

Mysticism in Islam

By William Chittick

The "enlightened" position of the modern intellectual is often that religion is a neurosis or a delusion. If you are religious, you are in fact mad.

Whenever "Islam" is mentioned, we need to keep in mind that the word designates the religion of over one billion people that has been flourishing in much of Asia, Europe, and Africa for well over a thousand years and more recently in North America. We also need to remember that it is difficult to generalize about any religion. In this particular case, specialists have largely given up the old Orientalist habit of talking about Islam as if it were a single, clearly identifiable entity. They readily admit that we are in fact dealing with a multiplicity of phenomena, or, if you prefer, many Islams. In other words, to assert without qualification that "Islam believes this," or "Muslims do that," is misleading at best.

The fact that specialists are wary of generalizations in no way prevents most people in the West from thinking that there is a clearly defined something out there called "Islam." Politicians, ideologues, and the media constantly talk about Islam as if it were one simple phenomenon, and they do so with their own agendas. If, however, we have any interest in understanding the relationship between current events and the Islamic tradition, we should never forget that Muslims have histories, cultural divergences, and differences in belief and practice every bit as complex as those of Christians.

The fact that I am talking not about "Islam" but about "Islamic mysticism" does not make the task any easier. The first problem arises because of the English word mysticism. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* provides three definitions. Most people nowadays, especially in the academic community, seem to understand the word in terms of the third of these, which is "vague speculation, belief without foundation." Mysticism commonly signifies mystification, madness, or mindless mush. The average hard-nosed American would likely agree with Bertrand Russell, who famously wrote a book called *Mysticism and Logic*. His point: You cannot be a mystic and a rational person at one and the same time.

I do not wish to deny that the word "mysticism" has an honorable pedigree

The traditional whirling dervish dance of the Sufi mystics produces a trance-like state.



and still retains something of its ancient meaning. *Webster's* gives the first meaning as "the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality." Putting aside "mystical union," which begs the question, we are left with "the experience of direct communion with ultimate reality." Surely those who have any sympathy with religion would agree that without some sort of communion with ultimate reality, religion would have nothing to distinguish it from a merely human construction. It would be an ideology, or a political agenda, or an illusion.

If we do take mysticism in the first meaning of the word, then it points to the origin of religion, the founding moment that is often called "revelation." What is it that drives a prophet, an avatar, or a buddha, if not the experience of direct communion with ultimate reality? The word mysticism in this sense also points to the goal of religion. Why does one engage in religious practice if one is not convinced that some sort of direct communion with ultimate reality is possible, if not in this life, then in the next?

In short, "mysticism," as I would prefer to understand it, stresses the fact that many religious people have been seriously and intimately engaged with ultimate reality, or, at the very least, that they have been engaged with a quest for communion with that reality. In this sense, the word does not imply "vague speculation" or "belief without foundation" unless, of course, one takes the position—common enough these days—that there is no such thing as "ultimate reality." If that is one's belief, then the quest to achieve communion with a nonexistent entity is certainly stupid and misguided. Indeed, the "enlightened" position of the modern intellectual is often that of Freud: religion is a neurosis or a delusion. If you are religious, you are in fact mad.

So, unless we take our stand in atheism or agnosticism, we should agree that religion in any meaningful sense of the word has by definition something "mystical" about it. The experience of communion with ultimate reality lies at the foundation of religion, and the quest for such communion has always motivated the practice of religious people.

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Let me now turn to mysticism in the

context of Islam. Anyone who surveys the literature on Islamic civilization will quickly discover that a great deal has been written on the topic. Scholars have defined and described Islamic mysticism in many ways.¹ Some of the earlier Orientalists went to great lengths in order to show that mysticism was alien to a harsh and sterile religion of the desert—that is, to Islam as they imagined it to be. They wanted to prove that any discussion of mystical topics in Islamic texts in fact derives from outside sources, such as Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, or Hinduism.

It is worth noting that modern-day "Islamism"—that is, ideological posturing and political activism in the name of Islam—agrees with the early Orientalists on the origins of Islamic mysticism. Despite the fact that the Islamists are harshly critical of Western scholarship, they adopt many of its positions. They love Western technological

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expertise along with its guns and bombs, and they also love the various political theories that justify totalitarian control. By claiming that mysticism derives from outside sources, they embrace the Orientalist myth of a harsh and sterile Islam and ignore the spiritual and intellectual heritage of their religion. They have focused all their efforts on turning people away from the Islamic tradition and establishing authoritarian regimes.²

In my own writings, I have always avoided the word "mysticism," partly because of its strong negative connotations.

I prefer instead the word "Sufism," which has the advantage of deriving from Arabic and pertaining specifically to Islam. Nowadays, this word is rather well known in the West. In the United States, Rumi has recently been one of the best-selling poets, and every introduction to his poems points out his affiliation to the Sufi tradition. Health clubs and New Age centers teach "Sufi dancing" along with yoga and Zen meditation. At least the name is no longer strange in English, even if, in contrast to "mysticism," few people have any real idea as to what the word might mean.

One of the problems with "mysticism" is that there is no corresponding word in the pre-modern Islamic languages. The modern usage of the word has everything to do with the history of the Christian tradition, but we should not ignore the fact that there are many basic differences of outlook between Christianity and Islam, not least in the case of "mysticism." We have a similar problem with the word "theology," which designates a discipline that has always played a central role in Christianity. Many historians have assumed that the Islamic discipline known as *kalām*—a word that might better be translated as "dogmatic theology"—plays an exactly analogous role. In fact, *kalām*'s role in Islam has been much more limited than that of theology in Christianity. In the same way, Sufism has had a much more pervasive presence in the Islamic tradition than has mysticism in Christian civilization.

It is true that there are many parallels between Sufism and various teachings

The Sufis taught that people must attune their intentions, their love, and their sincerity to the divine will.

and practices associated with mysticism. Nonetheless, much that happens under the name of Sufism in the Islamic world would not be placed in the category of mysticism in the West. For example, the vast majority of people who have engaged in the practice of Sufism would not be “mystics” in the current sense of this word. A mystic is typically understood as someone who undergoes supranormal or perhaps “extrasensory” experiences. In contrast, most so-called “Sufis” are ordinary Muslims who happen to be more serious about the practice of their religion than others.

What then is Sufism? There is no simple answer. It is certainly not a sect within Islam. It has nothing to do with the two major denominations, Sunnism and Shi'ism, since it has been found in both from earliest times. Both men and women engage in Sufi practice, and it is common for some members of a single family to be Sufis, and for others not to be. A husband may be a Sufi, while his wife may not, or vice versa. Certainly, not every Muslim is a Sufi, but Sufism has been present wherever there have been sizable Muslim populations. This is especially obvious from about the thirteenth century, when clearly defined institutions associated with the word came to be established.³

It is, in short, extremely difficult if not impossible to draw a clear distinction between Sufis and other Muslims. Even if we take an anthropological perspective and say that a Sufi is someone who says that he is a Sufi, we may find that for historical or political reasons the word itself is not employed by people who would be called Sufis by most other definitions of the term.

The original Arabic word, *sūfī* (“one who wears wool”), does not offer much help in clarifying the meaning, since it simply suggests that some early Muslims had an ascetic tendency. In fact the word has been controversial since it first came to be used in the eighth century (the second century of Islam). Moreover, many other words have also been used to designate the same teachings and practices, such as “poverty” (*faqr*) and “gnosis” (*ma'rifa*). Historically, it is not at all clear why Sufism rather than some other word should have become the general designation.⁴

Instead of trying to provide an exact definition, it seems best simply to say that Sufism is a specific approach to Islamic learning and practice that has been found among Muslims everywhere. Having said that, I can now describe a few of the characteristics that differentiate the Sufi approach from other approaches. It should be kept in mind, however, that I am generalizing. I am talking about family resemblances in a host of phenomena. My remarks will not necessarily apply to any given historical or cultural situation.⁵

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We need to begin by looking in broad outline at the teachings established by the Koran (the book received from God by Muhammad) and the Sunnah (the practices and sayings of Muhammad). As soon as we do so, we can see that, like any great religion, Islam addresses three primary domains of human concern. These can be called body, mind, and spirit; or doing, knowing, and being. The body is the realm of activity, ritual observance, and social relationships. The mind is the realm of perceiving, believing, knowing, and understanding. The spirit is the realm of the deepest awareness of self and of direct communion with ultimate reality, which is God, or true and real Being.

The Koran is perhaps unique among the world's scriptures in the degree to which it stresses the importance of knowledge and understanding. Many sayings of Muhammad confirm the importance of knowing things correctly. Because of this stress on knowledge, Islamic civilization has been

marked by a high level of learning and scholarship. From the beginning it was an enormously bookish culture. This is one of the main points of the classic study by the great Orientalist Franz Rosenthal of Yale: *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*.

As Islamic civilization developed, many Muslims devoted themselves to the pursuit of knowledge. These Muslims were not priests or ministers, since Islam has no priestly class. They were simply people who took seriously the various Koranic and prophetic injunctions to seek knowledge, such as Muhammad's saying, “The search for knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim, male and female.”

Because of the devotion to knowledge and understanding, Muslims came to study and assimilate the sacred lore that was set down by the Koran and the Prophet with more and more attention to analysis, explanation, and systematization. Some people were



Umayyad mosque in Damascus, Syria, Middle East

interested in learning everything that there is to know about the proper way of dealing with the body—that is, personal, social, and ritual activities. What exactly does the Koran command people to do? How exactly did Muhammad put the Koranic commandments into practice? How does one perform the so-called “five pillars” of the religion—uttering the declaration of faith, performing the daily prayers, paying the alms-tax, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and making the pilgrimage to Mecca? What is the correct way to go to the toilet, to wash oneself, to eat one’s meals? What are the proper rules for interpersonal activities, marriage, inheritance, trade? The moment one takes seriously the Koranic revelation and its embodiment in the Prophet, all these questions need to be asked and answered. But, notice that all of them are connected with proper activity. They focus on what the body does.

Other Muslims were much more concerned with how to understand the objects of faith, which the Koran designates as God, the angels, the scriptures, the prophets, the Last Day, and divine providence. Muslims who focused on understanding these objects held that a person’s faith depends upon knowledge. The claim of an ignorant person to believe in God is simply ignorance. No one can believe in God without knowing who God is and what his reality entails. By the same token, no one can claim to believe in the other objects of faith without knowledge. What exactly are “angels” that Muslims should have faith in them? What exactly are prophets, scriptures, and the Last Day? Having faith in any of these depends upon knowledge, and achieving sound knowledge of such realities is not easy. All those who want to achieve adequate understanding in Islamic terms must dedicate themselves to the study of God’s self-revelation in both the Koran and in the words of the Prophet. Learning and knowledge are essential.

Still other groups of Muslims focused their attention not primarily on activity or understanding, but on developing the love, generosity, nobility, justice, and sincerity that

are commanded by the Koran and typified by Muhammad’s relationship with God and with other people. For these Muslims, the basic question was this: “How can one become a good person?” How can one develop all the beautiful character traits and virtues that were found in Muhammad and the other prophets of God and in God’s special friends?

One might ask why most Muslim scholars became specialists in one of these domains rather than attempting to encompass all three. First of all, generally they did try to encompass all three domains, but actually doing so was beyond the capacity of most, though there are many exceptions. Scholars usually ended up being a lot more informed about one of these domains than the other two. Specialization, after all, is a general characteristic of all those who want to know something completely and thoroughly. Each of the three domains of Islamic knowledge—proper human activity, correct understanding of God and the world, and the actualization of

virtue and goodness—can be unpacked and analyzed without end.

There is a second reason for specialization that is perhaps even more telling: People have

natural aptitudes, personal inclinations, and mental limitations. The fact that someone may have a gift for football does not mean that he will necessarily be good at mathematics, or painting, or music. The fact that someone may have a great aptitude for understanding religious law—for deriving proper rules and regulations from revealed injunctions and principles—does not in any way imply that he will also have an aptitude for theology, or that he will necessarily attempt to become a better and more virtuous person.

What I am saying is that from the very beginning of Islam, being a Muslim meant recognizing that the Koran and Muhammad provided the basic guidelines for bringing the body, the soul, and the spirit into conformity with the divine purpose in creating the world. However, people differed among themselves as to which guidelines were the most important and how they should put into practice. Some Muslims were naturally inclined to place their first priority in the

body, others felt that they should focus their attention on the mind and expand their understanding of God and his creation, and still others held that the whole point of human existence was to harness the body and the mind in order to strengthen the spirit and to achieve communion with ultimate reality.

Specialization in Islamic learning did not become obvious until about the 9th century (the third Islamic century). Before that time, most scholars were interested more in transmitting all the lore received from God and Muhammad, often classified according to category. Little by little, however, scholars who dedicated most of their efforts to providing the guidelines for proper activity came to be known as “jurists” (*fuqahā*). They busied themselves with understanding the principles and rules of proper Islamic activity on the basis of the Koran, the sayings and activity of the Prophet, the opinions of the Prophet’s companions, and the views of learned Muslims of earlier generations.

Scholars who focused on understanding the objects of faith became differentiated into several schools of thought. The dogmatic theologians (the authorities in *kalām*) said that the best way to understand God is by rational interpretation of the Koran. The philosophers (*falāsifa*) held that human reason is a sufficient guide to the truth of things and that divine revelation may not be indispensable for understanding that truth. The Sufis maintained that the best and most reliable path to correct understanding was by direct communion with God.

Scholars associated with Sufism developed a distinctive methodology. With good reason, their approach has often been called “mystical.” Webster’s second definition of mysticism tells us that it can mean “the doctrine or belief that direct knowledge of God, of spiritual truth, or ultimate reality. . . is attainable through immediate intuition, insight, or illumination and in a way differing from ordinary sense perception or ratiocination.” This doctrine is certainly characteristic of the Sufi approach to understanding God and the world. However, they held that this direct knowledge—which they typically called “unveiling” (*kashf*)—must be rooted in the Koran and the Sunnah of Muhammad. Many of them also had a good deal of respect for the various rational

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approaches to knowledge. They maintained, however, that despite the opinions of the philosophers, reason alone is not sufficient to attain knowledge of God, and despite the opinions of the theologians, a merely rational understanding of the Koran is also inadequate.

In short, Muslim scholars who focused their energies on understanding the normative guidelines for the body came to be known as jurists, and those who held that the most important task was to train the mind in achieving correct understanding came to be divided into three main schools of thought— theology, philosophy, and Sufism. This leaves us with the third domain of human existence, the spirit. Most Muslims who devoted their major efforts to developing the spiritual dimensions of the human person came to be known as Sufis. They taught that people must attune their intentions, their love, and their sincerity to the divine will. Those who came to be recognized as having achieved this goal became the Sufi teachers. In effect, they functioned as spiritual therapists and depth psychologists for the Muslim populations. But, unlike modern psychologists, they were not interested in pathology, but rather in healthy and sound human souls who needed assistance in achieving communion with ultimate reality.

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One way to understand Sufism and the manner in which it has been differentiated from other approaches to Islamic learning is to look at the Sufi understanding of the human role in creation. Like Jews and Christians, Muslims in general believe that human beings were created in the image of God. Islam does not have a concept of original sin, but Muslims do maintain that Adam slipped and fell from the Garden because he was forgetful of God. Forgetfulness is the general failing of all of his children. It clouds the original brightness of the human soul, made in the divine image. Nonetheless, human beings have the potential to become brilliant mirrors reflecting the divine reality. They can do so if they follow the guidance of a prophet, Muhammad in particular. The proper role of human beings in the universe is to actualize the divine image and become God's representatives on earth. People can do so by "submitting" and "surrendering"

to God (*islām*) and by acting as God's "servants" (*'abd*). Once they become perfect servants, God may then choose to make them his "vicegerents" (*khalīfa*).

The jurists defined service of God and submission to him in terms of proper activity. The theologians, philosophers, and Sufis held that proper activity depends upon right understanding of God and the world. The Sufis added, however, that proper activity and correct beliefs must be perfected and completed by direct communion with God. Only such communion can actualize the divine qualities latent in the soul and bring about the appropriate manifestation of these qualities in society and the world.

The qualities that define the human image of God are much discussed by Muslim scholars and theologians. They are commonly called the "most beautiful names of God" and are typically said to number ninety-nine. They include knowledge, awareness, power, speech, creativity, compassion, love, justice, forgiveness, generosity, and so on. According to the Sufi teachers, people must actualize these divine qualities in themselves by serving God with their bodies, knowing him with their minds, and loving him in their spirits.

In the pursuit of knowledge, Muslim jurists wanted to discover the right way to perform every activity. Theologians tried to prove rationally the correctness of the Koranic teachings about God, the prophets, and the Last Day. Philosophers strove to develop their minds and actualize intelligence and virtue with the help of methods and tools largely derived from the Greek tradition. Sufis maintained that the only reliable way to actualize the self, gain awareness of God, and become a good person was to subordinate rational thought to prophetic guidance and to find God's names and qualities within one's own spirit.

The Sufis took Muhammad as their model. He gained knowledge and self-realization not by studying books or by going to school, but by devoting himself to God. Once he had done so, God taught him the Koran. Of course, the Sufis all agreed that Muhammad is the last prophet. They were not striving to receive new revealed books, but rather to actualize their understanding of what they considered the final and most

perfect revealed book, that is, the Koran.

The Sufis saw the Prophet's career as marked by two grand events: the descent of the Koran, and the ascent of Muhammad to God. Muhammad's career as a prophet began when God sent the Koran down upon him by means of the angel Gabriel. When Muhammad had fully submitted himself to the revealed message, Gabriel took him up to meet God in a journey known as *al-mi'rāj* ("the ladder").

Muhammad's ascent to God is referred to allusively in two passages of the Koran (17:1, 53:1 ff.). The details come down to us through Muhammad's accounts told to his companions. In brief, Gabriel came to Muhammad one night and took him in a flash to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, at the spot that is now marked by the Dome of the Rock, Muhammad met all 124,000 prophets from the time of Adam down to Jesus and led them in prayer. Gabriel then took Muhammad up through the celestial spheres, in each of which he visited one of the prophets and various angels. He was also given a tour of hell and paradise. Finally, Gabriel could lead him no further, so Muhammad had to ascend on his own to meet God.

After coming back to Mecca, Muhammad told his companions about his journey. They asked him if he had brought them anything from God. He replied that he had, and then instructed them in the performance of the five daily prayers, which God had sent for the community. Hence the daily prayers, which are the most basic of all Muslim rites, are closely associated with the journey to God. When the companions asked the Prophet if they also could travel to God, he replied, "The daily prayer is the ladder of the believer" (*al-salāt mi'rāj al-mu'min*). In other words, it is the daily prayer that establishes "direct communion with God," whether or not the believer is aware of God's presence. The Koran says, after all, that God "is with you wherever you are" (57:4). It is through the prayer that people can come to experience and realize their intimate connection with the divine.

It is obvious that the descent of the Koran to Muhammad is the founding event of Islam, but it is not so obvious that Muhammad's ascent to God is the culmination of the Koran's descent. By sending down the

Koran, ultimate reality communicated with human beings, but the meaning of that communication does not become clear until we understand that its concrete fruit was Muhammad's ascent to God. By taking the initiative and sending the Koran by means of Gabriel, God communicated with human beings and established the means of achieving communion with him. By ascending to God with Gabriel's guidance, Muhammad demonstrated the ultimate nature of that communion, which is accessible to all human beings in the depths of their spirit and after death.

Just as the descent of the Koran from God demonstrates to Muslims the divine origin of the book and the truth of the message, so also Muhammad's ascent to God verifies the goal of the message and shows the fruit of putting its guidelines into practice. The Koran descended so that people can ascend. By submitting to the Koranic message and following Muhammad, people can achieve their proper status in creation, which is to be simultaneously God's servants and his vicegerents.

Among the various approaches that Muslims took to their religion, the Sufi approach was most concerned with imitating Muhammad by ascending to God in this life. Other Muslims maintained that the meeting with God promised in the Koran was reserved for the afterworld. In general, the Sufis criticized the juridical approach because of the all too common idea that correct bodily activity is sufficient to make someone a good Muslim. They criticized the theological and philosophical approaches whenever these implied that one can understand God and the world adequately by the mere exercise of the rational mind. They held that the best way to understand God, the world, and oneself was to search for God in one's own spirit. To do so, one had to empty oneself of illusions and to make room for God in the heart. Egotism, pride, and worldly ambition obscure the divine image. One must "polish the mirror of

the heart" by overcoming one's own desires and making way for God's desires. One does so not by conforming to the expectations of family and society or by becoming learned, but by following the dictates of God and his Messenger with full sincerity and total love.

Sufis were differentiated from ordinary Muslims not so much by what they did, but rather by their single-minded dedication to actualizing their spirits and living in the presence of God. One of the most characteristic methods they employed in the attempt to keep God constantly in mind is known as "the remembrance of God" (*dhikr Allāh*). They held that anyone who can forget himself and remember God will overcome the forgetfulness inherited from Adam. Then one will be given access to spiritual reality and real being, just as Muhammad was given access to them.

The actual practice of *dhikr* or "remembrance"—a word that also means "mention"—takes diverse forms. The Koran refers to itself as *dhikr* and it commands people to remember God by reciting its verses. Many Muslims, Sufis included, placed great emphasis on regular recitation of the holy book. The Koran also calls the daily prayer by the name *dhikr*, and this is another reason for the central importance of the prayer for all Muslims. Several Koranic verses specifically command the believers to remember and mention God's *name*. Many formulae for remembering God's name are in fact employed on a daily basis in Islamic languages. For example, the phrase *al-hamdu Lillāh*, "Praise belongs to God," is typically recited to show gratitude after meals and on other occasions. The Sufi teachers made the remembrance of God a methodical practice. They had many Koranic verses and sayings of the Prophet to support their position. Among these is Muhammad's advice to a companion who asked him how he could worship God while working in the fields: "Keep your tongue moist with the remembrance of God."

As the Islamic tradition expanded and developed, a variety of techniques and methods were employed to focus the mind and spirit on God. One of these was listening to the recitation of appropriate poetry, often accompanied by music. By the ninth century, music and various forms of rhythmic bodily movement were being employed to aid concentration on God's name. Many Sufi teachers, however, felt that the ecstatic states that music sometimes induced could become an end in themselves. Too many people were concentrating on their own pleasure rather than on pleasing God. Such teachers forbade their disciples from listening to music. Other teachers felt that the advantages of listening to music outweighed the disadvantages. One form of listening to music was codified by the followers of Rumi. It is this that came to be known in the West as "the dance of the whirling dervishes." Even among Rumi's followers, however, this dance has played a relatively minor role.

This then is an extremely brief account of the Sufi approach to Islamic teachings and practices. It needs to be kept in mind that in Islamic history, Sufism came to be associated with many thousands of teachers, numerous institutions, and a vast literature. On the level of historical actuality we find tremendous variety, local understandings, individual preferences, and a great deal of disagreement as to appropriate practices, beliefs, and methods of realization. Nonetheless, if we want to say that there is a common thread tying all of this together, we will not be far from the mark if we call it "the quest for direct communion with ultimate reality."

¹ For an excellent overview of the teachings and literature of Sufism, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975). For a more historical approach, see Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). For a thematic approach, see W. C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000).

² For a fine analysis of the thoroughly modern approach



endnotes

of the Islamists and their rejection of traditional Islamic thinking, see the works of Khalid M. Abou El-Fadl, especially *And God Knows The Soldiers: The Authoritative and Authoritarian in Islamic Discourses* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001).

³ These institutions were commonly called *tariqa*, "path," a word that is usually translated as "order" on the analogy of monastic orders (though celibacy is practically unknown in Islam). See, for example, J. S. Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: University Press, 1971).

⁴ Carl Ernst argues convincingly that the current preference for the word "Sufism" has much to do with the nineteenth-century perception of Islam by British Orientalists. See his *Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997).

⁵ For a detailed version of this analysis of Sufism's role in the Islamic tradition, see Sachiko Murata and W. C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon, 1994).