

## I. Sufism and Islam

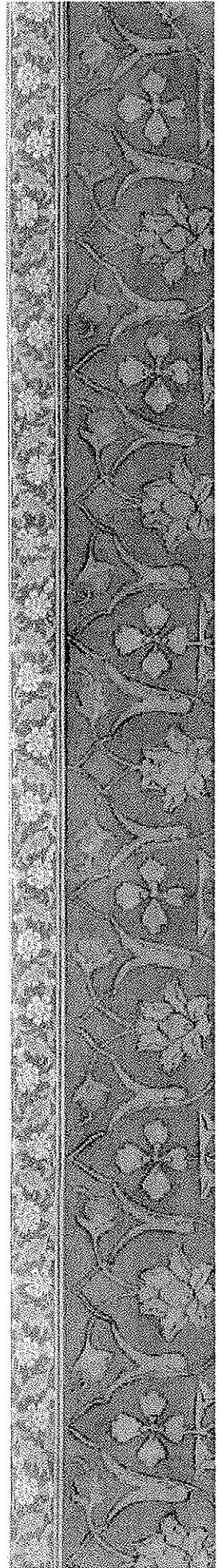
Sufism is the most universal manifestation of the inner dimension of Islam; it is the way by which man transcends his own individual self and reaches God.<sup>1</sup> It provides within the forms of the Islamic revelation the means for an intense spiritual life directed towards the transformation of man's being and the attainment of the spiritual virtues; ultimately it leads to the vision of God. It is for this reason that many Sufis define Sufism by the saying of the Prophet of Islam concerning spiritual virtue (*ibṣān*): "It is that thou shouldst worship God as if thou sawest Him, for if thou seest Him not, verily He seeth thee."

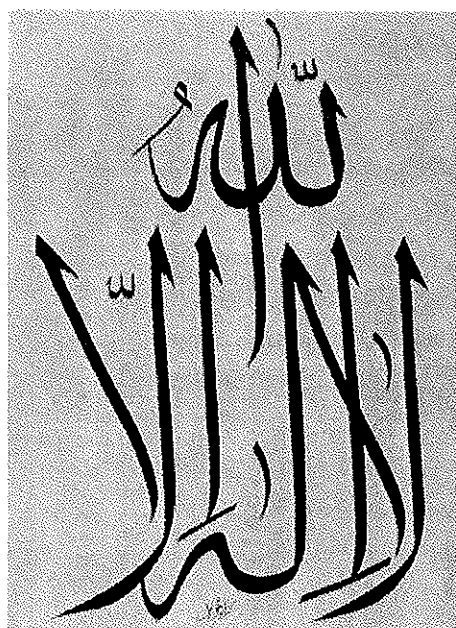
Islam is primarily a "way of knowledge,"<sup>2</sup> which means that its spiritual method, its way of bridging the illusory gap between man and God—"illusory," but none the less as real as man's own ego—is centered upon man's intelligence. Man is conceived of as a "theomorphic" being, a being created in the image of God, and therefore as possessing the three basic qualities of intelligence, free-will, and speech. Intelligence is central to the human state and gains a saving quality through its content, which in Islam is the *Shahādah* or "profession of faith": *Lā ilāha illallāh*, "There is no god but God"; through the *Shahādah* man comes to know the Absolute and the nature of reality, and thus also the way to salvation. The element of will, however, must also be taken into account, because it exists and only through it can man choose to conform to the Will of the Absolute. Speech, or communication with God, becomes the means—through prayer in general or in Sufism through quintessential prayer or invocation (*dhikr*)—of actualizing man's awareness of the Absolute and of leading intelligence and will back to their essence.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the relationship between Sufism and Islam see S. H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, chapter 5; Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, pp. 32 ff.; T. Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, chapter 1; and F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, chapters 1 and 4.

<sup>2</sup> See Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, pp. 13 ff. and Nasr, *Ideals and Realities*, pp. 21 ff.

<sup>3</sup> See Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, pp. 13 ff. and Nasr, *Ideals and Realities*, pp. 18 ff.





The *Shahādah* (calligraphy by Khurshid Alam)

Through the spiritual methods of Sufism the *Shahādah* is integrally realized within the being of the knower. The “knowledge” of Reality which results from this realization, however, must not be confused with knowledge as it is usually understood in everyday language, for this realized knowledge is “To know what is, and to know it in such a fashion as to be oneself, truly and effectively, what one knows.”<sup>4</sup> If the human ego, with which fallen man usually identifies himself, were a closed system, such knowledge would be beyond man’s reach. However,

in the view of Sufism, like other traditional metaphysical doctrines, the ego is only a transient mode of man’s true and transcendent self. Therefore the attainment of metaphysical knowledge in its true sense, or “spiritual realization,” is the removal of the veils which separate man from God and from the full reality of his own true nature. It is the means of actualizing the full potentialities of the human state.

Metaphysical knowledge in the sense just described can perhaps be designated best by the term “gnosis” (*irfān*), which in its original sense and as related to Sufism means “Wisdom made up of knowledge and sanctity.”<sup>5</sup> Many Sufis speak of gnosis as being synonymous with love, but “love” in their vocabulary excludes the sentimental colorings usually associated with this term in current usage. The term love is employed by them because it indicates more clearly than any other word that in gnosis the whole of one’s being “knows” the object and not just the mind; and because love is the most direct reflection in this world, or the truest “symbol” in the tradi-

<sup>4</sup> R. Guénon, “Oriental Metaphysics,” *Tomorrow* (London), vol. 12, no. 1, p. 10; also in *The Sword of Gnosis*, Penguin Books, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> G.E.H. Palmer, in the foreword to Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, London, 1959, p. 8.

tional sense, of the joy and beatitude of the spiritual world. Moreover, in Sufism, as in other traditions, the instrument of spiritual knowledge or gnosis is the heart, the center of man's being;<sup>6</sup> gnosis is "existential" rather than purely mental.

Rūmī indicates the profound nature of love (*ishq* or *maqabbah*), a nature which can completely transform the human substance, by saying that in reality love is an attribute of God<sup>7</sup> and that through it man is freed from the limitations which define his state in the world.

*He (alone)<sup>8</sup> whose garment is rent by a (mighty) love is purged entirely of covetousness and defect.*

*Hail, O Love that bringest us good gain—thou art the physician of all our ills,*

*The remedy of our pride and vainglory, our Plato and our Galen (I, 22-24).*

The interrelationship between love and knowledge is clearly expressed in the following passage:

*By love dregs become clear; by love pains become healing,  
By love the dead is made living. ...*

*This love, moreover, is the result of knowledge: who (ever) sat in foolishness on such a throne?*

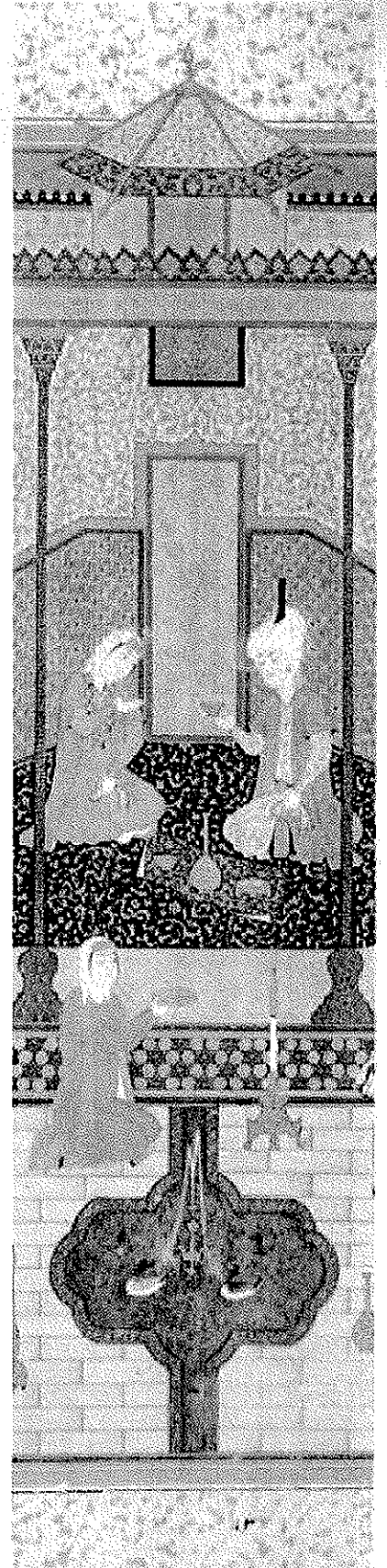
*On what occasion did deficient knowledge give birth to this love? Deficient knowledge gives birth to love, but (only love) for that which is really lifeless (II, 1530-33).*

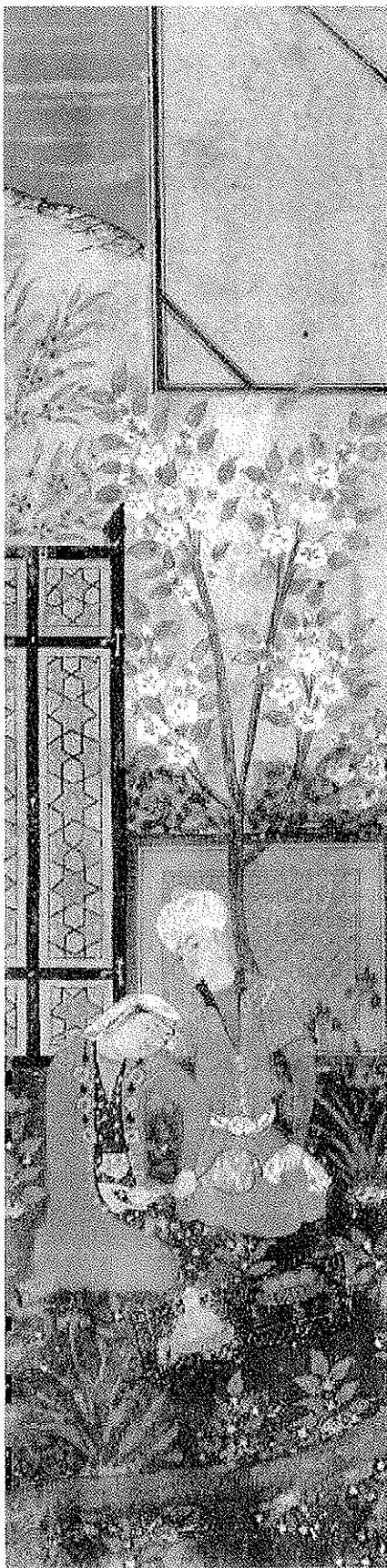
In his commentary on these verses Nicholson recognizes that Rūmī does not differentiate between gnosis and love:

<sup>6</sup> On the heart, which is the seat of the Intellect in its traditional sense, see Schuon, "The Ternary Aspect of the Human Microcosm," in *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, chapter 7.

<sup>7</sup> See *Mathnawī*, V, 2185, where Rūmī states this explicitly. He also says, "Whether love be from this (earthly) side or from that (heavenly) side, in the end it leads us yonder" (I, 111). The sources of quotations from Rūmī are indicated as follows: Roman numerals refer to the particular volume of the *Mathnawī* (Nicholson's translation) being cited. *Discourses* refers to *Discourses of Rūmī*; *Diwān* to *Selected Poems from the Diwānī Shamsī Tabriz*, and *Rubā'iyāt* to *The Rubā'iyāt of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī* (See Introduction, note 1).

<sup>8</sup> The additions within parentheses are Nicholson's; those within brackets are my own.





*Rūmī... does not make any... distinctions between the gnostic (ʿarif) and the lover (āshiq): for him, knowledge and love are inseparable and coequal aspects of the same reality.<sup>9</sup>*

Rūmī describes the spiritual transformation brought about by love as follows:

*This is Love: to fly heavenwards,  
To rend, every instant, a hundred veils (Dīwān, p. 137).*

*Love is that flame which, when it blazes up, consumes everything else but the Beloved (V, 588).*

And therefore,

*When love has no care for him [the traveler on the spiritual path], he is left as a bird without wings. Alas for him then! (I, 31).*

Sufism deals first and foremost with the inward aspects of that which is expressed outwardly or exoterically in the *Shari'ah*, the Islamic religious law. Hence it is commonly called "Islamic esotericism."<sup>10</sup> In the view of the Sufis, exoteric Islam is concerned with laws and injunctions which direct human action and life in accordance with the divine Will, whereas Sufism concerns direct knowledge of God and realization—or literally, the "making real" and actual—of spiritual realities which exist both within the external form of the Revelation and in the being of the spiritual traveler (*sālik*). The *Shari'ah* is directly related to Sufism inasmuch as it concerns itself with translating these same realities into laws which are adapted to the individual and social orders.

Exotericism by definition must be limited in some sense, for it addresses itself to a particular humanity and a particular

<sup>9</sup> *Mathnawī*, vol. VII, p. 294. In Sufism, contrary to Hinduism for example, there is no sharp distinction between the spiritual ways of love and knowledge; rather, it is a question of the predominance of one way over the other. See the excellent discussion by T. Burckhardt, "Knowledge and Love," in *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, pp. 27–32. On the various dimensions of love in Sufism as manifested in the world, see Schuon, "Earthly Concomitances of the Love of God," in *Dimensions of Islam*, chapter 9.

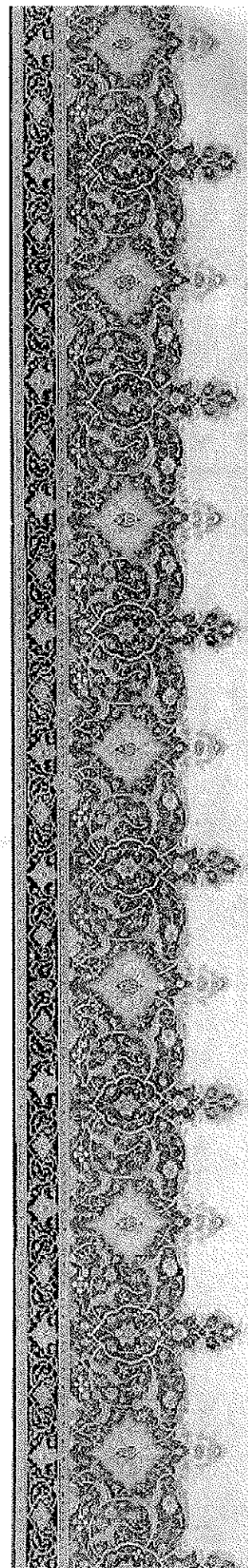
<sup>10</sup> On esotericism and exotericism, see Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, chapter 1; and Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, London, 1953, chapters 2 and 3.

psychological and mental condition—even though its means of addressing itself is to some degree universalized and expanded through time and space to encompass a large segment of the human race. Esotericism also addresses itself to particular psychological types, but it is open inwardly towards the Infinite in a much more direct manner than exotericism, since it is concerned primarily with overcoming all the limitations of the individual order. The very forms which somehow limit exotericism become for esotericism the point of departure towards the unlimited horizons of the spiritual world. Or again, exotericism concerns itself with forms of a sacred nature and has for its goal the salvation of the individual by means of these very forms, whereas esotericism is concerned with the spirit that dwells within sacred forms and has as its goal the transcending of all individual limits.

With these points in mind it should be clear why the Sufis acknowledge the absolute necessity of the *Shari'ah* and in general are among its firmest supporters.<sup>11</sup> They recognize that to reach the indwelling spirit of a doctrine or a sacred form (such as a rite or a work of art), one must first *have* that external form, which is the expression of the Truth which that form manifests, but in modes conformable to the conditions of this world. Moreover, the vast majority of believers are not capable of reaching the inner meaning that lies within the revealed forms, and so they must attain salvation by conforming to the exoteric dimension of the revelation.

Here it may be helpful to quote from Ibn 'Arabī. This great Andalusian sage of the 7th/13th century (d. 1240) was the first to formulate explicitly many of the metaphysical and

<sup>11</sup> Sufism is also in a certain sense "opposed" to the *Shari'ah*, although not in the way usually imagined. The spiritual Path is precisely a passing beyond or a penetrating into the forms of the *Shari'ah*, and thus certain Sufis may at one time or another criticize the Divine Law, or rather those who follow it blindly, but only to warn them not to be limited and held back by it. The spiritual traveler must be able to pass to the inner essence of the Law, while at the same time following it on the individual and social planes. Deviations from Sufism have appeared when the Law has been ignored. On the equilibrium between esotericism and exotericism in Islamic civilization, see Nasr, *Ideals and Realities*, pp. 122 ff; and on a particular example during the Safavid period in Iran of opposition to Sufism caused by a rupture of this equilibrium, see Nasr, "Sufism," *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 4, edited by R. N. Frye, Cambridge, 1975, pp. 442-63.



cosmological doctrines of Sufism. Rūmī, who lived a generation later than Ibn 'Arabī, was, as S.H. Nasr has pointed out,<sup>12</sup> certainly acquainted with Ibn 'Arabī's thought through the intermediary of Sadr al-Dīn Qunyawī. Qunyawī was Ibn 'Arabī's stepson and the foremost expositor of his school in the eastern lands of Islam and at the same time one of Rūmī's close friends and the leader of the prayers (*imām*) at the mosque where Rūmī prayed. In any case, the metaphysics which underlies Rūmī's writings is basically the same as that of Ibn 'Arabī—to the extent that certain later Sufis have called the *Mathnawī* "the *Futūhāt al-Makkiyyah* in Persian verse," referring to Ibn 'Arabī's monumental work. Therefore here and in a number of other places, especially in chapter two in the case of certain points of metaphysics where Ibn 'Arabī is much more explicit than Rūmī, I have taken the liberty of quoting Ibn 'Arabī's more theoretical and abstract formulations to make clear the underlying basis of Rūmī's doctrine.

To return to the subject at hand, Ibn 'Arabī points out that traditions have their exoteric and esoteric sides in order that all believers may worship to their capacities.

*The prophets spoke in the language of outward things and of the generality of men, for they had confidence in the understanding of him who had knowledge and the ears to hear. They took into account only the common people, because they knew the station of the People of Understanding.... They made allowances for those of weak intelligence and reasoning power, those who were dominated by passion and natural disposition.*

*In the same way, the sciences which they brought were clothed in robes appropriate to the most inferior understandings, in order that he who had not the power of mystical penetration would stop at the robes and say, "How beautiful are they!"; and consider them as the ultimate degree. But the person of subtle understanding who penetrates as one must into the depths after the pearls of wisdom will say, "These are robes from the King." He will contemplate the measure*

<sup>12</sup> "Rūmī and the Sufi Tradition," *Studies in Comparative Religion*, vol. 8, 1974, p. 79. On Ibn 'Arabī, see Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1964, chapter 3.



of the robes and the cloth they are made from and will come to know the measure of Him who is clothed in the robes. He will discover a knowledge which does not accrue to him who knows nothing of these things.<sup>13</sup>

In a similar vein Rūmī says the following:

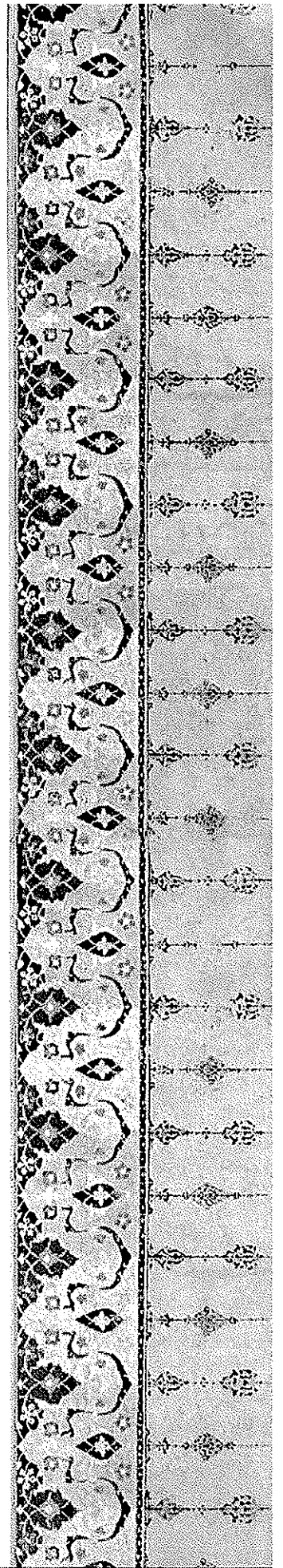
*The perfect speaker is like one who distributes trays of viands, and whose table is filled with every sort of food, So that no guest remains without provisions, (but) each one gets his (proper) nourishment separately: (Such a speaker is) like the Quran which is sevenfold in meaning, and in which there is food for the elect and for the vulgar (III, 1895-97).*



Orientalists commonly speak of the derivation of Sufism from non-Islamic sources and of its historical development. From a certain point of view there has indeed been borrowing of forms of doctrinal expression from other traditions and a great amount of development.<sup>14</sup> But to conclude from this

<sup>13</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, *Fusus al-hikam*, edited by A. Afifi, Cairo, 1946, pp. 204-5.

<sup>14</sup> Orientalists have proposed a variety of theories as to the "origin" of Sufism, which are well summarized in the introduction to R.A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, London, 1914.



in the manner of many scholars that Sufism gradually came into being under the influence of a foreign tradition or from a hodgepodge of borrowed doctrine is to completely misunderstand its nature, i.e., that in essence it is a metaphysics and means of spiritual realization derived of necessity from the Islamic revelation itself.<sup>15</sup>

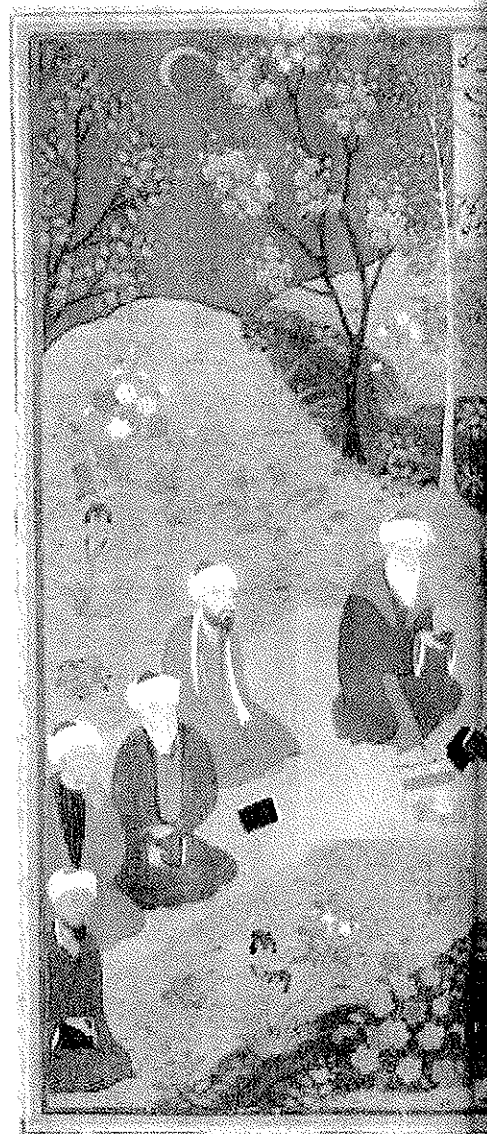
For the Sufis themselves one of the clearest proofs of the integrally Islamic nature of Sufism is that its practices are based on the model of the Prophet Muhammad. For Muslims it is self-evident that in Islam no one has been closer to God—or, if one prefers, no one has attained a more complete spiritual realization—than the Prophet himself, for by the very fact of his prophecy he is the Universal Man and the model for all sanctity in Islam. For the same reason he is the ideal whom all Sufis emulate and the founder of all that later became crystallized within the Sufi orders.<sup>16</sup>

According to Sufi teachings, the path of spiritual realization can only be undertaken and traversed under the guidance of a spiritual master; someone who has already traversed the stages of the Path to God and who has, moreover, been chosen by Heaven to lead others on the Way.<sup>17</sup> When the Prophet of Islam was alive he initiated many of his Companions into the spiritual life by transferring to them the "Muhammadan grace" (*al-barakat al-Muhammadiyah*) and giving them theoretical and practical instructions not meant for all believers. Certain of these Companions were in their own turn given the function of initiating others.

<sup>15</sup> On the Islamic origin of Sufism, some of the proofs of which are briefly summarized here, see Nasr, *Ideals and Realities*, pp. 127 ff.; Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, pp. 16-17; and M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> On the Sufi orders in their historical and social manifestation see J.S. Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, London, 1971.

<sup>17</sup> The absolute necessity for the spiritual master for entrance on the Sufi path is emphasized repeatedly in Rūmī's writings. On the significance of the master see Nasr, "The Sufi Master as Exemplified in Persian Sufi Literature," in *Sufi Essays*, chapter 4; and Schuon, "Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master," *Studies in Comparative Religion*, vol. 1, 1967, pp. 50-59.



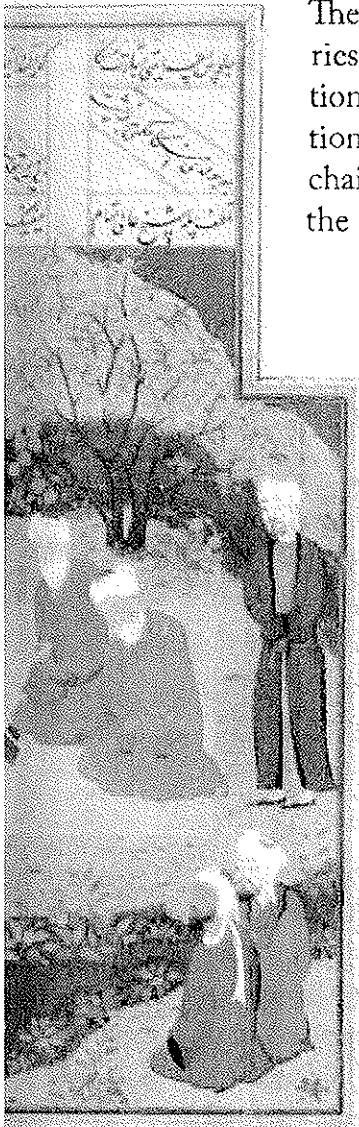


The Sufi orders which came into being in later centuries stem from these Companions and later generations of disciples who received the particular instructions originally imparted by the Prophet. Without the chain (*silsilah*) of grace and practice reaching back to the Prophet no Sufi order can exist.

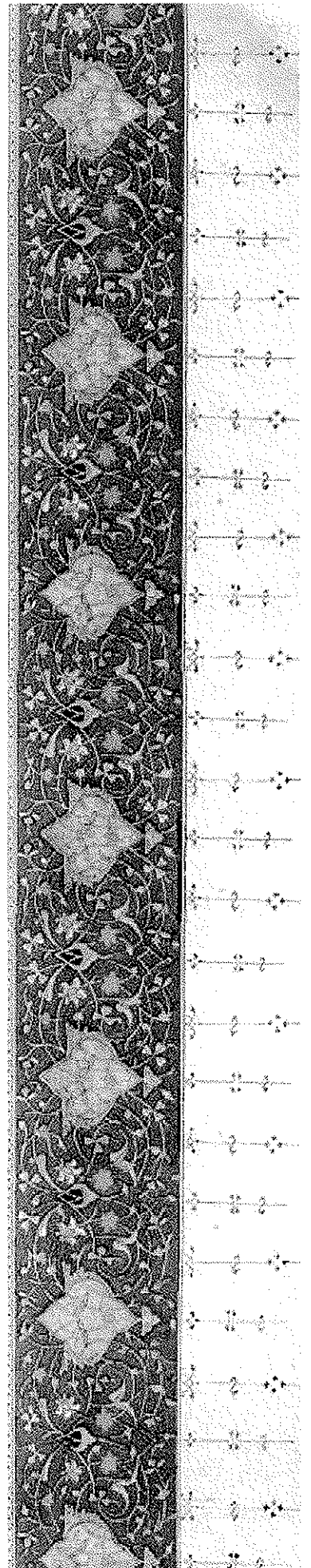
☞ *God's way is exceedingly fearful, blocked and full of snow. He [the Prophet] was the first to risk his life, driving his horse and pioneering the road. Whoever goes on this road, does so by his guidance and guarding. He discovered the road in the first place and set up waymarks everywhere* (Discourses, p. 232).

In the Sufi view of Islamic history, the very intensity of the spiritual life at the time of the Prophet did not permit a complete separation on the outward and formal plane between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of the tradition. Both the *Shari'ah* and the *Tariqah* (the spiritual path) existed from the beginning. But only after gradual degeneration and corruption—the tendency of the collectivity to become increasingly diversified and forgetful—was it necessary to make certain formulations explicit in order to refute the growing number of errors and to breathe new life into a decreasing power of spiritual intuition.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> "According to a very prevalent error... all traditional symbols were originally understood in a purely literal sense, and symbolism properly so called only developed as the result of an 'intellectual progress' or a 'progressive refinement' which took place later. This is an opinion which completely reverses the normal relationship of things.... In reality, what later appears as a super-added meaning was already implicitly present, and the 'intellectualization' of symbols is the result, not of an intellectual progress, but on the contrary of a loss by the majority of primordial intelligence. It is thus on account of increasingly defective understanding of symbols and in order to ward off the danger of 'idolatry' (and not to escape from a supposedly pre-existent, but in fact non-existent, idolatry) that the tradition has felt obliged to render verbally explicit symbols which at the origin... were in themselves fully adequate to transmit metaphysical truths." Schuon, "The Symbolist Outlook," *Tomorrow*, vol. 14, 1966, p. 50.



Gathering of Sufis





Rūmī was fully aware that on the collective level spiritual awareness and comprehension had dimmed since the time of the Prophet:

*Amongst the Companions (of the Prophet) there was scarcely anyone that knew the Quran by heart [which is not such a rare accomplishment in the Islamic world today, whereas it must have been common at the time of Rūmī], though their souls had a great desire (to commit it to memory),*

*Because... its kernel had filled (them) and had reached maturity (III, 1386-87).*

*It is related that in the time of the Prophet... any of the Companions who knew by heart one Sura [chapter of the Quran] or half a Sura was called a great man... since they devoured the Quran. To devour a maund of bread or two maunds is certainly a great accomplishment. But people who put bread in their mouths without chewing it and spit it out again can "devour" thousands of tons in that way (Discourses, p. 94).*

If elaborated and systematized forms of Sufi doctrine were not present in early Islamic history, it is because such formulation was not necessary for the spiritual life. The synthetic and symbolic presentation of metaphysical truths found in the Quran and the *hadīth* (the sayings of the Prophet) was perfectly adequate to guide those practicing the disciplines of the *Tarīqah*. There was no need for detailed and explicit formulation. It was not until the third Islamic century/ninth Christian century in fact that the *Tarīqah* became clearly crystallized into a separate entity, at the same time that the *Shari'ah* underwent a similar process.<sup>19</sup>

As for the similarities which exist between the formulation of Sufi doctrine and the doctrines of other traditions, in certain cases these *are* due to borrowings from other traditional sources. But here again it is a question of adopting a convenient mode of expression and not of emulating in-

<sup>19</sup> See Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, pp. 42 ff.



ner spiritual states; in any case such states cannot be achieved through simple external borrowing. It would be absurd to suppose that a Sufi familiar with the doctrines of Neoplatonism, for example, who saw that the truths they expressed were excellent descriptions of his own inner states of realized knowledge, would completely reject the Neoplatonic formulations simply because of their source.<sup>20</sup>

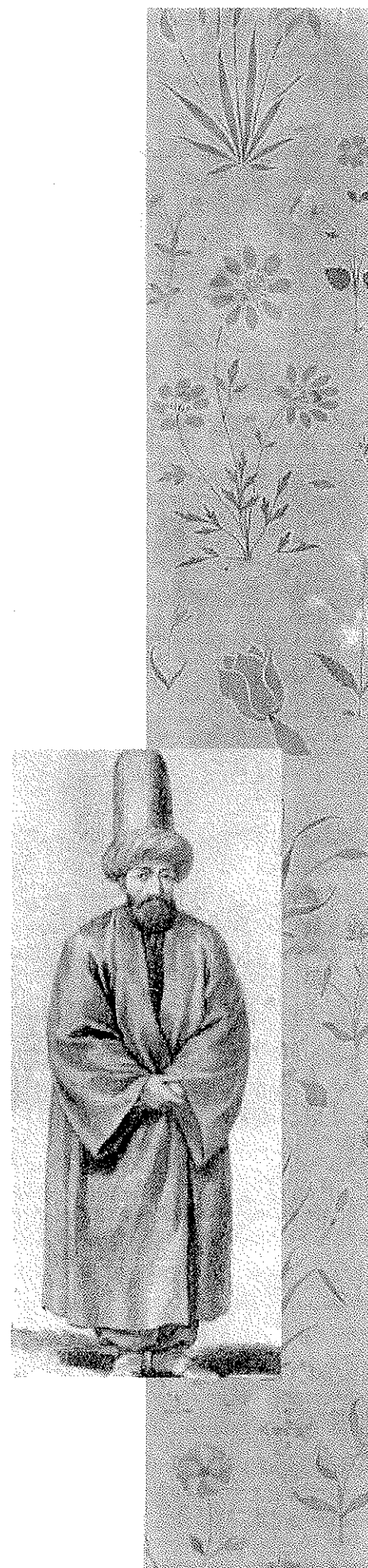
In Sufism, doctrine has no right to exist "for its own sake," for it is essentially a guide on the Path. It is a symbolic prefiguration of the knowledge to be attained through spiritual travail, and since this knowledge is not of a purely rational order but is concerned ultimately with the vision of the Truth, which is Absolute and Infinite and in its essence beyond forms, it cannot be rigidly systematized. Indeed, there are certain aspects of Sufi doctrine which may be formulated by one Sufi in a manner quite different from, or even contradictory to, the formulations of another. It is even possible to find what appears outwardly as contradictions within the writings of a single Sufi. Such apparent contradictions, however, are only on the external and discursive level and represent so many different ways of viewing the same reality. There is never a contradiction of an essential order which would throw an ambiguity upon the nature of the transcendent Truth.

Doctrine is a key to open the door of gnosis and a guide to lead the traveler on the Path. Thus, for different people, different formulations may be used. Once the goal of the Path has been reached, doctrine is "discarded," for the Sufi in question is the doctrine in his inmost reality and he himself speaks with "the voice of the Truth."

*After direct vision the intermediary is an inconvenience  
(IV, 2977).*

*These indications of the way are for the traveler who at  
every moment becomes lost in the desert.*

<sup>20</sup> According to the famous saying of 'Ali, the representative *par excellence* of esotericism in Islam, "Look at what is said not at who has said it." Islamic civilization in general has always adopted any form of knowledge, provided it was in keeping with divine Unity (*tawhid*). See Nasr, *Ideals and Realities*, pp. 36 ff. and Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1964, p. 5.



*For them that have attained (to union with God) there is nothing (necessary) except the eye (of the spirit) and the lamp (of intuitive faith): they have no concern with indications (to guide them) or with a road (to travel by).*

*If the man that is united (with God) has mentioned some indication, he has mentioned (it) in order that the dialecticians may understand (his meaning).*

*For a newborn child the father makes babbling sounds, though his intellect may make a survey of the (whole) world...*

*For the sake of teaching that tongue-tied (child), one must go outside of one's own language (customary manner of speech).*

*You must come into (adopt) his language, in order that he may learn knowledge and science from you.*

*All the people, then, are as his [the spiritual master's] children: this (fact) is necessary for the Pir [the master] (to bear in mind) when he gives (them) instruction (II, 3312 ff.).*

In his preface to the fifth book of the *Mathnawī* Rūmī summarizes the relationship between the exoteric law (the *Shari'ah*), the spiritual wayfaring which the Sufis undergo (the *Tariqah*), and the Truth which is Sufism's goal (the *Haqiqah*). He says that the *Mathnawī* is:

*...setting forth that the Religious Law is like a candle showing the way. Unless you gain possession of the candle, there is no wayfaring [i.e., unless you follow the Shari'ah, you cannot enter the Tariqah]; and when you have come on to the way, your wayfaring is the Path; and when you have reached the journey's end, that is the Truth. Hence it has been said, "If the truths (realities) were manifest, the religious laws would be naught." As (for example), when copper becomes gold or was gold originally, it does not need the alchemy which is the Law, nor need it rub itself upon the philosopher's stone, which (operation) is the Path; (for), as has been said, it is unseemly to demand a guide after arrival at the goal, and blameworthy to discard the guide before arrival at the goal. In short, the Law is like learning the theory of alchemy from a teacher or book, and the Path is (like) making use*



of chemicals and rubbing the copper upon the philosopher's stone, and the Truth is (like) the transmutation of the copper into gold. Those who know alchemy rejoice in their knowledge of it, saying, "We know the theory of this (science)"; and those who practice it rejoice in their practice of it, saying, "We perform such works"; and those who have experienced the reality rejoice in the reality, saying, "We have become gold and are delivered from the theory and practice of alchemy: we are God's freedmen"....<sup>21</sup>

The law is [theoretical<sup>22</sup>] knowledge, the Path action, the Truth attainment unto God.



<sup>21</sup> On the spiritual significance of alchemy see T. Burckhardt, *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, London, 1967.

<sup>22</sup> It should be remembered that the original meaning of the Greek word *theoria* is "viewing" or "contemplation"; doctrine is therefore "a view of the mountain to be climbed."

