Interview with Dr William Chittick

MO: *Me, and probably my Swedish readers as well, would very much like to know about how your interest in Islam and Sufism began.*

After graduating from high school in the town of my birth (Milford, Connecticut), I enrolled in the College of Wooster (Ohio) with the intention of studying mathematics. After completing the first year, I took advantage of an the opportunity to live with relatives and attend the International Christian University in Tokyo. Having returned to Ohio with an appreciation for traditional Japanese culture, I switched my major to psychology, but I found it uninspiring, especially after a year in Tokyo. Then I had an opportunity to attend the American University of Beirut, so I changed my major to history and did that. I needed a topic for an independent study project (required for all third-year students at the college). In the books that I was reading for courses on Middle Eastern history, I found that "Sufism" was an interesting subject for a paper. I immediately set out studying books and articles by orientalists, and after two or three months I was fairly sure that I had a good grasp of the topic. In the meantime, Seyyed Hossein Nasr was a visiting professor at the university, and he was offering a series of public lectures during the fall semester (lectures that were later published as *Ideals and Realities of Islam*). I saw that he would be talking about Sufism, so I attended the lectures from the beginning and found them fascinating. When he gave the fourth lecture, on Sufism—about which I thought I was informed—it seemed like a completely new topic to me. I immediately went out and bought his *Three Muslim Sages* and read the chapter on Ibn Arabi. That really stirred my interest. During the second semester, I audited his graduate course on Sufism, and by the end of the year, I had decided to go to Iran to learn more. I then returned to America and spent another year at Wooster, writing my senior-year independent study project on Rumi (based on Nicholson's translation). After graduation, I went to Iran and enrolled in a PhD program in Persian language and literature for foreigners at Tehran University. Eventually I did a dissertation under Dr. Nasr's guidance on Abd al-Rahman Jami, a fifteenth-century follower of Ibn Arabi's line of thought.

MO: *A question which has fascinated me for quite some time is the relation between Shiism and Sufism. If you speak to most Shiites you will find that they prefer to use the term "irfan" instead of Sufism or "tasawuf". Is there a real difference between irfan and tasawuf? How are Shiism and Sufism interlinked through history?*

Iranian Shi'ites prefer the term *irfan* for various reasons having to do with their history since the Safavid period. Up until that time the word *irfan*—and much more commonly the word *ma'rifa* (from the same root and with the same meaning)—was one of several expressions that was used to speak about the doctrinal side of Sufism. The practical side was often called *tasawwuf*, and more commonly *faqr* ("poverty"). Because of the complicated events connected with the gradual transformation of Iran into a majority-Shi'ite country during the Safavid period, the Safavid rulers (who themselves began as a Sufi order) marginalized the various Sufi orders in society, not least because the Sufis liked to follow their own shaykhs rather than the Shi'ite ulama who had been imported from Lebanon and Bahrain and were being given authority over religious affairs in society. The Safavids wanted a Shi'ite identity not only because they themselves were Shi'ites, but also to differentiate their dynasty from the two great Sunni dynasties of the time—the Ottomans and the Moguls.

To make a long story short, as a result of the Safavid transformation, the word *tasawwuf* came to be associated with popular and deviated Islam, and few people of any importance in the Safavid state would admit to being "Sufis." However, the word *irfan* was associated with the sophisticated teachings of the great shaykhs of the past, and it was considered perfectly legitimate for a Shi'ite scholar to study *irfan*. This happened gradually, but the upshot was that *irfan* eventually became a good word and *tasawwuf* a bad word. It was fine for a Shi'ite Muslim too study *irfan*, but he should avoid *tasawwuf*, because that is deviant, popular religion. This perception of the difference between *irfan* and *tasawwuf* is extremely common among Iranians, even though it is simply a question of terminology and definitions. And, for many other Iranians—today and in the past—the two words are simply synonyms.

This whole discussion has to do with how terminology has been used over Islamic history. And we also need to keep in mind that it is part of a broader discussion about the relationship between *tasawwuf* and the Islamic tradition. After all, everything that has gone by the name *tasawwuf* has not necessarily represented authentic Islamic teachings. Already in classical times, teachers like Ibn Arabi and Rumi were harshly critical of unqualified people claiming to be "Sufi" shaykhs and taking advantage of gullible followers. The harsh criticisms directed against "Sufism" by many of the ulama were often appropriate, given that calling oneself a "Sufi" (or an "*arif*") proves nothing. Carl Ernst has shown (in *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*) that the word *tasawwuf* itself was given a high profile by the British in India. Before that time it was one word among several that were employed to refer to the more inward and "spiritual" dimensions of Islamic teachings.

The question of the interlinking of Shi'ism and Sufism over history is enormously complicated, and I will not try to get into it (Dr. Nasr does a good job discussing it in the last chapter of *Ideals and Realities of Islam*). Let me say, however, that this is a bit like comparing apples and oranges. Shi'ism and Sunnism pertain to the same level of discussion, but Sufism relates to another issue altogether. The distinction between Shi'ism and Sunnism goes back to a dispute over religious and political authority in the nascent Islamic community. A minority held that Ali was the rightful successor of the Prophet, appointed by him, and the majority held that the community had to agree on the new leader, in the time-honored tribal fashion. Over history, two other main issues enter into the distinction between the two groups, one on the level of the Shariah and the other on the level of dogmatics (*`aqâ'id*). Most Shi'ites follow the *madhhab* of the Sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, whereas most Sunnis follow one of the four Sunni *madhhab*s. The distinctions in teachings are in fact rather minor. In most issues, the difference between the Ja'fari position and, let's say, that of the Malikis is on the same order as the distinction between the positions Malikis and the Hanbalis. As for dogmatics, generally Sunnis hold that there are three principles of faith (*tawhid*, *nubuwwa*, and *ma'ad*) and Shi'ites add two more to the list: *`adl* (justice), which is a codicil to *tawhid*, and *imama*, which explains the theological justification for giving authority to the Imams after the Prophet.

As for Sufism—as I understand the word (more on this later)—it does not address either of these levels, that is, Shariah and dogmatics. Rather, it provides instructions on how to practice the Shariah sincerely and how to understand the dogma correctly, always keeping in mind the final goal of both practice and faith, which is to find the presence of God everywhere and in everything that one does. In this definition, "Sufism" is a central concern of both Sunnis and Shi'ites,

and this helps explain why there have been Sufi orders everywhere, in Shi'ite communities as well as in Sunni communities.

MO: Do *you view both Sunnism and Shiism as expressions of Islamic orthodoxy?*

I understand your question to mean: Are both Sunnism and Shiism authentic, legitimate expressions of the Koranic revelation? My answer is yes, of course they are. For me, the legitimacy of both Sunnism and Shiism is what we Americans call a "no-brainer." Anyone who thinks they are not legitimate is ignorant of Islamic history. It is perfectly obvious that immediately after the death of the Prophet, his Companions disagreed on the question of the leadership of the community. Yet, these are those same Companions concerning whom the Prophet said, "My Companions are like stars—whichever you follow, you will be guided." On both sides of this split, there were some of the greatest Muslims, acknowledged by everyone as saintly souls. As the split developed and solidified over history, there were great scholars and saints in both factions. "By their fruit you shall know them," and in this case, the fruit of both Shiism and Sunnism has been great scholars and saints. That is sufficient to prove the legitimacy of both.

To me the split between Sunnis and Shiites is one of the most obvious manifestations of the wisdom of the saying (often attributed to the Prophet), "The disagreement of the scholars is a mercy" (*ikhtilâf al-`ulamâ' rahma*). God alone is one, and Islam, like all religions, has many branches. This branching of the religion does not go against the will of God. Rather, it is God's mercy that causes the branching, because branching allows for a diversity of ways that attract a greater variety of souls. People, after all, have infinitely diverse talents and capacities, and all of them cannot be enticed and attracted by the same message. The split into two main divisions follows the same divine logic that requires the diversity of creatures and allows for several legitimate *madhhab*s, several schools of Kalam, several branches of philosophy, and numerous Sufi orders (and, on a broader scale, many different religions).

Thinking that "my way alone is correct" is perhaps natural for human beings, but so also is forgetfulness and heedlessness—ever since "Adam forgot" and ate the fruit of the tree. Nonetheless, Islam encourages humility, and it also counsels people to have a "good opinion" (*husn zann*) of God. Part of that good opinion should be to acknowledge that God knows what He is doing. He is not incompetent like us. When He sends messengers, they do indeed deliver the messages, and the messages are designed in a way that allows them to speak to the widest variety of human beings.

Part of the humility that people should have is to acknowledge that we do not have a monopoly on God's truth and compassion. Iblis thought, "I am better than he" (*ana khayr minhu*), and as a result, he fell from divine grace. Pride and self-centeredness are always dangerous. Humility and truth demand that we acknowledge that God alone has the right to say, "I am better," for He alone is Real (*haqq*), and everything else is unreal (*bâtil*)—at least when compared to Him. He is better and greater, the best and the greatest, and He is also "the most merciful of the merciful" (*arham al-râhimîn*). Moreover, in His mercy He has invited each of us to follow a path to Him, and nowhere does He say that there is only one path. As the Sufi saying goes, there are as many paths as there are human souls.

As for the disagreements among people concerning the best path, how can anyone other than God know if there is such a thing as a "best path"? Moreover, just because path x is the best for me does not necessarily mean that path x is also the best for everyone else. If that were true, God would have sent only one path, but He has sent uncountable paths, at least to the number of the prophets. We have enough difficulty living up to the obligations imposed upon us by our own path. What does it concern us if someone else's path—so we imagine—is not as good? "My path is better than his"—yes, Iblis would agree. We will always disagree on paths. That is also part of God's wisdom and mercy. After all, God says repeatedly in the Koran that it is He who will judge among people concerning their disagreements on the Day of Resurrection (Koran 2:113, 3:55, 5:48, 6:164, etc.). It is not our business to judge. We cannot solve the insoluble. That is His business. After all, even the angels argue (Koran 3:44, 38:69), and they are God's obedient servants by definition. How can human beings, who are not obedient except with God's grace, agree with each other on much of anything?

I am not claiming that everything said or done by every Sunni and every Shiite is an authentic manifestation of Islam. That would be nonsense. Error is common, narrow-mindedness is rampant, and forgetfulness and heedlessness are the lot of mankind. Nonetheless, God's mercy is evident in the manner in which great Muslims, both Sunni and Shiite, have lived, practiced, and taught Islam over history. The very diversity of their ways has shown the spaciousness of the divine mercy.

MO: *What is the place of Sufism in Islamic orthodoxy?*

What do you mean by "Sufism" and what do you mean by "orthodoxy"? Both of these words are thrown around freely, typically with the assumption that they have clear meanings. They do not. "Orthodoxy" in particular is highly problematic, given the lack of a central authority in the Islamic tradition. And "Sufism," as I suggested earlier, means different things to different people.

The only way we can answer this sort of question is to define the terms. Let me try to do so, very briefly. "Orthodoxy" is "right speech," that is, teachings and doctrine that are true, right, appropriate, and correct (that is, teachings that are *haqq*, given that this Arabic word has all of these meanings). Truth and rightness is judged in terms of the agreement of the teachings with the sources of the tradition, both the historical sources (Koran and Hadith) and the ahistorical *Haqq* Itself (that is, the Divine Reality). The historical agreement follows on the second Shahadah, "Muhammad is God's messenger." The ahistorical agreement follows on the first Shahadah, "No god but God," i.e., the doctrine of *tawhîd*. Already, with this brief definition, I have raised many other questions, each of which deserves discussion. For example, Who judges rightness? What does "agreement" mean? How do we weigh the two historical sources, Koran and Hadith, against each other? These and many other questions implied in my definition were discussed endlessly by Muslim scholars in the past, and they are still being discussed today. Personally, I think that each Muslim (and every religious person, given that parallel issues arise in other religions) is called upon to deal with these questions for himself or herself. One cannot have "faith" on the basis of *taqlîd*, that is, by imitating and following blindly the words of someone else (even if those words are "orthodox"). One needs to understand what one believes. Although *taqlîd* is mandatory in practical matters—how to pray, how to fast, etc.—it is typically considered *harâm* in matters of belief. You cannot say, "I believe in God because my shaykh told me to." But it is perfectly legitimate to say, "I pray this way because my shaykh taught me to." This is, after all, the way all Muslims pray, given that prayer is a transmitted,

historical teaching. It makes no difference who your "shaykh" is—it may well be a teacher, a parent, a sibling.

In short, there is no simple answer to what "orthodoxy" is. Or rather, there is one simple answer: It is right doctrine, true teaching. In terms of Koranic formulae, it is to have faith in God, the angels, the scriptures, the prophets, and the Last Day. But, each Muslim has a duty to establish his or her own understanding of who God is, what the angels are, how to understand the teachings of the prophets and scriptures, what is the significance of the Last Day—these are the issues that are discussed in theology, philosophy, and the theoretical side of Sufism. Moreover, no two person's understanding will ever be exactly the same—my belief in God will never be identical to your belief in God, my understanding of God cannot be the same as your understanding of God. There is one God, but an infinity of creatures and an infinity of beliefs about the one God. Even for a single person, there will never be "one understanding" and "one belief." Anyone who is honest with himself knows that his understanding of things—not least of his own beliefs—is changing all the time, hopefully for the better—that is, more in conformity with *tawhid*.

As for "Sufism," as I said, it has been understood in many ways, often mutually contradictory. I take it to mean the tendency among Muslims to seek a personal relationship with God, and I see it as normative for the Islamic tradition. In other words, every Muslim should seek for this personal relationship, so every Muslim should have some "Sufi" dimension to his or her religious life. I have no particular attachment to the word "Sufism," and I use it simply because it is the best of the alternatives. Words like "mysticism" and "esotericism" have too many negative connotations.

In our *Vision of Islam*, Sachiko Murata and I have tried to unpack the implications of the famous hadith of Gabriel, which talks about *dînukum*, "your religion," as having three dimensions—*islâm* or practice, *îmân* or faith and understanding, and *ihsân*, or "doing the beautiful," i.e., living in both inner and outer harmony with God, who, according to the Prophet, is "beautiful and loves beauty." These three words are Koranic designations for the three basic dimensions of human existence—one can call them body, mind, and heart. In any case, as we have illustrated in detail in that book, in classical, "orthodox" Islam, all three dimensions were considered essential to every Muslim's religious life, and ignoring any one of them distances a person from the prophetic Sunnah, that is, the "beautiful model" (*uswa hasana*) that God has established for human guidance. Each of these three dimensions has produced specialists over Islamic history. The jurists are experts in *islâm*, the theologians experts in *îmân*, and the great spiritual guides were experts in *ihsân*. This third group were often known as "Sufis."

MO: *I'm a Swedish Muslim and my interest in Islam came through Swedish converts associated with the Traditional School, like Ivan Aguéli, Kurt Almqvist (Sidi Abd al-Muqsit) and Tage Lindbom (Sidi Zayd), the later which I knew personally. What role do you think the Traditional School has had, and will, have for the formation of a Western Islam?*

I take "Western Islam" to mean not the Islam of immigrants, but the Islam of Westerners who were raised as Christians, Jews, atheists, or agnostics. Western Islam can also include the Islam of the immigrants' children and grandchildren, who are trying to rediscover their own identity. For these "Westerners," the traditional school has played, and will continue to play, an important role, because it has translated Islamic teachings into terms that are comprehensible to people with a modern, secular education. Immigrant Islam is generally too culturally specific to

appeal to people who do not share that culture; notice that when Turks, Arabs, Malaysians, and so forth immigrate, each group will establish its own mosque, separate from the others, as soon as it can. Very few immigrants come with the combination of traditional and modern education that is needed to speak intelligently in the West about religion generally and Islam specifically. They may be good doctors or engineers, but they do not know "religion" in the full sense of *islam*, *iman*, and *ihsan*. And if they do know it, they do not speak the same language as the doctors and the engineers. It is significant here that politicized Islam—so-called "fundamentalism"—is largely led by doctors and engineers, who are ignorant of anything but a smattering of Islam's first dimension (law, practice), and who see religion as something like a grid that can be imposed on society, an engineering problem to be solved.

In short, without the help of the traditional school, it is extremely difficult for a Westerner to understand what Islam is all about. And those few Westerners who do find authentic Islam in all three dimensions—for example, by spending years in a Muslim country—are, in a way, simply discovering "traditional Islam," the Islam that the traditional school has described as authentic and full Islam.

MO: *One of the main ideas of the Traditional School is the "Transcendent Unity of Religions". How does one explain this idea within an Islamic framework using Islamic concepts?*

What I understand by this concept is that there is no unity but God's unity, just as there is no life but God's life, no knowledge but God's knowledge, no truth but God's truth. These are divine attributes, and in God they are identical with God. In God all truth is one truth, all reality is one reality. This is *tawhîd*, and anyone with a semblance of Islamic theological learning knows that God alone is truly real, really true, and absolutely one. This means that everything other than God, including religion, is many. According to the Koran, God sent a messenger to every people. He has told us the names of some of these messengers, and others He has not told us (Koran 4:164). Hadiths speak of 124,000 prophets, and classical Islamic literature often mentions this number. God gave every messenger the same message: "There is no god but I, so worship Me" (21:25). *al-Tawhîd wâhid*, as the saying goes—"*Tawhîd* is one," and it is everywhere the same. *Tawhîd* here does not mean the sentence that expresses *tawhîd*, i.e, *lâ ilâha illallâh*. It means rather the reality of *tawhîd*, the unity of God, which was known to every prophet. After all, God sent every prophet speaking "the language of his own people" (14:4), not Arabic.

So, the basic Koranic picture is that God is one, that He is the source of all the religions established by all the prophets, and that these religions are unified by two basic elements: *tawhid* and worship, that is, orthodoxy and orthopraxy. *Tawhid* is one teaching, and it expresses the unity of the Real. All divinely-established religions accept that—all the traditions founded by the 124,000 prophets—even if Muslims find it difficult to see how some of them do so (Buddhism, for example). As for worship, it takes many, many forms; the Koran often refers to the differences in practices given to various prophets, such as the "heaviness" of the burden imposed on the followers of Moses.

As far as I can see, the Koran among all the world's scriptures has by far the clearest expression of the transcendent unity of religions. Most modern-day Muslims find it difficult to accept this unity because preachers have told them that Islam "abrogated" the previous religions,

and most classical theologians took that position. But the Koran certainly does not say that it abrogated them. This is a theological opinion, by no means accepted by all Muslim scholars over history.

I don't mean to claim that the Koran is completely explicit on this issue of religious unity, or that it provides no counter-arguments. It does, of course. For example, there is always the issue of *tahrif*, "perversion" of religious teachings, but Muslims are not exempt from that either, as is proven by many, many preachers today who gain a great deal of public exposure.

There is also another issue that one should think about: When God sends a message, He wants it to be accepted by its recipients. And, He knows His recipients better than they know themselves. He knows, for example, that most of them will not be encouraged in their *tawhid* and their worship by learning that God has sent other religions that also lead people to salvation. The efficacy of the message depends upon its being taken seriously. It does not make sense to water down the message by suggesting that you can follow any message you want. Nonetheless, there are always those who know that God is not like people—He is not small-minded. Rather, He is infinitely merciful, and "He forgives all sins" (39:53). People like this will have no problem understanding that, when the Koran says that it has come to "confirm" the previous messages, it means that it is confirming their truth and their continuing efficacy and legitimacy. If the Koran had come to abrogate those messages, God would have said so in clear and undeniable language.