to withdraw except Fātima or one of my two sons, and when questioned he would answer me. And when I would remain silent and my questions would be exhausted, he would begin himself. So that nothing was revealed to the Prophet of the verses of the Qur'ān, or taught to him by

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Allāh, Exalted is He, concerning what was lawful and what was forbidden, command or prohibition, obedience or sin, things past or future —but he would teach it to me and I would write it down in my own hand. He would explain to me its true meaning (*ta'wīl*), and its apparent (*zāhir*) and hidden (*bātin*) significance, and I would commit it to memory and would not forget even a letter of it (Hollister, 21-22).

In reality, most Sufīs are Sunnīs even though, for the majority of them, the chain of affiliation goes back to Muhammad *via* 'Alī.

In the *Muqaddima*, the famous historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) describes the common beliefs shared by both Sufīs and Shī'ites. He noticed that the Sufīs were mainly inspired by the Shī'ī notion of the Infallible Guide (Imām) from whom the idea of the Perfect Human Being (*Al-Insān al-Kāmil*) derives. “[Shī'a] theories entered so deeply into their religious ideas that they based their practice of using a cloak (*khirqā*) on the [alleged] fact that 'Alī clothed al-Hasan al-Basrī in such a cloak and caused him to agree solemnly that he would adhere to the mystic path. [This tradition] was continued, according to the Sufīs, through al-Junayd, one of the Sufi *Shaykh*(s). (Ibn Khaldūn, 1958, vol. 2, 186-187) [...] Clearly, Sufism has plagiarised this idea from the Shī'a and come to believe in it. The [Sufīs], furthermore, speak about the order of existence of the Saints (*Abdāl*) who come after the Pole, exactly as the Shī'a speak about their Representatives (*Nuqabā'*). They go so far [in the identification of their own concepts with those of Shī'a] that when they construed a chain of transmitters for the wearing of Sufi cloak (*khirqā*) as a basic requirement of the mystic way and practice, they made it go back to 'Alī. This points in the same direction and can only [be explained as Shī'a influence].” (Ibn Khaldūn, vol. 3, 93)

Most of the time, Sufīs adopted the language of esoteric Shī'ism and the terminology of Neo-Platonism already incorporated into Islamic spirituality by that time. Moreover, much of the terminology used in the Sufi teachings is Platonic or, more accurately, Neo-Platonic. The basic esoteric framework of the Sufi teachings is tinged with Hellenic wisdom, reinterpreted by Plotinus, and conveyed by Sufi and Shī'ī esotericism. For Plato, the world of ideas is the ideal mirror of the physical world. But he argued that, in comparison with the world of ideas, the physical world is illusory, although he believed that both realms are connected to each other through the Demiurge who sustains the material world. Since Platonism is more an intellectual

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contemplation of the world of ideas, the seed of Socratic metaphysical idealism continues to grow and to try to reconcile the spiritual world with the physical one. Yet, several centuries were to pass before Platonism would blossom into a full-blown mystical system.

Plotinus (205-270) established Neo-Platonism. He was an Egyptian student of Ammonius Saccas of Alexandria (*circa* 175-242). Plotinus did not consider himself a Neo-Platonist; rather, he regarded himself as being fully faithful to Plato. However, both he and Ammonius were innovators. Plotinus wrote the *Enneads*, a series of fifty-four essays where he shared themes common to the Platonic tradition. He believed that the physical realm is influenced by the world of ideas. He preferred intuition over empirical approaches, believed in the immortality of the soul, and in the essential goodness of the physical universe (Steigerwald, 1999b, 177-178).

Moreover, even if Plotinus criticised certain aspects of Aristotelianism, he actually coupled Platonism with Aristotle's dialectic. Rather than presenting a detailed examination of Neo-Platonic emanationism, it is important to outline the major concepts in Plotinus's system, and to explain how these terms have been integrated into the Sufi metaphysics of unity in diversity. Furthermore, the similarity between Neo-Platonism and the Sufi teachings does not lie in the exactness of cosmological affinity but rather in the correspondence of terms and the importance of spiritual beings. The central feature of Neo-Platonism is the notion of God consisting of the One, the Intellect, and the Universal Soul. The Universal Soul embraces the entire spiritual world, which includes all human souls. However, according to Plotinus, each individual soul must, through the intellect, enter into a relationship with the body. Life itself is an emanation from the Universal Soul (Plotinus, 244), while matter, identified with evil, is the lowest emanation of the Universal Soul.

Plotinus was a rational mystic. Therefore, the Neo-Platonic soteriology is characterised by a moral purification, a logical analysis of the entire world, and an ecstatic communion with the One. All these three aspects are also shared in the Sufi soteriology. A spiritual hierarchy is established between God and the physical world. In other words, successively lowered-down levels of spirit animate all creatures. And it is the loving and knowing Divine Power which brings all reality under its Unity. The formative period of Sufism extended over the first three centuries of *Hijra*. The first phase of this movement is characterised by asceticism and quietism.

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The first Sufis were reacting against excessive wealth and luxury. Hasan al-Basrī (d. 110/728) considered the world (*dunyā*) as a venomous snake, smooth to the touch, but deadly. The ascetic movement spread from Madīna to Kūfa and Basra, to Damascus and Baghdad, to Khurāsān and Sind. The first examples of organised spiritual life were formed around remarkable personalities such as Hasan al-Basrī and Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/777), who brought a pietistic and an ascetic impulse to their meditation upon the meaning of the Qur’ān. These early figures had a great influence on their contemporaries, through their works and public preaching. They drew attention to the need for introspection and moral analysis as part of the duty to obey God. During this era, there were no formal social structures around these Sufi Masters.

This period culminates with a woman-saint, Rābi‘a of Basra (d. 185/801) who centred her life on Divine Love. She emphasised the importance of selfless love and entire devotion to God. Rābi‘a remained single all her life to focus on her goal: union with her Beloved. According to an anecdote, Hasan al-Basrī once asked Rābi‘a for her hand in marriage. She replied: “The tie of marriage applies to those who have being. Here being has disappeared, for I have become naughted to self and exist only through Him. I belong wholly to Him. I live in the shadow of His control. You must ask my hand of Him, not of me.” (‘Attār, 1966, 46) Of course Hasan never had the chance to meet God directly to ask her hand.

The essential of Rābi‘a’s teaching is summed up in this excerpt:

O God, if I worship Thee for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell and if I worship Thee in hope of paradise, exclude me from paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thy own sake, grudge me not Thy everlasting beauty. O God, my whole occupation and all my desire in this world of all worldly things, is to remember Thee, and in the world to come, of all things of the world to come, is to meet Thee. This is on my side, as I have stated; now do Thou whatsoever Thou wilt. (‘Attār, 1966, 51)

For Rābi‘a, Paradise is nothing but an image of this world since the spiritual world is also contingent. The real Freedom is beyond Paradise when the seeker is united with the Beloved. She did not want to rest till she had tasted the Essence. She was not afraid of hell nor did she desire Paradise. The only fear she had was to be cut off from the presence of God. She was intoxicated with the Love of God.

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Dhū al-Nūn al-Misrī (d. 245/859) lived mainly in Cairo but he travelled extensively. He was imprisoned by the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph al-Ma’mūn because he refused to adhere to the Mu‘tazilī point of view on the createdness of the Qur’ān. Dhū al-Nūn was among the first to make use of the notion of *coincidentia oppositorum* (conjunction of opposites). Thus God is both *al-Muhyī* (the Giver of Live) and *al-Mumīt* (The One who kills).

The transition from simple asceticism to a complex theosophy occurred in the III<sup>rd</sup>/IX<sup>th</sup> century. Trust in God (*tawakkul*) was defined as a mystical state (*hāl*) by Shaqīq of Balkh (d. 194/810). During this period, Sufis distinguished mystical knowledge (*Ma‘rifa*) from simple knowledge (*ilm*) derived from human intellect. The outstanding *Shaykh*(s) of the IX<sup>th</sup> and X<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 260/874) and Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 297/910), later became known as the principal organizers of the Sufi movement.

Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī lived in Bisṭām in the province of Qūmis. In a moment of ecstasy, he said: “Glory be to me! (*Subhānī*)” and “How great is my majesty! (*Mā a’zama sha’nī*)”. Because of his ecstatic utterances alluding to the identification of lover and Beloved some later Sufis considered him as the upholder of the path of intoxication (*sukr*) as opposed to the path of sobriety (*sahw*) represented by al-Junayd.

Al-Bisṭāmī’s philosophy of life could be summed up in his saying: “If you were given the election of Adam, the holiness of Gabriel, the friendship of Abraham, the yearning of Moses, the purity of Jesus, and the love of Muhammad, still you would not be satisfied. You would seek for more, transcending all things. Keep your vision fixed on high, and descend not; for whatever you descend into, by that you will be veiled.” (‘Attār, 1966, 112) The real Sufi yearns for Freedom and will never be glad till he is able to throw off his bondage. Thus he aspires to a higher realm and progresses along the spiritual path (*tarīqa*) towards his goal of passing away in God (*fanā*).

A disciple came to see al-Bisṭāmī and he inquired why, in spite of having led a pious life, he never acquired mystical knowledge. Al-Bisṭāmī explained that his own preoccupation with himself was interfering with his quest. The remedy was to perform a series of humiliating acts in public until the veil was lifted from his eyes. (‘Attār, 1966, 112) One must be humble to deserve the Grace of God. Al-Bisṭāmī explained that for twelve years, he had been the blacksmith of his soul. He had submitted his soul to an arduous discipline and hammered it with self-blame, till he

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fashioned it into a mirror. Through godly service and obedience, he polished the mirror. He gazed upon his own reflection for a long time until he was able to snap the girdle of delusion, coquetry, and self-regard. By God's Grace, he finally was able to meet Him ('Attār, 1966, 113).

There are two main *silsila* groups which later on split into hundreds of Sufi orders. The first *silsila* (chain) traces its spiritual lineage from *Shaykh* to *Shaykh* all the way back to Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī. The second goes back to Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd who decisively influenced the entire course of orthodox Sufism. He was the head of an influential school and died in Baghdad in 298/910. Al-Junayd was careful to develop a conception of Sufism acceptable to Sunnīs. Thus, he explained the experience of ecstasy by the fact that all things find their origin in God. He distinguished the *sharī'a* (religious law) from the *Haqīqa* (Truth). However, he never proclaimed the uselessness of the first even if the access to *Haqīqa* represents a higher spiritual level.

Al-Hallāj (d. 309/922) was born in Tūr in the Persian province of Fārs. He was initiated to Sufism early in life and was trained by famous *Shaykh*(s) such as Sahl al-Tustarī (d. *circa* 283/898), 'Amr al-Makkī (d. 297/909), and al-Junayd. Al-Hallāj became known as *Hallāj al-asrār* (the Carder of consciences). In an instant of spiritual enlightenment, he exclaimed: "*Anā al-Haqq* (I am the Truth)." Al-Hallāj's insistence on publicly proclaiming his mystical experience transgressed the practice of *taqiyya* (precautionary dissimulation) (Steigerwald, 1998). The Sufis are not supposed to divulge to all the people experiences that are beyond their understanding. For his proclamation of intimacy with the Divine, al-Hallāj was imprisoned and executed by the 'Abbāsīd authorities in 309/922. In spite of his unfair condemnation to die, al-Hallāj was not angry at those who sentenced him. He is reported to have said: "Kill me, my faithful friends! For in my slaughter is my life— my death is in my life and my life in my death." (Chittick, 1983, 183). For the Sufi, physical death leads to a rebirth at a higher level like a seed that dies and becomes a thousand ears. It is also wrong to affirm "I exist and God exists" because this affirmation goes against the meaning of *shahāda* "There is no reality but the Real." Thus when al-Hallāj said "*Anā al-Haqq* (I am the Truth)," the I (*Anā*) does not refer to himself but to God. Rūmī explains:

When Hallāj's love for God reached its utmost limit, he became his own enemy and naughted himself. He said "I am God" that is, "I have been annihilated; God remains,

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nothing else.” This is extreme humility and the utmost limit of servanthood. It means, “He alone is.” To make a false claim and to be proud is to say, “Thou art God and I am the servant.” For in this way you are affirming your own existence, and duality is the necessary result. If you say, “He is God,” that too is duality, for there cannot be a “He” without an “I.” Hence God said, “I am God.” Other than He, nothing else existed. Hallāj had been annihilated, so those were the words of God. (Excerpt of *Fīhi mā fīhi* 193/202 translated by Chittick, 1983, 191-192)

‘Ayn al-Qudāt (d. 525/1132), born in Western Persia, was inspired by the Sufī Ahmad al-Ghazzālī (d. 517/1123) who wrote a treatise on mystical love entitled *Sawānīh*. ‘Ayn al-Qudāt was also persecuted and put to death for certain of his beliefs about the Unity of the Creator with His creation. He expanded the theory of the science of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*) out of the Muslim profession of faith (*shahāda*): “*Lā ilāha illā Allāh* (There is no god but God!).” The first part *Lā ilāha* (There is no god) refer to malicious attributes which deny the existence of God. The Muslim travels from *Lā ilāha* to the realm of *illā Allāh*; in front of *illā Allāh* stands Iblīs (Satan) whom the Muslim must confront to profess the entire *shahāda*. For ‘Ayn al-Qudāt, God is the source of paradoxes and both elements of the paradox must be experienced to attain the Truth.

Some Sufīs such as Abū Bakr Muhammad al-Kalābādhī (d. circa 380/990), ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1074), and Abū Hāmid al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) felt compelled due to persecution to demonstrate in their works that the principles of Sufism were in agreement with those of Ash‘arism, the main orthodox school of theology. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazzālī was born in Tūs near Mashhad. He was trained mainly in *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *kalām* (theology), and *falsafa* (Islamic philosophy). He harshly criticised the philosophers in one of his work. Later in 1091, he went to teach in a famous school in Baghdad called the Nizāmiyya. During the period of his professorship, he went through a personal crisis. In his work *Al-munqidh min al-dalāl* (The Deliverer from Error), he described this difficult period where he experienced terrible doubts about his actual capacity to reach the truth.

When God Most High, of His kindness and abundant generosity, had cured me of this sickness, I was of the view that the categories of those seeking the truth were limited to four groups: i) The *mutakallimūn*, who allege that they are men of independent judgement and reasoning. ii) The Bāṭiniyya, who claim to be the unique possessors of *al-ta’līm* and the privileged recipients of knowledge acquired from the Infallible Imām. iii) The philosophers, who maintain that they are the

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men of logic and apodeictic demonstration. iv) The Sufis, who claim to be the familiars of the Divine Presence and the men of mystic vision and illumination. I then said to myself: “The truth cannot transcend these four categories, for these are the men who are following the paths of the quest for truth.” (al-Ghazzālī, 58)

After studying each of these four groups, he concluded that the truth lay within Sufism. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazzālī accused the *Bāṭiniyya* (Nīzārī Ismā‘īlīs) of *taqlīd* (imitation) of their Imām. For the Nīzārī Ismā‘īlī Nāsir-i Khusraw (d. after 465/1072), the word *taqlīd* does not have a pejorative sense. Imitation is necessary at the beginning; it is through imitation that man can attain true certainty and obtain access to Divine Unity. Only the Imām of the time can lead others to true certainty (Khusraw, 59-60). The imitation is the starting point in the development of faith. It is necessary to follow the examples of Prophets and Imāms (Steigerwald, 2000, 33). It is a pity that a brilliant mind such as al-Ghazzālī failed to recognise the mystical character of the *Bāṭiniyya*; those who seek the inner or spiritual meaning (*bāṭin*) of the Qur’ān and believe in a living Imām, a direct descendant of the first Imām ‘Alī Ibn Abī Tālib. At the end of his life, he abandoned his teaching career and took refuge in Sufism.

Sufism grew slowly into a theosophical system by adopting traditions of Neo-Platonism, the Hellenistic world, Gnosticism, and spiritual trends from Iran and various countries from the eastern Mediterranean to Iraq. One *Shaykh* who contributed to this development was the Persian Shihāb al-dīn al-Suhrawardī who was executed in 587/1191 in Aleppo. In his main work, entitled *Hikmat al-ishrāq* (The Wisdom of illumination), he defended the existence of a unique Wisdom expressed through the Divine Light. According to this theosophy, it is through the illumination of the soul by God that the Sufi reaches His Beloved. To him is attributed the philosophy of *ishrāq* (“illumination”), and he claimed to unite the Persian (Zoroastrian) and Egyptian (Hermetic) traditions. He developed an intricate theory explaining the role of angels in creation and the journey of the soul across the cosmos; the “Orient” (East) is the world of pure light and archangels, the “Occident” (West) that of darkness and matter. Human beings live in “Western” exile.

Farīd al-dīn ‘Attār (d. circa 627/1229) lived most of his life in and around the city of Nīshāpūr. He was killed during the Mongol invasion. His name ‘Attār indicated that he was an apothecary by profession. One of his most famous works is the *Mantiq al-tayr* (The Conference

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of Birds) (‘Attār, 1984). It is a tale about a group of birds that decide to seek their King, the Sīmurgh, whom they vaguely remember. The path leading to the King is sinuous and hard; many birds die or abandon the journey. Ultimately only thirty birds pass through the seven valleys and arrive at their destination. The meaning of thirty birds in Persian is “*sī murgh*”. The tale is an elaborate description of the Sufi path. The bird-souls pass through different stages: asceticism, illumination, and union. The birds reflect a variety of human personalities. Only a few selected birds reach the last valley of *fanā*’ (annihilation).

Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) was born in Balkh. His father Bahā’ al-dīn was a legist and spiritual guide who left Balkh to escape the Mongols and established his family in Konya, also known as Rūm, in Anatolia. Rūmī was trained under many masters but Shams-i dīn of Tabrīz deeply influenced the course of his life. Rūmī recognised in Shams the Perfect Human Being whose guidance helped him to reach true ecstasy. But Shams mysteriously disappeared in 1248, probably killed by some jealous disciples. Rūmī was disconsolate and became a poet due to his experience of love, longing, and loss.

Most of his poems were composed in a state of bliss, inspired by the music of the reed-flute. He wrote beautiful mystical poems in the *Rub ‘āiyyāt* (Quatrains) and dedicated one of his works entitled: *Divān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī* to Shams. The name Shams means the “Sun;” like the Sun, Shams dazzled Rūmī with his bright Light. For Rūmī, the face of Shams is the Sun towards which the cloud-like hearts of men are moving (Rūmī, 1977, original 26; translation 27). The Light of Shams is “at once joined with all things and apart from all” (Rūmī, 1977, original 36; translation 37). Shams is the “beauty and glory of the horizons” (Rūmī, 1977, original 40; translation 41) and “without the power imperial of Shams al-Haqq of Tabrīz one could neither behold the moon nor become the sea” (Rūmī, 1977, original 78; translation 79). For Rūmī, without the help of the true Master (Shams) the human soul cannot reach the sea (God). The Sun of the face of Shams “never shone upon aught perishable but he made it eternal” (Rūmī, 1977, original 92; translation 93). According to Rūmī, people must seek future bliss from the Sun of Tabrīz who is the source of all knowledge (Rūmī, 1977, original 176; translation 27).

Rūmī is also the author of the *Mathnawī* (Spiritual Couplets). In the opening couplets, he compares the conscious human soul to the reed-flute (*nay*). When the soul remembers the state

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of union before the worldly creation, it feels emptied of self and longs eagerly for a return to its Lord.

Hearken to the tale of the reed flute,  
complaining of the pangs of separation:  
Since they tore me from the reed-bed,  
my laments move men and women to tears.  
O for bosom torn like mine with wound of severing  
that I may tell it of the pain of longing!  
One who is far from the place of origin  
longs for the day of the Return.  
(Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, n.d., vol. 1, lines 1-10)

The wise soul considers this world as a prison and yearns for Freedom. “Each and every part of the world is a snare for the fool and a means of deliverance for the wise.” (Rūmī, excerpt of *Mathnawī*, 1925-1940, VI, 4287 translated by Chittick, 1983, 24) The body keeps man in the torment of this physical world; the man, who is not conscious that he lives in a prison (physical world), does not long for Freedom. As Rūmī explains, “The only thing that will keep a caged bird from trying to escape is ignorance.” (Excerpt of *Mathnawī*, 1925-1940, I, 1541 translated by Chittick, 1983, 29)

The objective of man is to struggle against his own ego because “the sensual ego is blind and deaf to God” (Rūmī, excerpt of *Mathnawī*, 1925-1940, IV, 235 translated by Chittick, 1983, 33) and incites to evil. The ego is similar to a dog that must be tamed and submitted to the Universal Intellect that is luminous and seeks the good. “God wills both good and evil, but He only approves the good.” (Rūmī, excerpt of *Fīhi mā fīhi*, 179-180/186-188 translated by Chittick, 1983, 56). According to Rūmī, everything serves God’s Will even those who disobey His Commands:

When you consider carefully, you see that all are doing God’s service: the impious and the pious, the rebellious and the obedient, the devil and the angel. For example, a King desires to test and make trial of his servants with various means, so that the constant may be discerned from the inconstant, the loyal from the disloyal, and the faithful from the unfaithful. There is need for a tempter and provoker so that the servants’ constancy may be established. If there were none, how could it be established? So that tempter and

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provoker does the King's service, since the King desired him to act in such a way. He sent a wind so that the constant could be discerned for the inconstant, the gnats from the trees and gardens. (Excerpt of *Fīhi mā fīhi* 46/58 translated by Chittick, 1983, 100)

Besides his poetry, Rūmī left a collection of talks entitled: *Fīhi mā fīhi* ("There is in it what is in it") as they were noted down by his disciples.

Muhyī al-dīn Ibn Arabī was born in Murcia in Spain. He travelled extensively and finally established himself in Damascus where he died in 638/1240. During the course of his pilgrimage to Makka, he met a Persian lady who was for him a source of Divine Wisdom. This encounter inspired him to write the charming poems of the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* (Interpreter of Yearning). Ibn 'Arabī was able to systematise Sufi theory into an aesthetic worldview. His contribution to Sufism is impressive. Two of his most influential masterpieces are: *Al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya* (The Makkan Revelations) and *Fusūs al-Hikam* (The Bezels of Wisdom).

The central concept underpinning his metaphysics is the Unity of Being (*Wahdat al-Wujūd*). God is both Transcendent and Immanent. The Divine Essence is unknowable whereas His Unity manifests itself in plurality. In his Unity reside the qualities of all potential beings. The first part of the *shahāda* "*Lā ilāha* (There is no god)" refers to the *Theos agnostos* (The unknown God) whereas the second part "*illā Allāh* (but God)" points to the God of revelation. Ibn 'Arabī explains the creation of the cosmos by the fact that God wanted to escape from isolation. This idea is inspired from a *hadīth*: "I was a hidden treasure and I desired to be known, so I created the creation in order that I might be known." Creation is thus the manifestation of the One in the plurality of all creatures. For Ibn 'Arabī, the goal of the Sufi is to acquire the Wisdom through which the Gnostic uncovers the One hidden in the plurality of all beings.

Prophet Muhammad is conceived as the Universal Man, the Perfect Human Being, the total theophany of the Divine Names, the prototype of creation. Muhammad is the *Logos* "Divine Word," (Steigerwald, 1996, 335-352) each particular aspect of which is identified with a Prophet, and he is also the model for spiritual realisation. The Sufi has to pass through different stages until he becomes united with the Muhammadan Reality (*Haqīqa Muhammadiyya*). The notion of union does not mean becoming one with God, but the Sufi must realise the already existing fact that he is already one with God because God is everywhere.

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The One manifests most perfectly in *Al-Insān al-Kāmil*, the Perfect Human Being. He appears in every generation and becomes the mediator through whom the process of emanation and return occurs. The Perfect Human Being is the *Qutb* (Pole), the axis around which the universe revolves. *Shaykh(s)*, inspired by Ibn ‘Arabī and his disciple ‘Abd al-Karīm Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Jīlī (d. circa 820/1417), started to attribute to themselves superhuman qualities. They became known as *Awliyā’* (Friends of God) and pretended to be *Qutb*.

### *Sufi Orders*

The most decisive institutional formation came with the emergence of Sufi orders. A number of famous figures of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries lent their names to associations that developed spiritual methods. Each of these associations had a “chain” (*silsila*) of affiliation. Chains were plotted backward in time to end finally with Muhammad. Nearly all of these chains reach Muhammad via his son-in-law and cousin ‘Alī even though most Sufi orders belong to the Sunnī branch of Islam.

The Sufi orders are various. The Mawlawiyya order traces its chain to Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī. Sultān Walad, the son of Rūmī, was the real organiser of this fraternity. Their members are known in the West as the Whirling Dervishes. They practice *samā’* (cosmic dance) which consists of listening to music and chanting to favour a state of ecstasy and mystical trance. Sufis maintain that melodies and rhythms prepare the soul for a better receptivity to the Divine realities (Steigerwald 1999c).

The Bektāshiyya order derives its name from Hajjī Bektāsh (d. circa 738/1337) of Khurāsān. The members are renowned for their syncretism. Shī‘ism, Byzantine Christianity and esoteric cults inspire their rituals and beliefs. In contrast to the Mawlawiyya, composed of an educated elite, the Bektāshiyya attracted less literate people who were impressed by magic-like rituals and the political influence of the order.

Two other orders emerged in Iraq the Suhrawardiyya and the Rifā‘iyya. The chain of affiliation of the first order goes back to Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d. 563/1168) a disciple of Ahmad al-Ghazzālī. He wrote a rulebook for initiates, *Kitāb ādāb al-murīdīn* (Book of the Manners of the Disciples). The real founder of the fraternity was Abū al-Najīb’s nephew, Shihāb

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al-dīn Abū Hafs ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234) who is the author of *‘Awārif al-ma‘ārif* (*Masters of Mystical Insights*). The Rifā‘iyya order was founded by Ahmad Ibn ‘Alī al-Rifā‘ī (d. 578/1182). Their members are known as “Howling Dervishes” because they perform a loud *dhikr* recitation, dramatic rituals such as fire-eating, piercing hands, necks with iron rings; biting heads off live snakes, etc.

Abū Hasan al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258) founded the Shādhiliyya order in Tunis. One of the famous *Shaykh(s)* of this order is Ibn ‘Atā’ Allāh (d. 709/1309) who wrote *Latā’if al-minan* (Subtle Graces) which exalted the role of the *Shaykh* as *Walī* and *Qutb*. He was also the author of a very popular collection of Maxims known as *Hikam*. The members of this fraternity remain involved in worldly matters.

The Qādiriyya were established by the famous saint ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī (d. 561/1166). After his death, his disciples propagated his doctrine and legend through his works and sermons. The Qādiriyya are spread mainly from North Africa to Southeast Asia. Like the Naqshbandiyya, they feel it is important to influence political leaders in religious matters.

The Naqshbandiyya order was organised by Bahā’ al-dīn al-Naqshabandī (d. 791/1389), but its rules were properly established by Yūsuf al-Hamadhānī (d. 535/1140) who insisted on the importance of practicing a silent *dhikr*. The members of the fraternity come mainly from Central Asia and India. They preserve an entirely Sunnī outlook and trace their chain of affiliation back to Muhammad *via* Abū Bakr.

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The majority of Muslims are not mystics. They prefer a literal interpretation of the Qur’ān and pursue mainly the external forms of Islam i.e. the *sharī‘a* (religious law). The Sufis favour a spiritual exegesis (*ta’wīl*) of the Qur’ān and follow all the religious obligations of the *sharī‘a*. But, for the true Sufis, all of this is not enough; they yearn for Freedom in perpetual search of the *Haqīqa* (Truth). However, over the ages, only a select few with great spiritual courage have reached their goal, mainly all the great Prophets (Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and

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Muhammad), and most probably al-Hallāj and Rūmī. These exceptional souls were all passionately in love with their Lord.

In Islam, there are two main paths: the exoteric and the esoteric. In the exoteric path, the majority of Muslims fulfil their religious obligations. They prefer reciting from the Book, fasting and prayer. Their main objective is to reach Paradise. In the esoteric path, the Sufis also fulfil their religious obligations but they desire to go further and to rise spiritually through meditation. Their main objective is to be reunited with their Beloved. We may contrast concepts used in each of these two paths: the apparent (*zāhir*) and the hidden (*bātin*); the religious law (*sharīʿa*) and the inner Truth (*Haqīqa*); the descent of revelation (*tanzīl*) and the spiritual exegesis (*taʿwīl*). The following table distinguishes the exoteric from the esoteric path (Steigerwald, 1999b, 179).

### Exoteric Path

*Zāhir* (the apparent)

*Tanzīl* (revelation)

They prefer the Book, fasting and prayer. Their main objective is to reach Paradise.

Religious obligations

*Islam* (submission)

Qawl (verbal profession) and *ʿamal* (action in accordance with the literal meaning of the Qurʾān)

Actions oriented towards the material life

*Nazar* (discursive reasoning)

### Esoteric Path

*Bātin* (the hidden)

*Taʿwīl* (spiritual exegesis)

They yearn for Freedom. Their main objective is to be reunited with their Beloved.

Religious obligations and asceticism

*Īmān* (faith)

*Qawl*, *niyya* (intention) and *ʿamal* (action in accordance with the spiritual meaning of the Qurʾān)

Seeking the spiritual ascent

*ʿAqlanī* (pure intellectual reasoning)

Muslim mystics use a common spiritual terminology in their narrative frameworks, sometimes as parables, to convey spiritual meaning. The path of ascent from the lower to the upper world is based on the Sufi metaphysics of unity in diversity. However, if God is One, then all that exists is part of the Unity of God. In Sufi cosmology, an unknowable God is at the summit of a hierarchy of angels. The latter occupy various spiritual levels and they too are

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unknowable to the soul occupying the levels below them. In this world, the spiritual realities are known by analogy. Reflecting metaphorically on the revelation of God and His Signs, it is possible to perceive His Divine Nature. However, in the spiritual world, physical symbols are no longer required. Through the inner vision of all the levels of angels, it is possible to acquire knowledge of the spiritual world. However, God will forever remain Unknowable.

The greatest power of human beings comes from the Spirit (*Rūh*), the Divine breath that animates and pervades all things. It is manifested throughout creation at different levels. God, through his Divine Will, chose to confer upon human beings the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him, fulfilling the primary purpose of the whole creation.

Muslim mystics used Neo-Platonic cosmology and soteriology in which God has provided a means for all humanity to link with its Creator through what Plotinus would have referred to as the contemplation of the One. In the physical world, the rational soul learns through the senses. However, if assisted by the Master or divinely inspired Sage, the human spirit can become acquainted with the Divine secrets and heavenly realities. The basis of the Sufi spiritual transformation is an understanding of the real nature of man, his relationship with the physical and the spiritual world, and the manifestation of spiritual Guides. According to the Sufi teachings, man has a dual nature —a soul and a body. In fact, the body actually is the physical temple of the soul in this world. The harmonious relationship between the soul and body is realised by submission to the Will of God.

However, the human intellect must keep the balance between the body and the soul. A constant reflection on materiality keeps one's consciousness in the realm of human imperfection, while the contemplative focus on oneself as a spiritual being, strengthened with spiritual power, is the key to spiritual uplift. It raises one's consciousness to the spiritual world which reflects creation and frees one from human imperfections.

The essential requisites for spiritual growth, according to Muslim mystics, are recital of the daily prayers (*salāt*), the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God, reverential readings of the Qur'ān and meditative reflection on the teachings of the Master. Besides that, Sufis had to make daily efforts to have their personal conduct conform to the highest standards of the ascetic life. By practising these principles, Muslims will improve the welfare of the community (*umma*).

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