

SUFISM FOR WESTERNERS

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Fritjof Schuon, the Swiss-born leader of the neo-Sufi Maryamiyya order, received divine mystical powers through a vision of the Virgin Mary. The precise contents of that vision were long shrouded in mystery. It appeared, however, that the Holy Mother had shown herself unclad to Schuon. Henceforth Schuon would also prefer to go naked as often as possible. Ritual nudity was also observed, and the leader of the order was frequently seen embracing nude women in order to impart some of his spiritual powers. To conservative suburbanites of Schuon's hometown of Bloomington, Indiana, Schuon seemed to be more like a dirty old man than a true spiritual leader. There were also charges that Schuon had performed his nude rituals with minors. He was tried in court, but was freed of all charges. Schuon's reputation may have been tarnished, but he remained a free man until his death on 5 May 1998. He had by then long lost any links with other Sufi masters. Even his former mentor, who was also a European who had adopted a highly idiosyncratic form of Sufism, had repudiated Schuon.

The fate of a man like Schuon may seem strange indeed. His interpretation of Sufism would appear unorthodox in the extreme. Yet, this bare-bones account points at some of the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in displacing an Islamic religious tradition from its context and transposing it to a quite alien environment. It is by all means common for an exotic practice to be imported to the West and adapted to suit Europeans and Americans. The military-style discipline typical of many Zen monasteries hardly suits coddled and individualistic Westerners who are mainly intent on

learning a meditative technique. Nor is there any good reason to import the caste system together with the many gurus who come from India. Nevertheless, Sufism at times seems to have changed more radically than many other religious traditions. This chapter will follow just a few of the many individuals who have contributed to shaping Western forms of Sufism. Toward the end, we shall return to the question of how and why these originally staunchly Islamic movements have been so profoundly reshaped.

New religious movements

The nineteenth century saw the beginning of a new epoch in the religious history of the West. Whereas previous dissenting religious movements had typically reformulated Christian doctrines, new movements now arose that repudiated large parts of the biblical heritage. By the end of the century, Helena Blavatsky, a flamboyant Russian émigré, had managed to become the most successful of the leaders of these new religions. She combined various esoteric ideas that were widespread in the cultural undergrowth of the late nineteenth century: from astral travel and Atlantis to telepathy and reincarnation. She presented this heady mixture of occult speculation as the essence of all the great religious traditions of the world, as transmitted to her by great spiritual masters living in the Himalayas. Large numbers of seekers were attracted to her movement, hoping to chart a third course alongside a Christian orthodoxy that had lost much of its credibility and a materialistic world-view that seemed to rob life of its spiritual zest.

After a little more than a century, there are today hundreds of Westerners proclaiming themselves to be spiritual leaders and claiming to represent the best of the world's repository of spiritual wisdom: American Zen masters, British Sufi sheikhs and Swedish shamans. These are individuals whose religious identities are part and parcel of the cultural preconditions of modernity, not the least being globalisation. The world is understood to be one single place, where Islam and Buddhism, the Jewish kabbalah and Hindu yoga co-exist.

With the advent of a global religious culture, many of these traditions are profoundly altered as Western seekers appropriate

them. Yoga in London is not the same as yoga in Varanasi, Sufism on the shelf of New Age bookstores in New York or Paris differs from Sufism as practised in the suburbs of Cairo or Istanbul. Specifically, the traditions that are borrowed are adjusted in order to fit a number of preconceptions characteristic of the modern West. Briefly, these received ideas are as follows. The essence of religion is an inner experience of the sacred, not a set of doctrines and rituals. This experience is at heart one and the same, regardless of which tradition one chooses to follow: Islam, Christianity and Buddhism are thus merely different manifestations of the same spiritual essence. The level of one's spiritual understanding is the product of a process of inner progress. Some individuals have progressed further along this path than others. For this reason, we can let ourselves be inspired by others, for instance by spiritual masters or by books containing spiritual insights.

The first converts

In the nineteenth century, intellectual circles already knew of Sufism as a historical phenomenon. Some medieval Sufi texts had been translated into French and English. These classic texts, however, had a very limited impact on the religious culture of the West. There were no Sufi missionaries in Europe or America, who could present Sufism as a living religious praxis. There were hardly any communities of Westerners in countries such as Iran, where Sufi orders were active. And whereas nineteenth-century American transcendentalists and theosophists read Hindu texts in order to find doctrines that could be suitably modernised and made relevant for a modern audience, there were few religious pioneers who were interested in creating a similarly Westernised form of Sufism. This process would only begin shortly after the turn of the twentieth century.

A Swedish painter, Ivan Aguéli, was one of the decisive cultural brokers to present the fundamentally Islamic practices of a Sufi order to the innovative religious circles of Europe. Aguéli was somewhat of an outsider in Swedish artistic life. He left Christian orthodoxy at an early stage and eagerly embraced the alternative religious and political ideologies of his time. He delved into the

works of Emanuel Swedenborg, became an anarchist during a stay in Paris and was arrested for his political convictions. In France he also came in contact with the occult revival that was taking place during the late nineteenth century. He became a member of the Theosophical Society, and simultaneously picked up influences from Islam and Taoism. Aguéli's omnivorous religious appetite resembled that of present-day New Agers, who also pick, reinterpret and combine bits and pieces of traditions from all over the globe.

However, Aguéli's sympathies for the Muslim world soon outweighed his other interests. He visited Egypt in 1895, and returned a few years later with the intention of settling there. He soon went native, dressing in a fez and a flowing Egyptian robe. On the occasions when he visited his small hometown of Sala in Sweden, his exotic dress and manners seem to have caused quite a stir. However, Aguéli's adoption of Egyptian culture went far deeper than the espousal of a few exotic customs. He was a linguistic genius, and learned perfect Arabic. His letters and notebooks are filled with handwriting as fluent as that of a native speaker. Around the year 1900, Aguéli formally converted to Islam. Due to his formidable command of the language, he was able to proceed to study Islamic theology at the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo – one of the first Westerners ever to do so.

Despite these tokens of Muslim orthodoxy, it was not mainstream Sunni Islam that interested Aguéli, who remained as much of a transcultural religious innovator as before his conversion. The Quran and the writings of Swedenborg remained side by side on his desk. In 1907, he was initiated into a branch of the Sufi Shadhiliyya order by its spiritual leader, Sheikh Abd ar-Rahman Illyash al-Kabir. Shortly thereafter, the sheikh appointed Aguéli a teacher, thus giving him the right to initiate others into the order.

After returning to Paris in 1910, Aguéli began submitting articles to a new journal called *La Gnose*, with the subtitle *Revue mensuelle consacrée à l'étude des sciences ésotériques*, in English 'Gnosis, monthly journal dedicated to the study of the esoteric sciences'. Here, Aguéli had found a forum where he could present his view that medieval Sufism, especially as developed by the thirteenth-century mystic Ibn Arabi, was precisely such an esoteric science, i.e. a spiritual insight common to humanity that transcended the

boundaries of conventional religion. Oversimplifying somewhat, one could say that Ibn Arabi had created a synthesis of Neoplatonic philosophy and Islam. God is to be found in everything, and is constantly creating the world. Ultimately, the deity is an utterly unknowable Supreme Being, but through his infinitely diverse creation he is forever revealing himself to humanity. Every individual attains his or her knowledge of the nature of God differently. Implicit in such a creed is a call for tolerance of other people's divergent ways of understanding God, and a sharp dichotomy between essence and manifestation. By basing his rather syncretistic faith on a personal interpretation of Ibn Arabi's mystical philosophy, Aguéli had become a quite unorthodox Muslim.

For some time, Aguéli remained a sole traveller in a highly unusual religious landscape. Then, however, followed an encounter that would transform him from Sufi convert and pluralistic seeker to the first link in a new religious movement. Due to his collaboration in *La Gnose*, he became acquainted with the founder of the journal, the young Frenchman René Guénon. Like Aguéli, Guénon had left Christian orthodoxy in order to experiment with a whole range of religious options. France was, at the turn of the century, the homeland of a vast number of more or less secret societies, and Guénon became a member of several such occultist and fringe masonic organisations: groups of people who believed in reincarnation, spiritualism and ritual magic. Guénon was dissatisfied with the doctrines of several such occult groups, and in 1909 founded *La Gnose* in order to spread what he felt to be the true core of the world's spiritual traditions. One of the ideas that fascinated him was the concept of a primordial religion of humankind, an *Ur-revelation* handed down through the ages. Vestiges of the primordial religion were to be found in several of the major religions. Guénon could therefore present articles on the hidden dimension of the Christian cross and on Hindu Vedanta philosophy in the same volumes of *La Gnose*, with no sense of contradiction.

It remains a fact that different religions, at least on the mundane plane of observable facts, seem to present divergent opinions on a variety of subjects. Was there any one creed that was more faithful to the primordial tradition? Whereas Aguéli saw Sufism as the foremost vehicle of divine wisdom, Guénon initially favoured Taoism,

Catholicism and certain Hindu philosophies. However, Guénon gradually approached the mystical branches of Islam. In 1912, he was formally initiated into the same order as Aguéli. Guénon, however, proved to be as unorthodox a Muslim as his mentor was. After his conversion, he remained a freemason as well as a member of the Catholic church. He continued to explore a variety of belief systems from a perspective that owed much to a distinctly Western esoteric mode of thought. The production of *La Gnose* came to a halt, but Guénon continued a highly productive career as a writer, publishing seventeen books and a stream of articles on his highly personal interpretation of the world's religions.

Guénon had thus been initiated as a Sufi, but the teachings he presented in his publications were certainly unconventional from an Islamic perspective. His religious world-view builds on a form of criticism of modern culture that is only comprehensible when one sees him as a deeply dissatisfied Westerner. Modern society, in his view, has lost its spiritual foundations. Science builds on a materialistic illusion, but most people who have understood that modernity is an evil force retreat into what Guénon scathingly called pseudo-religions. Among the worst of these are theosophy and spiritualism. The only viable option in the struggle against modernity is to return to the primordial Tradition. This Tradition is mainly to be found in the symbolism of the main religious systems. Spiritual insight affords one the key to understanding these symbols. Sufism, from this perspective, is a term designating one perspective among many from which to reach back to the primordial Tradition, rather than a set of Muslim social formations and practices.

In the late 1920s Guénon was hit by several personal tragedies. His wife and his aunt died, and a cousin with whom he had lived left him. Soon thereafter Guénon moved to Cairo, ostensibly in order to look for Sufi texts, but probably just as much in order to start a new life. He spent much of the rest of his life writing a considerable corpus of texts expounding what he believed to be the inner message not only of Sufism, but of all major religious traditions. By then, Guénon had gained an important follower, Fritjof Schuon. Schuon was born in the Swiss city of Basel in 1907. He joined the Catholic church, but whereas his brother would become a Catholic monk, Schuon soon left the church. Schuon discovered Guénon's writings

in 1924 and was inspired to become yet another religious seeker with universalist aspirations, convinced that there was a basic concord between the world-views of the Upanishads, Buddhism and Islam. When Schuon left for Algeria in 1932 and was initiated into a Sufi order, it was not in order to become a Muslim, but to get to know the ancient wisdom tradition that Guénon had written about. Schuon received the power to initiate others, effectively making him more influential than his senior Guénon. The group around Schuon grew steadily throughout the 1930s.

In the realm of ideas, both men agreed that all religions are manifestations of an underlying divine metaphysics, to which they had immediate access. On the ground, however, matters were quite different. The friendship between Guénon and Schuon was stranded on religious questions, and specifically on the issue of the efficacy of the Christian sacraments. Schuon's belief that he had received a mystic experience, giving him direct insights into the primordial wisdom tradition, allowed him to construct his own religious movement, far removed from any Islamic form of Sufism. He still considered himself a Sufi and used the Muslim name Isa Nur ad-Din, but believed that he had found the true essence of Sufism hidden under the ephemeral details in which the various historical orders and traditions had clothed the tradition. Schuon's understanding of Sufism gained a considerable amount of legitimacy due to the endorsement of the Iranian-American professor of Islamic philosophy at George Washington University, Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

As a consequence of his universalistic approach, Schuon freely combined aspects of Islam, Buddhism, Hindu philosophies and several Native American traditions. Thus far his career resembled that of many other leaders of new religious movements in the West. A truly radical innovation originated in the middle of the 1960s. During a trip to Morocco, Schuon once again had a vision. The Virgin Mary showed herself to him, and physically transformed him. Henceforth, the divine force or *baraka* would emanate directly from Schuon's body and from pictures of him. Some of that force was transmitted to Badriyah, the woman he lived with. By being naked together, smaller amounts of *baraka* were deemed to reach his disciples. Texts intended for the circle of adepts explain that the mystic transformation led to Schuon gathering within himself all the

properties previously found in Shiva, Krishna, Abraham, David, Christ and Muhammad. Sufi orders tend to be hierarchically constructed, with the sheikh functioning as a link between the divine and the ordinary member of the order, but Schuon's near-deification must have been unique.

Despite all the controversies surrounding traditionalist neo-Sufism, the writings of Guénon, Schuon and other authors within the same religious lineage have had, and continue to have, a considerable impact. The thought that Sufism is a manifestation of a divine tradition common to all world faiths remains attractive for many spiritual seekers.

Universal Sufism

At roughly the same time as Aguéli converted to Islam and became one of the very first Western Sufis, the first Sufi teacher from the Orient arrived in the West. However, Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882–1927) was an atypical representative of his tradition. Despite being a member of a Sufi group, the Chisti order, he did not represent the teachings and rituals of that order, but worked independently and propagated his own teachings. According to the semi-legendary accounts of Inayat Khan's life, he had already in childhood begun to manifest the signs that pointed to his future role as the founder of an ecumenical religion. Although he was raised in a Muslim family in India, he was, according to these sources, interested in Hindu mysticism. Like Jesus, he reportedly reached insight about his spiritual mission at the age of twelve. A number of miraculous events pointed to his historical role of uniting the religious heritage of East and West in one coherent message.

These events belong to the realm of hagiography rather than biography. The veracity of these accounts should be taken with a grain of salt. What this story really seems to say is that it was preordained that Inayat Khan should found a new universal creed, rather than a Muslim form of Sufism. Khan's message is indeed quite innovative. He states that the word 'religion' can be understood in two distinct senses. Each of the world's great religions, which he defines as Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism and Buddhism, has an external form and an inner core. Religion in

the external sense consists of the various doctrines, rituals and organisations. The inner message is, on the contrary, identical in all six. This core consists of the doctrine of the unity of God, and in the contention that the purpose of religion is to cultivate the inner life and the sense that God is present in everything. This implies that Khan's Sufism, according to his own definition, is an inner religion but not an outer one.

Most Muslims would find Khan's message highly controversial. It is certainly part of Islamic orthodoxy to claim that God has revealed his message through many prophets, from Adam to Muhammad. However, this revelation has become progressively clearer and Muhammad seals the line of prophets by transmitting the message without distortions. For most Muslims, Muhammad is foremost among prophets because his historical role is unique. For Inayat Khan, the role of Muhammad is to present the same message as all other founders of major religious traditions. As a symbol of this view, religious texts of all six religions are used in the rituals of the Sufi order. Similarly, the Quran is not seen as a unique divine revelation. One can perfectly well remain a Christian or a Buddhist and nonetheless join the Sufi order. His followers were also taught an eclectic mix of meditative practices, some of which were Islamic, others drawing on Hindu methods and yet others constructed from Christian elements.

Inayat Khan, who was also a musician, embarked on a combined mission and concert tour in 1910. In connection with a recital of Indian music, he met Ada Martin, who became his first disciple. Ada Martin was a fairly typical representative of the alternative religious milieu of that time. A woman of Jewish origin, she left the faith of her family in order to experiment with a variety of religious options. She came to perceive her meeting with Inayat Khan as the end of a long spiritual quest, and as a sign of her new status she adopted the name Rabia Martin. Two years later, Khan felt that she had attained a sufficient spiritual maturity to assume the role of teacher. This was a decisive break with the nearly universal praxis of Islamic Sufi movements, where only men reach the highest positions. Since then a number of women have had an elevated rank in Khan's order. Several of these women had backgrounds in the Theosophical Society, which retained its function as one of the main sites of

unchurched spirituality during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Khan moved from the United States to London, and began spreading his message to a wider audience. He published *A Sufi Message of Spiritual Liberty* in 1914, began editing the journal *The Sufi* in 1915, and formally founded the Sufi order in 1916. He then embarked on extensive trips to expand the movement further, and set up branches in France, Switzerland and other countries. Inayat Khan returned to India in 1926 and died a year later. After his death, the Sufi order split. The American branch was at first led by Rabia Martin together with another disciple, Samuel Lewis. New schisms arose in 1945, when Martin formed a group called Sufism Reoriented and Lewis instituted the Sufi Islamia Ruhaniat Society. Even more eclectic than its predecessor, the Sufi Islamia Ruhaniat Society expanded Khan's original list of six traditions to encompass Taoism and a variety of more or less authentic tribal traditions. The European branch was also subject to schisms, with members of Inayat Khan's family presiding over the various groups. Leaders of all these groups have either been Westerners, or Westernised relatives of Khan's. Just like Guénon's esoteric and traditionalist form of religion, Inayat Khan's Sufism is a quintessentially Western phenomenon.

Sufism as popular fiction

Traditionalism has reached a relatively restricted number of individuals. The groups that can trace their lineage back to Inayat Khan also have a limited membership. Many more people have come into contact with Sufism through the popular books of Idries Shah (1924–96).

Shah began his career as a writer in 1956 with *Oriental Magic*, followed in 1957 by *The Secret Lore of Magic*. His most widely sold work, *The Sufis*, appeared in 1964. When Shah died in 1996, his books had sold some fifteen million copies in a dozen languages. Shah presented Sufism as a form of religious insight that was only marginally connected to the social formations and ritualised activities that scholars of Sufism generally study. In books such as *Thinkers of the East* and *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla*

Nasruddin, the core of Sufism is purported to be a form of spiritual wisdom subtly encoded in humorous anecdotes. One story tells of the man who has lost his key, and is looking desperately on the ground. A sympathetic neighbour asks if this is where he lost the key. 'No, I lost it at home', says the man, 'but there is more light here than in my own house'.

Given the right reading, such a story might well be understood as a parable of a spiritual quest. But who was Shah, and what credentials did he have for presenting such more or less Sufi-inspired lore to the West? Biographical notes in his books mention his ties of kinship with the prophet Muhammad as well as his affiliation with a more or less secret Sufi order in Central Asia. According to one version, he belonged to the same tradition as the controversial religious leader Georgii Gurdjieff. Other accounts claim that he was a member of a branch of the well-known Naqshbandi order. However, the identity of his sheikh and teacher remained a secret. His spiritual lineage made him a respected figure among sections of the higher echelons of British society. As the years passed by, Shah entered the exclusive ranks of those religious leaders who have become truly wealthy due to the generosity of their admirers.

Controversies arose during Shah's last years, since there seemed to be disturbing discrepancies between the autobiographical data and recoverable facts. Quite possibly there may be a link of kinship with the prophet Muhammad, but after 1300 years there must be a million people or more who are his descendants. Other elements of the autobiography would seem to be pure fiction. Idries was indeed born in India, but his father was an Afghan immigrant to England, who had married a Scottish woman. Idries Shah himself was mainly brought up in the vicinity of London. He did spend part of his youth abroad, but as far as is known not in any Central Asian monastic order but in the considerably less exotic business community of Uruguay. Pecuniary misfortunes and allegations of being involved in shady deals made him return hastily to Britain. His first book, *Oriental Magic*, appeared after he had been employed for some time at a museum on the Isle of Man that featured exhibits on magic and witchcraft. The story of his mysterious background seems to have been a fabrication, which took shape over the years.

The story of Idries Shah and his Sufi insights was deconstructed

more than two decades ago by a professor of Oriental languages, Lawrence Elwell-Sutton. However, the public demand for Shah's books has continued unabated, and a number of his titles are still in print. His position in relation to Sufism as a group of historically documented movements is quite marginal. He has, however, played a significant role in representing the essence of Sufism as a non-confessional, individualistic and life-affirming distillation of spiritual wisdom.

Global Sufism

In the West, it is only over the last few years that Sufi teachers with distinct roots in an Islamic tradition have established their presence. Most of these individuals have followers among the immigrant communities from the Muslim areas of Africa, Asia and south-eastern Europe. The majority population of the countries in which these teachers reside will usually be entirely unaware of the presence of Sufi orders. Sufism for immigrant Muslims in the West and Sufism for Westerners would seem to be two quite distinct phenomena.

As one reads about the lives of the pioneers of Western neo-Sufism, one of the things that stands out is the extent to which they adapted Sufism to the needs of Westerners involved in a quest for alternative forms of religiosity. Even René Guénon, who moved to Egypt and remained there for the rest of his life, represents a radical departure from traditionally Islamic forms of Sufism. A simple comparison between Islamic Sufism and Western neo-Sufism might concentrate on five points, as set out in Table 7.1.

Why is Western neo-Sufism so different from Islamic Sufism? One important reason lies in the fact that Sufism in northern Africa and the Middle East is not only part of a Muslim religious context, but also of a local social setting. A reason for joining a Sufi order may be that one identifies oneself as a Muslim and wishes to deepen one's religious commitment. Sufism is not a practice centred on a monastic life or an existence in an ashram, as are many other Oriental traditions that have attracted Western adepts. On the contrary, after joining, one's bonds to surrounding Islamic society remain strong. Thus, there are no obvious precedents for a complete stranger with a different religious affiliation, different ethnic back-

Table 7.1 Comparison between Islamic Sufism and Western neo-Sufism

<i>Islamic Sufism</i>	<i>Neo-Sufism</i>
1 Membership in a Sufi order introduces the individual into a strong and often large social network.	Neo-Sufism is pursued as an individual quest; any collective participation is typically in small and socially marginal groups.
2 Belief and practices are framed within a culturally determined Muslim background.	Belief is universalist, can be combined with other forms of religiosity and are adapted to the perceptions Westerners have of themselves and their environment.
3 The roles of men and women are often sharply differentiated.	Western gender roles are adopted; women often reach important positions.
4 Islamic Sufism spreads through personal contacts.	Neo-Sufism is spread mainly through books.
5 Correct practice is paramount.	Experience is paramount.

ground and no family ties to join the group and begin to participate in the activities of the order. Only recently have some Muslim orders become more familiar with the Western pattern of the spiritual quest and have accepted outsiders. In time, perhaps more Sufi sheikhs will get used to having backpackers arrive on their doorsteps, hoping to be admitted to the community.

For a Western audience, the most appealing part of being a Sufi is hardly the prospect of forging social ties with other Muslims, but rather the element of spirituality in neo-Sufism. But what does the elusive term spirituality mean for a modern European or American? Behind this extremely vague term there are some culturally defined characteristics, that may be so obvious to many that they are no longer perceived as the specific products of our own culture. First, the concept of 'spirituality' is often set apart from terms such as 'religion' or 'faith'. For some, religion would appear to be the doctrines and rituals that authorities have forced upon people, whereas spirituality is the common core found under the various

superficial manifestations. If one removes the idiosyncrasies that separate Hindus from Muslims and Buddhists from Christians, the same timeless essence would seem to underlie them all. The split between inner and outer religion that we saw in both Guénon's and Inayat Khan's understanding of Sufism appears to be part of the presuppositions of modern Westerners.

Without delving into the question whether there really are any universals uniting the various religious systems of the world, and what these universals might be, one can note that the idea of a perennial tradition arose because there was a need for such a concept. People in the Middle Ages lived in a world defined by their own religion. What was known of Ancient Greek philosophy was assimilated to a biblical framework. Contemporary peoples with a different faith – Jews and Muslims – were almost exclusively understood in negative terms. An important change in this attitude arose in fifteenth-century humanist circles in Italy. Scholars gradually became aware of a wider range of religious texts: kabbalistic tracts, Platonic dialogues, Neoplatonic treatises and the writings attributed to the mythic figure of Hermes Trismegistus.

The latter works especially posed a challenge to the intellectual culture of the Renaissance. The Hermetic corpus is a collection of Greek texts written in late antiquity. These writings were, however, falsely attributed to an Egyptian sage living at the time of Moses. It seemed obvious to the Renaissance thinkers that there were striking similarities between these purportedly ancient traditions and Scriptural revelation. How could an ancient philosopher have gained knowledge of religious truths at an epoch far predating the revelation afforded through the Gospels? And how could this common core of knowledge be so similar to the Platonic worldview? Some favoured the theory that there was a single core of divine knowledge, transmitted to a succession of sages from the dawn of time. According to an early version of this theory, developed by Marsilio Ficino in the mid-fifteenth century, Zarathustra, Hermes, Pythagoras, Orpheus and Plato had all received essentially the same teachings. The list was soon expanded by his follower Giovanni Pico della Mirandola to include various Islamic philosophers and Jewish kabbalists.

A century later another Renaissance humanist, Agostino Steuco,

coined a term for this primeval revealed teaching. In a book published in 1540 with the title *De perenni philosophia* ('On the perennial philosophy'), he explains that most philosophies and religions – with the exception of the teachings of Martin Luther, of which he heartily disapproved – ultimately reflect a common doctrine. He defended his belief in the ultimate concord of all faiths by advancing a view of history that runs counter to the modern outlook, but which is not unlike the understanding of the past that one finds in many New Age books. In the beginning of time, wise people wandered the face of the Earth. They were blessed with a spiritual insight unmatched by any later age. This primeval wisdom has been gradually corrupted, but can be retrieved by studying ancient wisdom traditions.

Since the days of Steuco, the belief in a perennial philosophy stemming from the dawn of time has been reformulated in many ways. Steuco himself obviously had a very limited knowledge of the religions of the world. For him, the primeval philosophy was basically that of the Neoplatonic current. As the generations passed, travellers described previously unknown peoples, texts from the most diverse cultures were translated, and spokespersons for a variety of faiths presented their beliefs for a Western audience. The concept of a *philosophia perennis* was retained, but was filled with new doctrinal contents in order to accommodate new elements. The price to be paid for such a universalising approach is of course that any true divergence between traditions must be silenced, and those faiths that are too different from the imagined 'perennial philosophy' are excluded. All religions are said to be fundamentally identical, with the exception of those that claim to be exclusive truths. Thus only certain minority views of Islam can be included in the universalist scheme, since many mainstream forms are difficult to squeeze into the procrustean mould. This is one reason why those Sufi movements that are most unorthodox from a traditionally Islamic point of view are the ones that have met with the greatest success in the West.

In the contemporary West, 'true' religion is often understood as an inner experience, a personal spiritual quest. Thus ritual observances, which are central to many religions as actually practised, are declared to have only a marginal significance. Ultimately, this

understanding of the word 'religion' has its roots in the Protestant milieus of northern Europe. Especially in pietist circles, it was believed that the essence of religion was inner edification, the contact with the divine and the right for each Christian to teach and to preach. The step would seem small to declaring that each of us can receive insight into the divine by turning inwards. With the birth of Romanticism, similar ideas became increasingly familiar to educated people.

From the end of the nineteenth century, concepts such as experience, feeling and insight have received partially new meanings. The spiritual core within us has come to be understood in psychological terms. As psychology, understood as an academic discipline, freed itself from its roots in philosophy, the question of disciplinary boundary-drawing arose. A number of influential psychologists adopted an outlook close to that of the natural sciences, and attempted to apply experimental methods to the study of the human mind. Others had a more humanistic approach, and favoured studying human experience. Psychologists such as William James and Carl Gustav Jung felt that spiritual experiences were vital elements in psychological growth. Theories such as those formulated by James and Jung in turn influenced alternative spiritual movements beginning in the 1950s and 1960s. Since then, there has been a strong tendency to conflate religiosity, psychology and therapy.

Sufism is still quite a minor component in the palette of alternative religions in the West. Nevertheless, the number of books on the subject increases, and even the titles are evidence of the far-reaching changes that Sufism has undergone on its way to the New Age marketplace. Books such as *Sufism and Psychology* and *Sufism as Therapy* are only imaginable in a culture that is impregnated with the vocabulary of popular psychology. A title such as *Universal Sufism* reveals the eclectic spirit of the modern religious landscape.

If neo-Sufi movements have had such an ability to adapt to changing circumstances, one might wonder why their success has been so limited when compared with religious movements that draw on Indian, Japanese or Tibetan roots. Recent scholarship on the process of religious plurality and religious conversion shows how religions in the modern West function like products on a market. One does not change religious affiliation primarily because one is

suddenly convinced of the merits of the new religion, or because of any obvious deprivation. Much of the research conducted over the last few years points at the importance of considerably more mundane factors. The success of a movement often has to do with its successful marketing strategies, and not least its ability to expand its membership by exploiting pre-existing social networks. Sufism had a slower start than many other alternative religions, and the gap to its main competitors remains large.

One of the most important single events that made Oriental religions known to a Western audience was the World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893. Large numbers of visitors attended the various conferences, and missionaries of numerous faiths were present in order to draw attention to their traditions. Islam, however, was poorly represented, and there were no spokespersons of any Sufi groups. An alternative to the publicity that one might have gained by attending such an event would have been to begin long-term missionary work. However, some of the first attempts to import Sufism to the West were conducted by highly secretive groups. Obviously, few potential converts will be attracted if hardly anybody is aware of the existence of the religious movement, few people have ever met any of its members and their writings are not disseminated. Sufism has the added problem of being associated with Islam, a religion that many outsiders view with suspicion. Considering the fact that women are much more likely than men to become interested in a religious lifestyle, it is of course highly problematic that many Western women associate Islam with rigid patriarchal structures.

Despite the slow start, there is nevertheless a large potential market for Sufism in the West. In order to succeed in appealing to a broader audience, these movements would probably need charismatic representatives who are able to portray Sufism as an individualistic, experientially based universalist religion which specifically empowers women. Such a move would, however, appear to remove everything traditionally Sufi from neo-Sufism.

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