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SUFISM

MUSLIM IDENTITY is a potentially fluid concept that is contingent on the perceived correct or normative interpretation of Muhammad's message. Such interpretations are based on various groups' ability to marshal sources that they construct as authoritative to legitimate a particular perspective on diverse matters that include everything from the political to the religious. Previous chapters focused largely on the institutions that developed over the issue of prophetic succession and the various legal, political, and institutional developments that emerge from it; the present chapter again returns us to Muhammad and offers yet another window onto the manifold ways that both his personality and his teaching have been interpreted. Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, further displays the dynamic use of Muhammad in the development of Muslim identity after his death.

The word "mysticism," narrowly defined, refers to a religious experience that involves a paranormal state of consciousness wherein the individual claims to encounter or unite with some form of what is considered to be ultimate reality. The individual subsequently claims a special knowledge or gnosis that derives from his or her illumination, which is usually characterized by a loss of self-identity and intense joy and bliss.

Scholars formerly assumed that mysticism exists in all the world's religions. Recent scholarship, however, has tended to argue that mysticism

cannot be easily removed from its cultural contexts,[1] and, as a result, it is very difficult to speak of mysticism outside of specific religions. Linguistic and cultural vocabularies both color the mystic's interpretation of any given experience and thereby shape the very contents of the experience. Although mystical traditions certainly share common features, each one's cultural specificity demands that it be studied in its appropriate historical, social, and cultural context.

Mystical traditions consist of speculative doctrines, ethical values, literary texts, rituals, and social institutions. The relationship between mysticism and the religious tradition in which it functions is certainly a complex one. Some mystical movements express a religion's basic values; others challenge and conflict with certain aspects of the tradition; and yet others offer creative and elaborate ways to reinterpret the religion. The mystical elements associated with any religion are certainly not monolithic and, as such, display a rich diversity over time and geography. Finally, it is necessary to be aware that what has emerged as mysticism in any religious tradition is often contingent on the establishment of a discourse with a distinctive vocabulary, concerns, canonical texts, and authoritative interpretations.

Locating Sufism

Although scholars of the nineteenth century were largely critical of what they considered to be the aridity of orthodox Islamic doctrine, they were greatly impressed by the spiritual teachings and exercises of Sufism. Some even referred to Sufism as the "rose in the desert of Islam." Because they doubted that Islam could have fostered such a movement, they imagined all sorts of extra-Islamic origins for the existence of a mystical strain in Islam, from Neoplatonism to Christian monasticism to some sort of generic "Oriental" spiritualism.

It is sometimes said that there exist three "denominations" in Islam: Sunni, Shiʿi, and Sufi. Although it is certainly true that Sufism possesses its own teachings and structures of authority based largely on the relationship that develops between the shaykh (master) and the *faqir* (disciple, sometimes referred to as a *murid*), a Muslim's commitment to Sufi doctrine and practice usually occurs over and above his or her commitment to Sunnism or Shiʿism. But even this distinction may be drawing a

line where none in fact exists. Millions of Muslims—from Morocco in the West to Indonesia in the East—know only of an Islam that includes saints, amulets, pilgrimages to the tombs of "holy men," and other such practices that are often and perhaps misleadingly referred to as "Sufic." This Islam is sometimes referred to pejoratively as "popular Islam," is roundly criticized by theologians, and until relatively recently has been largely ignored in academic treatments, which have tended to focus on the so-called great men of Sufism, such as Ibn Arabi or Rumi.

The difficulty in defining Sufism may well stem from the fact that dating when exactly it emerged is itself a problem. Although later Sufis would claim that Muhammad was the first Sufi and the progenitor of all later mystics, the situation is not surprisingly more complex. At some later point in the historical development of the movement, people with certain mystical or renunciatory tendencies began to be recognized as "Sufis." However, it would be incorrect to assume that Sufism emerged as a unified movement at a specific point in time.[2] Rather than claim, as many want to, that there exists an unchanging core to all Sufi phenomena, it is more appropriate to imagine disparate and heterogeneous groups of renunciants that by the ninth century—especially in Baghdad, the center of the Abbasid dynasty—began to be part of a mode of piety regarded as distinct from the slowly emerging movements we now know as Sunnism and Shiʿism.

There certainly existed groups of renunciants in other areas of the enormous empire, particularly in Persia and Central Asia. Possessing their own ideas and practices, these groups were not originally identified as "Sufis," but they gradually became identified as such as "Sufism" spread beyond Baghdad in the following centuries. It is thus important to be aware of the great variety inherent to the generic term "Islamic mysticism"—a variety that combines the teachings of key mystical figures with various local teachings and practices.

Another problem in trying to locate Sufism is that there has always existed firm opposition to Sufi teaching, belief, and practices within certain quarters of conservative interpretations of what Islam should be. Such critics deem Sufism heretical and contrary to the "real" teachings of Islam, and they juxtapose Sufi teaching with the austere and radical monotheistic Islam that they have constructed in their reading of the Quran and related sources. Despite this opposition, Sufism exists in all sorts of local variations and is integral to the way that millions of Muslims go about their daily lives. Far removed from the theological formula-

AN EARLY ORIENTALIST ENCOUNTER WITH SUFISM

In 1815, Sir John Malcolm published *The History of Persia*. An ambassador of the British East India Company to the Persian court, Malcolm had the following to say of Sufism: "It is in India, beyond all other climes, that this delusive and visionary doctrine has most flourished. There is, in the habits of that nation, and in the character of the Hindoo religion, what peculiarly cherishes the mysterious spirit of holy abstraction in which it is founded; and we may grant our belief to the conjecture which assumes that India is the source from which other nations have derived this mystic worship of the divinity."*

Malcolm fairly typically saw in Sufism an Indian or a Hindu origin. Writing four years later, in 1819, Lieutenant James William Graham published an article in the *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay*, "A Treatise on Sufiism, or Mahomedan Mysticism," in which he praises "Sufiism" for its spiritual refinement and unwillingness to be bogged down by the law:

> With regard to the religion (if it can be so termed in the general acceptance of that word) or rather doctrine and tenets of the sect of Sufis, it is requisite to observe, first, that any person, or a person of any religion or sect, may be a *Sufi*: the mystery lies in this;—a total disengagement of the mind from all temporal concerns and worldly pursuits; an entire throwing off not only of every superstition, doubt, or the like, but of the practical mode of worship, ceremonies, &c. laid down in every religion, which the Mahomedans term *Sheryat*, being the law, or canonical law; and entertaining solely mental abstraction, and contemplation of the soul and Deity, their affinity, and the correlative situation in which they stand; in fine, it is that spiritual intercourse of the soul with its Maker, that disregards and disclaims all ordinances and outward forms, of what sect or religion soever; such as observance of feasts, fasts, stated periods of prayer, particular kinds of meat to be eaten, ablutions, pilgrimages, and such like other rites and ceremonies which come under the head of practical worship (*Jismani amul*), being the deeds of the law, in contradistinction to mental or spiritual worship (*Roohani amul*), that is, as I take it to be, grace or faith.†

*John Malcolm, *The History of Persia, from the Most Early Period to the Present Time: Containing an Account of the Religion, Government, Usage, and Character of the Inhabitants of that Kingdom*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1815), 2:384.

†Quoted in Carl Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), 13–14.

tions produced at places such as al-Azhar University and from the customary "five pillars of faith" traditionally used to teach about Muslim life and practice, Sufism remains a vibrant religious and political force throughout the Islamic world.

Even the names "Sufi" and "Sufism" are modern translations that turn on the Arabic term *suf* (wool), in reference to the woolen garments that Sufis wore to indicate their poverty and asceticism. The Arabic phrase that mystics in Islam used to refer to themselves is ***ahl al-tasawwuf***, perhaps best translated into English as "People of the Woolen Way." Although the "mystical trend" seems to have existed only among individuals very early in

the development of Islam—later Sufis claiming, perhaps not surprisingly, that Muhammad was the first to engage in such practices—those individuals eventually collected themselves into orders or brotherhoods, some of which were actively involved in political affairs throughout the centuries.

Like other aspects of Islam that we have encountered in previous chapters, we should not assume that the term *ahl al-tasawwuf* or the category "Sufism" existed from the beginning. However, we can say fairly confidently that very early on there existed individuals involved in the "renunciation" (***zuhd***) of material comforts and the constant "remembrance" (***dhikr***) of God and that they were the catalyst for what would eventually emerge as what is called "Sufism." Because this movement had roots in the apocalypticism associated with the earliest Meccan suras (e.g., suras 56 and 81), the early renunciants derived legitimacy from the Quran's imperative to remember the name of God (76:25) and to sleep little at night (51:15). Although Sufis may well have been inspired later by the woolen cloaks of Christian monks, the ascetic impulse within the Quran apparently negates the thesis that a mystical impulse is somehow foreign to Islam.

Like all Muslims, Sufis claim that their interpretation of the tradition is the one that most closely coincides with the life of Muhammad. Like other Muslims, they also seek to legitimate their identity by looking to the sources that the community as a whole has signified as authoritative (Quran, Sunna). Of particular interest to Sufis is Muhammad's asceticism, which, they contend, led to his initial moments of revelation atop the mountains surrounding Mecca and which culminated in the "mystical" experiences associated with his *isra* and *miraj* (often referred to as his "night journey" [see chapter 2]). The emphasis on these aspects, however, often comes at the expense of hadith and other sources that show a Muhammad who is critical of asceticism. Indeed, as discussed more fully later, Sufi claims and methods would eventually come under harsh criticism from conservative thinkers and reformers, and many later mystics were accused of ***kufr*** (unbelief).

The Expansion–Asceticism Theory

We know very little about the historical emergence of Islamic mysticism. We possess many records, but they date from a later period even though they claim to offer information on the period in question. These sources

tell us the names of certain figures that were involved in the formation and subsequent development of the tradition; however, many of these sources represent often idealized constructions by later authors from later centuries.

The main Islamic account for the rise of Sufism is referred to as the "expansion–asceticism theory." It contends that when Muhammad was alive, especially before the *hijra* to Medina, there existed a purity and a pristineness to his message. These qualities can be witnessed in the relatively short, highly poetic, and rhythmic Quranic passages that date to this time and that can be contrasted with the longer, more legalistic ones from the Medinan period. As the religion expanded and became increasingly caught up in the mundane affairs of state and administration, the original purity and pristineness were gradually lost. After Muhammad's death, in other words, it became increasingly difficult to be a Muslim in the way that Muhammad had originally configured the category. This difficulty gradually led to various factional ways to be a good Muslim (Sunni, Shiʿi, and so on). Early Muslim asceticism, according to this theory, presented itself as an "authentic" response to the Muslim community's rapid expansion. Sufism was accordingly constructed as the other-worldly response to the this-worldliness of the new empire.

The renunciatory trend may well have developed *in part* as a reaction to a certain warrior ethic practiced during the empire's "conquest" phase, but this theory is potentially reductive and simplistic. It seems to take the words of ascetics—words often mediated by later generations—at face value. These later sources tend to speak of a group of men (and women) who turned their backs on the empire's luxury and power to move toward an ascetic lifestyle. This theory also tends to ignore the malleability of the "holy man" in late antiquity. As others have argued—especially in the context of Christianity (e.g., Peter Brown)[3]—this social type was much more complex than we tend to think and often played a role in very mundane affairs, such as expanding the Catholic Church's sphere of influence. In terms of Islam, as Richard Bulliet's studies have well argued,[4] Sufis were apparently involved at a relatively early period in converting entire villages and regions to Islam. A complicated relationship existed between political authority and ascetics, a relationship that we should not always assume was high-minded, but that might well have included political and ideological components. We should therefore not assume that Sufi sources offer adequate historical descriptions of the advent of Sufism.

Sources of the Ascetic Impulse

Asceticism was the earliest phase of a movement that would eventually grow into various Sufi circles. Historians of Sufism tend to call it "asceticism" more for convenience because many of the classical "mystical" elements developed gradually over time. In other words, the early ascetics—especially when compared to the florescence of Sufism in the ninth and tenth centuries—had only an undeveloped "mystical" component to their beliefs and practices. For this reason, these early individuals are referred to as "ascetics" rather than "mystics."

Although the earliest mystics were ascetics, it is important to be aware that there are many different reasons behind the adoption of an ascetic lifestyle. In medieval Islam, to be an ascetic was in many ways to have an occupation. One might have chosen to be an ascetic for religious reasons (e.g., the renunciation of wealth and the development of the power to remember God). However, the life of the ascetic was probably easier to live if one was poor. Moreover, one's social status might well have improved by becoming an ascetic. In early Islam, for example, a scholar who was an ascetic was perceived to be closer to God (and thus the truth) than a nonascetic.

There were, in short, many motives for becoming an ascetic. Some people were ascetics as we see them today, unattached individuals living apart from others in a life of renunciation and meditation, yet we also know that many Muslim "ascetics" had families and continued to support them. Much of early Islamic mystical writings are, perhaps not surprisingly, interested in ascertaining that one have the proper motive or intention (*niyya*) for choosing a life of asceticism. A common and critical motif from the earliest mystical writings is of the ascetic who loves stroking his well-groomed and bushy beard more than he does getting close to God. Such stories seem to bear witness to the fact that there existed many types of ascetics in early Islam, only some of whom were the precursors to the Sufis of later generations.

Geographic Diversity

The Sufi mode of piety that gradually emerged in Baghdad, one of the most cosmopolitan centers within the Islamic Empire, during the ninth

century proved to be very adaptable as it moved into the hinterlands. During subsequent centuries, this interpretation of Muhammad's message spread to all the major cultural regions within the empire and blended there with what one scholar calls local "indigenous interiorizing trends."[5] Foundational figures' teachings and the stories of these individuals' lives most likely spread into other areas as students from these areas traveled to Baghdad and then returned to their homes to teach locals. And we should not underestimate the traveling holy men who moved throughout the empire spreading their teachings of a mystically inspired Islam.

This geographical diversity should alert us to the fact that there existed other "interiorizing" or, for lack of a better term, "spiritualist" groups within early Islam. Such groups—for example, the Karramiyya, based in the eastern empire (Khorasan and Transoxania) in the ninth century—seem to have been critical of Sufi teaching. We unfortunately know little about groups such as the Karramiyya because most of the sources we possess about them were written by their enemies as a way to discredit them. It is worth noting, however, that Sufism had to contend not only with conservative critics, but also with the spiritualists of other movements. It was only later that Sufism won out as *the* "spiritual way" within Islam.

Many of these diverse other interiorizing trends eventually died out, were persecuted into extinction, or became folded into Sufism, which, by the tenth and eleventh centuries, had become the established pietistic tradition. This does not mean, however, that Sufism simply leveled local traditions and replaced them with its own monolithic teachings. On the contrary, as already mentioned, Sufi teaching seems to have connected and merged fairly easily with local traditions that had existed in far-flung areas for centuries, including before the arrival of Islam. Once again, this regional diversity should prevent us from speaking of "Sufism" as if it were a teaching that was always and everywhere the same.

Key Terms and Concepts

The set of terms and concepts offered here is certainly not meant to be an exhaustive list of all the technical vocabulary associated with Sufism. Rather, it provides an introductory overview of terms that run throughout much of the lengthy history of the movement, from its beginnings in the renunciant tradition to the emergence of Sufism to its practice today. It

is important, however, not to think that these terms somehow define the essence of the tradition.

THE *ZAHIR–BATIN* DICHOTOMY

One of the central themes and interpretive strategies in Islamic mystical writings is the dichotomy between the ***zahir*** (external or exoteric) and the ***batin*** (internal or esoteric). This dichotomy is essential to the notion that there exists some thing or teaching hidden deep within the Quranic message that only those with the proper understanding can attain. If the *zahir* is that to which all Muslims aspire, the *batin* is that which only very few can attain. If every Muslim performs the "pillars" of faith (see chapter 9) to ensure reward in the next life, the Sufi sees his or her goal as being to use these pillars as a segue into a life spent basking in their meditative performance. One of the main ways to ascertain the Quran's mystical secrets is through *taʾwil* (esoteric and mystical interpretation).

Sufis often took this dichotomy to the next level and contended that all of reality possessed a *zahir* and a *batin*. If the former refers to the material world, the world of apparent meaning, the latter refers to that which exists beyond this world and that which gives it existence. It is the movement from the *zahir* to the *batin* that symbolizes the Sufi message, hermeneutic, and worldview.

TARIQA

We can see the dichotomous relationship between the *zahir* and the *batin* at work in the concept of ***tariqa*** (pl., *turuq*), which has several meanings in Arabic. Much like the word "sharia," this term refers to the concept of "way" or "path" and came to denote a particular path—that is, the mystical path of Islam. The term *tariqa*, then, is in many ways symbolic of the inner dimension of the Sufi quest. Whereas the sharia came to denote Islam's outer path, the system of obligations and prohibitions of which every Muslim must be aware, the *tariqa* came to be the religion's inner dimension meant only for a select few. This distinction need not be as antinomian or opposed to the traditional understanding of the law as it first appears (although for some "drunken" Sufis it is) because one of the main

teachings of Sufism is that one can enter into the *tariqa* only after one has mastered the life of sharia. In later Sufism, the term *tariqa* came to denote a specific type of Sufi order or brotherhood.

NAFS

The Quran employs the term ***nafs*** to refer to the self or the individual's soul. Sufis refer to it pejoratively as that which gets in the way of the individual's true realization of God. In Sufi parlance, *nafs* refers to the individual in his or her unrefined state, his or her animal nature that must be refined through renunciation and remembrance. According to the eleventh-century mystic Abu ʾl-Qasim al-Qushayri, the *nafs* consists of "the defective attributes of the servant, his blameworthy character traits and actions. . . . The strongest determination of the *nafs* and the most difficult to overcome is the delusion that it contains something good or that it deserves some status."[6]

The greatest obstacle to a proper relationship with God, according to Sufism, is the individual's *nafs*. One must move beyond the carrot of reward and the stick of punishment so as to cultivate a *batin*-based relationship with God, which necessarily involves a negation of the self.

DHIKR

Dhikr, as mentioned earlier, is the Quranic word for "remembrance" or "mentioning." It is frequently applied to the concept of prayer. In Sufism, however, it has taken on the broader notion of invoking the divine presence and subsequently worshipping God. It can be both joyous and contemplative. How one engages in this remembrance is based on the Sufi order to which one belongs. Although any Muslim can and should engage in the remembrance of God, Sufis have developed *dhikr* into elaborate forms of meditation. It can take the form of reciting incantations—for example, the phrase customarily referred to as the ***shahada***: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God" (in Arabic, "la ilaha illa Allah wa-Muhammad rasul Allah")—or whirling in a circle, as the famous Mevlevi dervishes of Turkey do. The goal of *dhikr* is to purify the *nafs* and thereby to bring the worshipper closer to God. This process

sometimes involves music and occasionally even the ingestion of alcohol or other narcotics.

As Sufism developed into different orders over time, differing *dhikr* practices connected to those specific orders arose. These practices would function as one of the main features used to define particular orders and differentiate them from one another. It was not uncommon for one order to criticize the *dhikr* practices of another order.

The Stations of Progression

Early in the development of Islamic mysticism, theories arose concerning the spiritual progression of the adept that explained, for example, the movement from fasting to the fear of God to the love of God. These theories and the manuals explaining them eventually led to the development of an elaborate and highly detailed mystical cartography that charted the experiential quest for the spiritual traveler. The journey detailed, of course, is not an external one, but something that takes place on an internal plain within each adept's soul. Central to this journey is the existence of "states of being" (*maqamat*; sing., *maqam*)—a series of discrete psychological and ethical qualities that the mystic must attain and progress through on his or her journey.[7] These stations are neither static nor agreed on by all mystical theorists. Al-Qushayri, for example, included fifty such stations that culminate in yearning for God, whereas Ansari included one hundred that culminate in the unity of the individual with God. These stations are sometimes perceived as a chronological progression; according to other perceptions, they are helixlike, with the adept moving back and forth between them. Each station is also often associated with particular meditative practices and techniques.

TAWAKKUL

Tawakkul is the "absolute trust" that the Sufi puts in God. If one believes that God is the great provider, then, according to Sufi teaching, one must put all of one's trust in him. Farid al-Din Attar (1145–1221), who wrote a hagiography of the early Sufi saints called *Memorial of God's Friends*, recounts a story that nicely illustrates this concept of radical trust:

> It was related on the night [Rabia] was born, there was no lamp in her father's house, not a drop of oil to anoint her navel, nor so much as a piece of cloth to swaddle her in. Her father had three daughters, and Rabia was the fourth. And so they called her Rabia, meaning "the fourth one."
>
> His wife said to him, "Go the neighbors and ask for a lamp's worth of oil."
>
> Rabia's father had sworn not to ask any creature for anything. He got up, went to the neighbor's door, and returned. "They were asleep." He said.[8]

Although the story goes on to recount how Rabia's father sees Muhammad in a dream and is told that his daughter will grow up to be a great intercessor for pious Muslims, the passage related here reveals how God is seen to provide for those who trust in him. Rabia's father, for example, refuses to ask his neighbor for oil because he believes that such an action would mean violating his radical trust in God to provide for him at the particular moment. If God wanted him to have oil, according to the tenor of the anecdote, then God certainly would have provided it for him.

The notion of variety is as germane to Sufism as it is to Sunnism and Shiʿism. Related terms that also define the Sufi's quest include but are not limited to ***dhawq*** (taste), *sukr* (drunkenness), and *baqa* (abiding). And, as mentioned, al-Qushayri lists fifty possible stations in the practitioner's spiritual journey, and other Sufi thinkers recount even more.

FANA

Near the end of his mystical allegory *The Conference of the Birds*, Attar writes of a group of moths before a flame, a passage that is worth quoting at length:

> Moths gathered in a fluttering throng one night
> To learn the truth about the candle light,
> And they decided one of them should go
> To gather news of the elusive glow.
> One flew till in the distance he discerned
> A palace window where a candle burned—
> And went no nearer: back again he flew
> To tell the others what he thought he knew.
> The mentor of the moths dismissed his claim,

Remarking: "He knows nothing of the flame."
A moth more eager than the one before
Set out and passed beyond the palace door.
He hovered in the aura of the fire,
A trembling blur of timorous desire,
Then headed back to say how far he'd been,
And how much he had undergone and seen.
The mentor said: "You do not bear the signs
Of one who's fathomed how the candle shines."
Another moth flew out—his dizzy flight
Turned to an ardent wooing of the light;
He dipped and soared, and in his frenzied trance
Both self and fire were mingled by his dance—
The flame engulfed his wing-tips, body, head,
His being glowed a fierce translucent red;
And when the mentor saw that sudden blaze,
The moth's form lost within the glowing rays,
He said: "He knows, he knows the truth we seek,
That hidden truth of which we cannot speak."
To go beyond all knowledge is to find
That comprehension which eludes the mind,
And you can never gain the longed-for goal
Until you first outsoar both flesh and soul;
But should one part remain, a single hair
Will drag you back and plunge you in despair—
No creature's self can be admitted here,
Where all identity must disappear.[9]

According to this story, some form of death or extinction represents the final goal of the Sufi's quest. The complete obliteration of the *nafs*, a state referred to as ***fana***, presumably allows the Sufi to abide in God. This notion of *fana* led to a body of literature in Sufism telling of mystics who engage in "ecstatic utterances" (*shathiyat*)—such as Mansur al-Hallaj's famous expression *ana al-haqq* (I am the truth [i.e., God])—and of Sufis who eat during Ramadan. Such stories seek to convey the notion that these Sufis, whose selves have been extinguished in God, operate with a *batin*-level of consciousness, which permits them to flout the customary sharia rules and regulations.

"Sober" and "Intoxicated" Sufism

The words "sober" and "intoxicated" have to do with the mystic's orientation toward the sharia. "Sober" mystics tend to stress the compatibility and points of contact between the law and mysticism, showing how mystical teachings take the individual into a deeper and more spiritual understanding of the law. On their reading, Sufism does not contradict or subvert the law but succeeds in facilitating the mystic's greater appreciation of it. The Sufi, then, is someone who understands the law and never seeks to transgress its principles.

Juxtaposed to the "sober" mystic is the "intoxicated" or "drunken" Sufi. If "sober" Sufism stresses the compatibility of mysticism and law, "intoxicated" Sufism tends to stress the spirit as opposed to the letter of the law. The goal of the latter type of Sufism is to pursue the intoxicating union with God at all costs. Among the most famous "intoxicated" Sufis are al-Hallaj (discussed more fully in the next section) and the Persian Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 875), who is reported to have uttered in the passion of an ecstatic union with God, "Glory to me! How great is My majesty!"[10] Although many "drunken" Sufis of the past were not opposed to the law, the potential for antinomianism in Sufism bothered people associated with the legal establishment, which perhaps explains the conservative criticism and persecution of Sufism down to the present day.

Some Key Figures

The list of key figures in the historical development of Sufism given here is by no means exhaustive, but it does seek to provide a sampling of the most important names.

RABIA AL-ADAWIYYA

Rabia al-Adawiyya (717?–801?) is often regarded as one of the most important female voices in early Islam and as a central figure in the development of the early mystical impulse. She left no writings, and what we do possess about her comes from much later male sources, in particular Farid

al-Din Attar, whose goal, as we have already seen, was not so much historical accuracy, but the construction of Sufi hagiographies.

Rabia was born in Basra, Iraq, to an ascetic, once again showing how in the early Muslim mystical tradition ascetics had families, so that we should regard asceticism as a profession. She was the fourth daughter—hence, the name Rabia, which derives from the Arabic word for the number four. After the death of her family, Rabia was orphaned and subsequently sold into slavery, whereupon she encountered all sorts of hardships. Many men asked for her hand in marriage, but she always refused because she said that she was already married to God.

According to her hagiography, Rabia is the one whose life best symbolizes the virtue of ecstatic love (*mahabba*) of God. Rabia's love—expressed in terms of passion and intensity—was not based on fear of punishment or hope of reward; on the contrary, she describes with erotic undertones how only God could satisfy her. According to Attar, "It is related that Hasan said to Rabia, 'Would you like to take a husband?' She replied, 'The marriage knot ties only one who exists. Where is existence here? I am not my own—I am His and under His command. You must ask permission from Him.' 'O Rabia,' Hasan said, 'By what means did you attain this degree?' [She responded,] 'By losing in Him everything I had attained.' 'How do you know Him?' [She replied,] 'You know the how, I know the no-how.' "[11]

The truth of the matter is that we know next to nothing about Rabia. We know her story only as mediated by male Sufis for the consumption of other male Sufis. As such, she is constructed to do what few other women do: she refuses to increase her status (e.g., through marriage) and is thus content with her lot. Her story, as an object lesson for later Sufis, is one that ignores all attachments except to God. She symbolizes the Sufi virtues of *tawakkul*, *tawhid*, and negation of the *nafs*. Implicit in Attar's construction, it would seem, is that the ideal (male) mystic must become like a woman before God.

MANSUR AL-HALLAJ

Perhaps the best example of a "drunken" Sufi, Mansur al-Hallaj (ca. 858–922) was born in Persia, where he married. He subsequently made the pilgrimage to Mecca but decided to stay for one year, facing the mosque, as his biographers–hagiographers would say, and devoting himself to fasting

and total silence. Implicit in this story is that whereas the average Muslim is content to go to Mecca for a few days as part of his or her religious duties, al-Hallaj was not content with such a *zahir*-based performance. His goal was to move toward the *batin*. After his stay in the city, he traveled extensively and wrote and taught along the way.

Many Sufi masters felt that it was inappropriate to share the mystical secrets of Islam with everyone, which is why the master–disciple relationship was so important to the development of Sufism: it cultivated the proper channels of transmission. However, al-Hallaj did share his message with all and sundry, so that he began to make enemies, both among other Sufis and the ruling authorities. This unwelcome approach was exacerbated by occasions when he would fall into trances and utter phrases such as "Ana l-haqq" (I am the Truth), which those unaccustomed to the mystical path took to mean that he was claiming to be God because *al-haqq* (the Truth) is one of the ninety-nine names of God. Al-Hallaj is also credited with uttering that "there is nothing wrapped in my turban but God." These utterances led to a long trial and his subsequent imprisonment for eleven years in a Baghdad prison. In the end, he was publicly crucified in 922. At his execution,

> When they cut off his hands, he burst out laughing, "What's there to laugh about?" They asked.
>
> "It's easy to cut off the hand of a person who's chained up. The true believer is one who cuts off the hand of attributes, swindling aspiration from the highest throne of heaven."
>
> When they chopped off his feet, he smiled and said, "With these feet I used to travel the earth. I have other feet that are traversing both worlds at this very moment. Cut off those feet, if you can." . . .
>
> Then they cut out his tongue. When they cut off his head, it was the hour of the evening prayer. As his head was being cut off, [Hallaj] smiled and died. The people roared. He shot the ball of his fate to the final goal of acceptance. From each one of his limbs came the cry "I am the Real." . . . None of the people of the path have had a victory like [al-Hallaj's].[12]

Like other "drunken" Sufis, al-Hallaj was so overcome by his ecstatic experiences that his bodily existence seems to have meant very little to him. Moreover, such mystics' utterances became more widely known than any actual teaching ascribed to them.

It should be noted, however, that much of what we know about al-Hallaj is based on later legendary accounts of his life, by which point he had become an important personality to whom any number of characteristics and sayings could be affixed. Indeed, some scholars think that al-Hallaj's execution had less to do with his mystical teachings than with various political intrigues at the Abbasid court in Baghdad.

ABU ʾL-QASIM AL-QUSHAYRI

The Persian Abu ʾl-Qasim al-Qushayri (986–1074) was the great theoretical systematizer of Sufi doctrine and teaching. His goal was to show the compatibility between mystical teaching and mainstream Sunni Islam. Although it is customary to say that this synthesis first occurred in the writings of al-Ghazali, it began, for all intents and purposes, with al-Qushayri. His major treatise, referred to as the "Qushayrian Treatise" or simply "the Treatise," is one of the most popular Sufi manuals and has served as a primary textbook for many generations of Sufi novices to the present.[13] In section three of the Treatise, al-Qushayri provides a taxonomy of key Sufi terms and concepts that theoretically and practically guide the mystic's journey.

Significantly, Qushayri also incorporated into his treatise the biographies of past masters, thereby providing a historical argument for Sufi legitimacy. His treatise was translated into Persian (under his supervision), which had the important repercussion of facilitating the dissemination of an increasingly systematized Sufism to the Persianate world.

ABU HAMID MUHAMMAD IBN MUHAMMAD AL-GHAZALI

Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111) was not just an important Sufi thinker, but one of the most important thinkers in medieval Islam. He was a famous legal scholar and philosopher who taught at the prestigious Nizamiyya, an institution of higher education in Nishapur in northeastern Iran. His autobiography (*The Deliverance from Error*) describes his emotional breakdown from the weight of fame and prestige and his gradual rehabilitation through Sufism. He writes: "What

is most distinctive of mysticism is something that cannot be apprehended by study, but only by immediate experience. . . . I apprehended clearly that the mystics were the men who had real experiences, not men of words, and that I had already progressed as far as possible by way of intellectual apprehension. What remained for me was not to be attained by oral instruction and study, but only be immediate experience and by walking in the mystic way."[14]

The term that al-Ghazali here uses for "experience," *dhawq*, literally means "taste" and is meant to show God's sensual and sensory nearness to the mystic. After his rehabilitation, al-Ghazali spent the next ten years of his life traveling, writing, and teaching; he eventually opened up a "retreat center" (*zawiya* or *ribat* in Arabic; *khanqah* in Persian), a place where mystics could go for spiritual retreats and support in the Islamic world. Ghazali was certainly not the first to open such a retreat; although their origins seem rather obscure, the first one documented appeared in the late eighth century and was associated with Abu Hashim al-Sufi (d. 768).

One of al-Ghazali's major works is *Ihya ulum al-din* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*), which, as the title suggest, is a compendium to virtually all fields of Islamic religious science (such as *fiqh* [jurisprudence] and *kalam* [theology]) filtered through the prism of Sufism. Owing to his earlier training in the Islamic legal sciences and building on the works of earlier Sufis such as al-Qushayri, al-Ghazali did more than anyone to bring Sufism into the heart of Sunni Islam. Rejecting the "intoxicated" variety practiced by al-Hallaj, he created a vision of Islam that used mystical teaching to inform traditional understanding of sharia.

IBN ARABI

If al-Ghazali was famous for his sobriety, Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) is well known for his theoretical sophistication. Born and raised in Muslim Spain (al-Andalus), he left the Iberian Peninsula at the age of thirty-five and set out for Mecca, where he began writing his *Al-Futuhat al-makkiyya* (*Meccan Illuminations*). He eventually left Mecca and died in Damascus, where his tomb is still an important pilgrimage site.

Ibn Arabi is most famous for his controversial theory of *wahdat al-wujud* (the oneness of being). According to him, all things in the universe are a manifestation of God in the sense that they derive their potency from

God's perception. Although critics would label this vision pantheistic (i.e., equating God with the world), Ibn Arabi's doctrine is much more nuanced and complex than such a moniker would suggest.

Central to Ibn Arabi's mystical theory is the concept of love—not only between the mystic and God, but as a principle that sustains the organic flow of the universe. Religions, individuals, indeed all phenomena differ little from one another in Ibn Arabi's singular vision:

> My heart has adopted every shape; it has become a pasture for a gazelles,
> and a convent for Christian monks.
> A temple for idols, and a pilgrim's Kaʿba, the tables of a Torah, and
> the pages of a Koran.
> I follow the religion of Love; wherever Love's camels turn, there Love is
> my religion and faith.[15]

RUMI

Probably the most famous Sufi in the West is the great thirteenth-century poet Jalal al-Din Muhammad al-Rumi (1207–1273). He was born in what is now Tajikistan, and his name, Rumi, means "the Roman," because he lived in an area called Rum, which was once ruled by the Byzantine Empire.

Rumi composed thousands of rhymed couplets in Persian in a genre known as *mathnawi*. A collection of some 25,000 of them are known as the *Mathnawi*; it has been translated into many languages, and the English translation has made Rumi one of the most popular poets in the United States.

Following his death, his followers founded the Mawlawiyyah (or Mevlevi) Order, whose members are also known as the "whirling dervishes" because of their dance ceremony *sama*, a ritualized remembrance of God.

The following verse provides a sense of the evocative nature of Rumi's poetic voice:

> O you who've gone on pilgrimage
> where are you, where, oh where?
> Here, here is the Beloved!
> Oh come now, come, oh come!
> Your friend, he is your neighbor,

he is next to your wall
You, erring in the desert
what air of love is this?
If you'd see the Beloved's
form without any form
You are the house, the master,
You are the Kaʿba, you! . . .
Where is a bunch of roses,
if you would be this garden?
Where, one soul's pearly essence
when you're the Sea of God?
That's true—and yet your troubles
may turn to treasures rich—
How sad that you yourself veil
the treasure that is yours![16]

Institutional Sufism

Larger-than-life individuals tend to define the early or classical period of Sufism. Although individuals such as Hasan al-Basri (642–728) and Rabia al-Adawiyya were undoubtedly historical figures, their life stories—or, perhaps better, their hagiographies—were written and added to during the ensuing centuries. According to these sources, asceticism in the earliest centuries tended to be an elite preoccupation as opposed to a large-scale popular movement. The eleventh century, however, witnessed the rise of organized movements or associations, most likely brought on by the important synthesis between Sufi teaching and mainstream Islam achieved by mystics such as al-Ghazali. Indeed, as mentioned, al-Ghazali's name is often associated with those who established residential and self-governing brotherhoods of like-minded individuals (although these brotherhoods' origin seems to be even earlier). The brotherhoods would meet in retreats called either *khanqah* in Persian or *ribat* or *zawiya* in Arabic.

If in earlier centuries the *tariqa* referred primarily to the Sufi path to enlightenment, in the centuries after al-Ghazali it came to designate the various "orders" whereby initiates were instructed in the various stages of mystical experience. Although the relationship between the master (*shaykh* in Arabic; *pir* in Persian) and the disciple (*faqir* or *murid* in Arabic; *shagird* in

SUFISM, NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY, AND THE INTERNET

In recent years, especially with the popularity of the Internet and the perceived lack of spirituality in the modern world, Sufism (much like Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism) has been co-opted into the New Age movement. Sufi poets such as Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (1207–1273) have now become almost household names in the West. Although many may well find benefit in this construction of Sufism, we should be aware that it largely strips Sufism of its historical, linguistic, and intellectual contexts in the service of some inchoate spirituality.

In this new configuration, Sufism often becomes "de-Islamicized" and part of a universal and perennial wisdom (*sophia perennis*), as in the following definition of Sufism: "[An] [a]ncient Persian mystical religious system which has been absorbed by Islam. Rather than focusing on the Five Pillars of Islam, Sufis seek ultimate religious experience through mystic trances or altered states of consciousness, often induced through twirling dances (the 'whirling dervish'). Although the Qurʾan is considered scripture, many practitioners [of Sufism] have more in common with the New Age movement than with classic forms of Islam."*

Perhaps because Sufism is perceived as quietist and less political, it is often held up as the future of Islam or the "real" Islam. The Sufi convert Stephen Schwartz writes that Sufism holds itself out as the threshold to "global harmony": "I believe that the world needs Sufism. It is God's most deeply hidden treasure, *another Islam*, a miraculous sanctuary. One need not go all the way to Turkistan to find it, for it is present in the hearts of many who live throughout this world. Its gates are open; and in the world of Rumi it appeals to all believers: only come."† In his works, Schwartz seeks to create a distinction between the "religious" or "spiritual" forms of Islam (i.e., Sufism) and the "political" or "ideological" forms of tradition (e.g., alternatively referred to as "Wahhabism" or "Salafism" or "jihadism," all of which Schwartz often lumps together under the omnibus term "Islamofacism"). The result is a Manichean approach to Islam, wherein everything good apparently derives from Sufism, and everything bad emerges from Wahhabism.

*"Sufism," in *New Age Spirituality Dictionary on Sufism*, Global Oneness: Co-creating a Happy World, http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/Sufism/id/293028.

†Stephen Schwartz, *Other Islam: Sufism and the Road to Global Harmony* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 239.

Persian) was common to all these orders, the orders tended to differ in the various techniques they used to achieve such enlightenment. The masters received their spiritual authority by tracing their mystical lineage (*silsila*) back to Muhammad. Consistency was maintained by the leader of the order passing on to the next generation the teachings that he had received from his shaykh. Disciples swore allegiance to their shaykh, thus further maintaining doctrinal consistency within each order. To this day in many Sufi communities, Sufism is disseminated and propagated through the teaching tradition, mediated between the intimate exchange between master and disciple, and experienced through ritual performance.[17]

The result of this method of dissemination was that by the thirteenth century, there existed numerous international *turuq*, such as the Mawlawi Order and Bektashiyya Order in Turkey, the Badawiyya Order in Egypt, the Suhrawardiyya Order in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Tijaniyya in Africa, and the international Naqshbandiyya.

The Sufism associated with these various orders is frequently referred to as "popular Islam" because of its many heterogenous elements, which are often derived from syncretistic practices with local non-Muslim cultures and practices, and because of its wide appeal among so-called non-elites. The emphasis on pilgrimage to the tombs of saints or holy men, the celebration of their birthdays, and the practices often deemed "superstitious" by others make this form of Islam seem very real to its adherents, however. To call it "popular" is often a way of discrediting it, especially among ultraconservative forces (see the next section). Moreover, it is often very hard to teach about Sufism in the classroom because it often does not square either with assumptions of what Islam should be (e.g., radical monotheism) or with the "five pillars" to which we often reduce Islamic thought and belief.

Conservative Criticism of Sufism

As mentioned several times throughout this chapter, many conservative thinkers have labeled Sufism a *bida* (innovation). Its emphasis on the shaykh is accordingly seen as taking the Muslim away from an unmediated relationship with God. The visit to tombs and other such practices are likewise regarded as a form of *shirk* (polytheism). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, Wahhabis—members of a conservative Islamic movement associated with the rise of modern Saudi Arabia—destroyed all shrines devoted to saints, including the tomb of Muhammad. The rationale was that such shrines contributed to idolatry. This is also the reason behind the destruction of the large Buddha statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in 2001, which the Taliban regarded as intolerable monuments to polytheism.

In an attack against Sufism in the very conservative Muslim magazine *Nid'ul Islam*, Yusuf al-Hijazi summarizes many of the reasons why conservative authorities are mistrustful of Sufism and blame it for all the current ills in Islam:

> Sufis distracted the Muslims from the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah towards the servitude of the Sheikh. Muslims thus became alienated from the teachings of Islam, and possessed no protection from the innovations and trappings of the deviant sects. . . . The Sufi's [*sic*] have left a lasting impression on the image of Islam, portraying it as one of peace and apolitical, and anyone who contravenes this is an impostor and considered an extremist. . . . The Sufi influence undoubtedly contributed greatly to the decline of the Ottoman Empire. The pacifist views they spread, the lack of Shariah knowledge, and their befriending of the disbelievers, made sure that no one would oppose the vast changes being made to the Ottoman Laws. . . . Whilst the masses were busy in the construction of extravagant mosques and spinning around in circles, the Ottoman Empire was overtaken by Masons and eventually torn to parts.[18]

Such criticisms have also entered the mainstream and occasionally appear in introductions to Islam meant for Western undergraduates and other readers. For example, in a relatively popular and otherwise very good introductory treatment of Islam, Fazlur Rahman—a Pakistani scholar and liberal Muslim reformer—writes of Sufism:

> As it developed in the whole of the Muslim world, [it] is solely responsible for inculcating, spreading and perpetuating the most fantastic and grotesque beliefs in the miracles of saints. The network of superstitions such beliefs have engendered has simply enchained the minds and spirits of the credulous masses, and even the educated and the learned have fallen a prey to them in large numbers. . . . Tomb worship and the ills accruing from this have rendered the Muslim masses almost incapable of understanding the Islamic teaching.[19]

Lived Sufism Today

Such critical comments clearly reveal that many contemporary reformers regard Sufism as a pernicious influence in the modern world. This view, of course, says less about Sufism than about its critics, who seek to purge Islam of all Sufi influences. The role of Sufism in the spread of Islam to the far-flung reaches of the Muslim empire cannot be underestimated. Its use of mystically inspired poetry, the cult of saints, and practices geared to undertake mystical communion with God played a formative role in the spread of Islam.

Despite the vitriol that many reformers level against Sufism, it still plays an important role in the religious lives of Muslims around the world. Sufism today, as it has been throughout its lengthy history, remains a very diverse tradition that possesses much variation dependent on numerous regional and cultural contexts. Taking place within the channels of particular orders, teachings and knowledge are transmitted largely by the interpersonal teaching networks between masters and disciples. Within these orders, ritual performance, even more than teaching, remains the major vehicle of Sufi expression. Through activities such as dreams and dream interpretations, daily rituals of remembrance, and pilgrimage networks, Sufis struggle to attain spiritual enlightenment.

The quest for spiritual wisdom, in other words, is not found in books, but in the intimate face-to-face interaction with the master and in bodily practice. Within these contexts, stories about past masters are told and retold, initiates attend regular *dhikr* sessions and make pilgrimages to local shrines, and so on. The initiate's progress is charted by means of his or her practice of discipline, self-sacrifice, and ritual activity.

Although Sufism remains deeply rooted in everyday practice, it can also function as an important marker in regionalized networks of individual and group identity. In his analysis of the Chishti Sabiri Order in Pakistan, for example, Robert Rozehnal has shown that members of the order articulate and preserve an alternative identity independent of conservative Islam and the state through their piety and practices.[20]

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1. For example, Stephen Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in Stephen Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 22–74.

2. See the comments in Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1–3.

3. Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

4. For example, Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

5. Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 56.

6. Quoted in Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Quran, Miraj, Poetic, and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 147–148.

7. See the discussion in Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambala, 1997), 102.

8. Farid ad-Din Attar, *Memorial of God's Friends: Lives and Sayings of Sufis*, trans. Paul Losensky (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 98.

9. Farid ad-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 206.

10. Quoted in A. J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), 54.

11. Quoted, with slight modification, from Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 161–162.

12. Attar, *Memorial of God's Friends*, 406.

13. Abu ʾl-Qasim al-Qushayri, *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism: Al-Risala al-qushayriyya fi ʿilm al-tasawwuf*, trans. Alexander D. Knysh (Reading, Eng.: Garnet, 2007).

14. Quoted in W. Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1953), 56–57.

15. James T. Munroe, *Hispano-Arab Poetry: A Student Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 320.

16. Quoted in Annemarie Schimmel, *I Am Wind, You Are Fire: The Life and World of Rumi* (Boston: Shambala, 1992).

17. Robert Rozehnal, *Islamic Sufism Unbound: Politics and Piety in Twenty-first Century Pakistan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3–6.

18. Yusuf al-Hijazi, "Sufism: The Deviated Path," *Nidʾul Islam* 22 (1998), http://web.archive.org/web/20050803084708/http://www.islam.org.au/articles/22/sufism.htm.

19. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 245–246.

20. Rozehnal, *Islamic Sufism Unbound*, 36–38.

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AARON W. HUGHES

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