

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Thomas Merton (1915–1968): Cistercian monk (at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky) and writer greatly interested in non-Western religious traditions. Author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and many other books read by religious scholars and laymen alike. He died at a religious conference in Bangkok, Thailand, on December 10, 1968.

Abdeslam (c. 1900–1980): Sufi teacher from Tetuan, Morocco, who visited Merton at Gethsemani in the fall of 1966. He was a disciple of Hadj Adda Bentounes, the North African successor of Ahmad al-'Alawī.

Ahmad al-'Alawī (1869–1934): Algerian Sufi master who was the subject of Martin Lings' *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century*, a book which made a tremendous impression on Merton. Al-'Alawī founded a *ṭarīqah* that is a branch of the Darqawī-Shādīliyya Order; Merton came into contact with representatives of two different branches of this *ṭarīqah*.

Abdul Aziz (1914–): Pakistani scholar of Sufism who corresponded with Merton from 1960–68; he sent Merton many books on Sufism from his own library.

Louis Massignon (1883–1962): French Islamicist and devout Catholic with whom Merton corresponded from 1960–62.

Marco Pallis (1895–1989): Author, mountain climber, scholar of Tibetan Buddhism and Sufism, and a leading member of the traditionalist school of thought associated with Fritjof Schuon. He corresponded with Merton frequently starting in early 1963.

Fritjof Schuon (1907–1998): Preeminent traditionalist thinker, scholar of world religions, and leader of a branch of the 'Alawīyyah *ṭarīqah*. Author of such works as *Understanding Islam* and *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. Merton never met him, but they were in contact through several mutual friends, especially Marco Pallis.

INTRODUCTION

SUFISM: NAME AND REALITY

William C. Chittick

A great deal has changed since Thomas Merton discovered Sufism. At that time, only someone pursuing academic studies would have been likely to run across a name like Rūmī, whereas today any bookstore carries a few collections of his poetry. The “whirling dervishes” were known only as one of the bizarre manifestations of the Orient, but today people take courses on Sufi dancing at the local health club. “Sufism” was a piece of exotica, but today it is mentioned in daily newspapers and best-selling novels. Thirty years ago, someone not writing for a specialist audience would have had to assume that his readers had never even heard the name *Sufism*, but today one has to assume that everyone has some idea of what the word means.

What Thomas Merton discovered was an opening into a spiritual universe parallel to his own, but most people today think that Sufism is one of the New Age fads. So, despite the fact that the word is much more familiar, one still has to assume that most people know nothing about it, and one also has to free the word from all the detritus.

Already a thousand years ago, a Sufi teacher called Būshanjī (d. 959) complained about the misunderstandings of his times. “Today,” he said, “Sufism is a name without a reality, but it used to be a reality without a name.” Nowadays, in North America, the name has become relatively well known, but the reality has become far more obscure than it ever was in the past. The divide between our own times and the times of Būshanjī—when the various phenomena that came to be named “Sufism” were just beginning to have a shaping effect on Islamic society—is so deep and stark that I doubt that it is possible to recover anything more than a dim trace of the “reality”

about which Bāshanjī was speaking. Nonetheless, even the trace of such a reality—in an age that knows little of “reality” in this sense—is certainly worth pursuing.

First, however, I need to say something about the name. Anyone who has looked at the various teachers and groups that go by this name in present-day America will have been left with the impression of a great heterogeneity of beliefs and practices. In fact, it is difficult to suggest what exactly it is that ties them all together, other than a connection—sometimes quite tenuous—to the religion of Islam and a tendency toward what might be called “mysticism” or “esotericism” or “spirituality.”

It probably does not help us much, however, to employ these terms, because they are almost as elusive and difficult to pin down as the name *Sufism* itself. Suggesting, as is often done, that Sufism is “Islamic mysticism” or “Islamic esotericism” simply puts one unknown in place of another. People do not agree, after all, on what the words *mysticism* and *esotericism* mean, but everyone has a good sense of their connotations and is likely to have a positive or negative reaction to them. The term *spirituality* may be a bit better, but it also is notoriously vague, and in fact it is simply a contemporary way of saying “religion,” a term that is less than fully respectable in polite society. In order to make sense of naming Sufism with our home-grown labels, we would first need to provide a detailed and careful definition and analysis of the meaning of these labels, and then we would find that the labels are still far too vague and far too specific to explain the reality of Sufism. I think that we are better off stating from the outset that, although indeed there may be familiar resemblances among Sufism, esotericism, mysticism, Yoga, Zen, and many other such phenomena, each of these terms needs independent examination, and none of them per se will help us get closer to Sufism’s “reality.”

The use of the name *Sufism* itself already presents us with several difficulties, and we do not need the added complication of explaining how a Western-language term does or does not coincide with what is designated by this name derived from Arabic. Although the Arabic term is widely used in the classical texts of Islamic civilization in several different languages, before the present century it always had a rather limited definition and was rarely used in the broad sense that it has now acquired. Nor is there any agreement in

the texts as to what exactly the word means, and it is common for authors to argue both about its meaning and its legitimacy.

For those authors who use the term *Sufism* in a positive sense, it is associated with a broad range of ideas and concepts all having to do with achieving human perfection through following a path that leads to God. Moreover, it is usually employed to point to a certain moral and spiritual transformation that the travelers on this path should be striving to achieve. But, as Carl Ernst has pointed out in his important recent book, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, the actual term *Sufism* was given prominence not by the classical Islamic texts, but rather by British Orientalists, who wanted a word that would refer to the various dimensions of Islamic teachings that they found attractive and congenial and that would avoid the negative stereotypes associated with Islam itself—stereotypes that were often propagated by the same Orientalists.

In short, scholars in the field of Islamic Studies do not agree about what exactly the term *Sufism* means or should mean, and their disagreement is a fair reflection of the use of the term over Islamic history. Personally, I use this rather obscure term because we need a name to refer to a certain something that surfaces throughout Islamic history, and the alternatives that have been offered to designate it are more problematic than *Sufism* itself.

Having said all this, I am, of course, not about to provide a nice, succinct definition of Sufism. As I understand the issues, the reality of Sufism is far too subtle and elusive to lend itself to neat delineation and classification. Nonetheless, we do need the word in order to differentiate a certain more inward approach to Islamic teachings and practices from other approaches, all of which have their own designations.

In searching for Sufism’s reality, we first have to bring out what the name represents in relation to the names of other phenomena that have appeared in Islamic history. As should be obvious to everyone—though it is often forgotten in the rush to pin labels on things we don’t know much about—the religion of Islam, numbering today over a billion followers, has been and remains a vastly diverse and complex tradition, whether historically, geographically, culturally, linguistically, politically, or whatever. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to argue that the name *Islam* points more or less adequately to a core or an essence that is shared by diverse manifesta-

on the aura of a proper name. But, if the name was new, the focus and interests of the Sufis were not by any means new. The "reality," as Bāshanjī pointed out, was there from the beginning of Islam. Only when this name appeared and began to be discussed—even by those who were in no way qualified or prepared to understand what the reality was—did the reality become elusive, if not lost.

Sufism, then, is one of the terms that was applied to a certain interpretative approach to the teachings of the Qur'an and the Hadith, an approach that had specific, concrete applications in the daily practice of the religion. To clarify what sort of teachings these were, it is necessary to clarify the basic components of Islamic teachings. In doing so, I will use one of the oldest and most traditional of methods, one that goes to the Prophet himself. This is the division of the whole religious enterprise called "Islam" into three basic dimensions, corresponding to practice, knowledge, and interiority; or body, mind, and heart.

On the most external level, Islam is a religion that teaches people what to do and what not to do. Right and wrong practices are clearly delineated and codified in a system of law that gradually came to be known as "Shariah," a word that originally designated a road that leads down to water. The Shariah is a great compendium of systematic law, based squarely on Quranic teachings and Prophetic practice, but adjusted and codified by generations of scholars. The Shariah is like the body of Islam in that it designates proper activities, all of which are performed by the body, and in that it is utterly essentially for the existence of the mind and heart. The most important of the activities and practices that it delineates must be observed by all Muslims, and for this reason they are called the "Five Pillars" of the religion.

On a deeper level, Islam is a religion that teaches people how to understand the nature of things. This second dimension, which corresponds to the mind, has traditionally been called "faith," because its fundamental focus is to grasp and understand the objects to which faith attaches. These objects are God, the angels, the scriptures, the prophets, the Last Day, and the "measuring out" of good and evil. These are mentioned several times in the Qur'an and the Hadith, and investigation of their nature and reality became the domain of various disciplines, such as theology, philosophy, and theoretical Sufism. Any serious attempt to investigate these objects

tions over history. To begin with, what properly deserves this name must be rooted in the Qur'an, the revealed book that lies at the foundation of the tradition, and the Hadith, which are the teachings given by the recipient of the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad.

The Qur'an and Hadith cover a vast range of topics, ranging from God, angels, and prophets to toothbrushes and toilet training. The "religion of Islam" represents the attempts of Muslims over history to understand the wisdom offered in the Qur'an and to put it into practice on the basis of the model—called the "Sunnah"—provided by the Prophet. It was the natural calling of those who took their religion seriously to attempt to embrace all the knowledge and right conduct handed down from the Qur'an and the Prophet. But it was also natural that people were attracted to what corresponded to their own talents and aptitudes, which is to say that some Muslims focused more on practical teachings, some focused more on intellectual teachings, and some focused more on spiritual teachings. It was a rare individual who was able to focus on all three levels and bring them into the harmonious balance that was achieved by the Prophet himself.

In terms of the literary sources of Islam, the process of understanding and assimilating the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet came to be reflected in the gradual development of several different intellectual disciplines, each supported by many scholars who investigated and clarified the nature of the sources and the manner of putting them into practice. Already in the earliest sources, in fact, there are clear precursors for the work of giving order to the diversity of Islamic learning and to classifying the various elements in terms of their order of importance. This process of investigation, classification, and clarification, and the resulting specialization to which it naturally gave rise, can be observed among learned Muslims throughout Islamic history. By Islam's third century (that is, the ninth Christian century), one can find a great variety of approaches to Islamic learning, each of which was considered by its proponents to be focused on the most important elements of the Qur'an and the Hadith. It is around this time that certain people were calling themselves "Sufis" for the first time, although the same people were also calling themselves by other names, such as "knowers" and "ascetics" and "renouncers." What is peculiar about the term *Sufi* is that its derivation is not completely clear, so it took

globally cannot fail to enter into an investigation of every human concern, whether in this world or the next. The great scientists of Islam who have been studied and admired by Western historians were invariably trained in this dimension of the religion. So also, the most famous of the Sufis were thoroughly grounded in the theoretical knowledge of the objects of faith.

On the deepest level, Islam is a religion that teaches people how to transform themselves so that they may come into harmony with the ground of all being. Neither activity nor understanding is humanly sufficient, nor are both together. Activity and understanding must both be focused in such a way that they bring about human goodness. This goodness is inherent and intrinsic to the original human nature, made in God's image, and it does not depend on outward activity for its presence. If the first dimension of Islam has in view the activities that must be performed because of our relational situation with others and with God, and the second dimension has in view right understanding of the nature of things, the third has in view seeking out constant presence with God. For those with any sensitivity to the interior life, the various terms that are employed in discussing the focus of this third dimension are immediately recognizable as the *raison d'être* of religion itself. These include sincerity, love, virtue, and perfection.

All three dimensions of Islam have been present wherever there have been Muslims, because Muslims cannot take their religion seriously without putting it into effect in their bodies, their minds, and their hearts; or in their activity, their thinking, and their being. But these dimensions became historically embodied and institutionalized in a large number of forms, the diversity of which has all sorts of causes, about which historians have written no end of books. After all, we are talking about how Muslims practice their religion, how they conceptualize their faith and their understanding of the nature of things, and how they express their quest to be present with God. We are talking about various schools of Islamic law and institutions of government, diverse schools of thought investigating the nature of God and the human soul, and multifarious institutions that guide people on the path of spiritual aspiration and crystallize their vastly different experiences of God's presence in their lives.

These diverse expressions of Islam, which have undergone tremendous historical and regional variation, have been given many

names over Islamic history, and the whole situation has become much more complex because of the investigations of modern scholars, who have had their own programs, agendas, and goals. More often than not, the scholarly community has had little sympathy for the object of its study and for the way in which Muslims have understood themselves. One of the most obvious and striking characteristics of Thomas Merton's mentions and discussions of Islam is precisely his ability to see through the obfuscations of the scholars and his recognition that Islam represents an enterprise of the human spirit as complex and deep as Christianity. It is somewhat less remarkable today to hear a non-Muslim take this position than it was a few years ago, but it is still the position of only a minority of the supposedly qualified observers.

It should be clear from what I have said that Islam, like any religion, embraces the whole range of human activities and concerns, and the Islamic approach to these has become manifest in a great variety of forms and institutions over history. In contrast to the stereotypes, Islam has a special affinity for diversity of expression. Part of this has to do with the fact that it has nothing to compare to the centralized authority of the Christian church. Instead, it has produced a great variety of institutional forms that come and go, all with the function to transmit and inculcate the necessities of practice, understanding, and the interior life.

There has always been a good deal of diversity among the schools of Islamic law, of which there are five that still play major roles today. And there has been no end to disagreement and debate among the three major intellectual perspectives—theology, philosophy, and theoretical Sufism—each of which has several schools. But perhaps the greatest diversity of Islamic expression has been found on the third level, that of the heart, or the domain that can be called "Sufism" in the most general sense of term. In this broad sense, "Sufism" can be understood to refer to the inner life of practicing Muslims. It is an essential part of the religious experience of most serious Muslims in one way or another. It is also the most personal and private dimension of the religion and by nature the least given to explication and exact expression. It refers, in short, to the secret quest for God in the inner castle, and any attempt to explain precisely what this is or should be can only be the proverbial finger pointing at the moon. Of course, I do not mean to imply that all

among contemporary Muslims. For every Hallâj who has been studied in modern times there are dozens of other major figures waiting to be investigated.

Moreover, it is important to remember that what has been written down by the Sufis, or about the Sufis, represents only a tiny fraction of the phenomenon of Sufism, since the vast majority of Muslims devoted to God—including most of those who were known in their own time or by later generations as great Sufis and knowers—did not have the vocation of writing. The literary output represents only the “name” of a much deeper and broader reality that by nature cannot be known from the outside.

*
* *

I spoke earlier of “theoretical Sufism” without any explanation other than to say that it represents one of the three main approaches to the objects of faith, or to Islamic understanding. What differentiates the Sufi approach from that of philosophy and dogmatic theology is mainly that the Sufi authors rely on *ma'rifa*—the direct knowledge of self and God that flows freely in the purified heart. In contrast, both the theologians and philosophers affirm the necessity of *'ilm*, which one can translate as knowledge, science, or learning. They insisted that the primary means of gaining knowledge was reason, and the theologians added that reason had to submit to the givens of revelation. Like the theologians and unlike the philosophers, the Sufis gave pride of place to the Qur'an and the Hadith, but they also held that the only way truly to understand the revelatory message was the inner purification that made a person worthy to be taught directly by God Himself. They like to quote the Quranic verse, “Be wary of God, and God will teach you” (2:282). Since “being wary of God” (*taqwâ*) is designated by the Qur'an itself (49:13) as the highest human attribute in God's eyes, this verse was a powerful scriptural support for the Sufi position. Abû Yazîd al-Bastâmî, a ninth-century figure looked back upon as the “sultan” or chief authority of those who receive their knowledge directly from God. (*sultân al-'arîfîn*), is reported to have said to certain scholars who were objecting to his formulations of Islamic teachings, “You take your knowledge dead from the dead, but I take my knowledge from the Living who does not die.”

devout: Muslims consider themselves “Sufis” of some sort or another. Quite the contrary, for a wide variety of reasons, the name itself—which has always had its critics and detractors—has become especially suspect among modern-day Muslims. Nonetheless, it would be rare indeed to find any Muslim who denies the value of sincerity in observing the divine commandments, love for God, and virtue, and these are precisely the focus of Sufi learning and practice throughout Islamic history.

One of the most common terms that is used to designate what I have just named “Sufism” in Islamic texts is *ma'rifa* (or *'irfân*), a term which means simply “knowledge” or “recognition.” However, the term connotes a special, deeper knowledge of things that can only be achieved by personal transformation. Often the goal and fruit of this type of knowledge is explained by citing the Prophet's saying, “He who knows [*'arifa*] himself knows his Lord.”

In short, *ma'rifa* demands knowing one's own innermost self, and this self-knowledge is the prerequisite for knowing God. The texts tell us repeatedly that *ma'rifa* cannot be found in books. In fact, it is already present in the heart, but it is hidden deeply beneath the dross of forgetfulness and ignorance. Recovering this knowledge from the heart is the most difficult of tasks. The famous theologian, philosopher, and Sufi al-Ghazâlî (d. 1111) compares the heart to a pond, fed by a hidden spring that has been clogged by mud and debris, so that the pond receives water only from rain. Through practice of the pillars of Islam, purification of self, and remembrance of God, one gradually removes the debris and mud from the bottom of the pool. Eventually, the hidden spring opens up and finishes the task of purifying the water. Then one has no need to go outside of self in search of God, for the water of the divine life and knowledge flows freely in the heart.

Generally speaking, those who have become famous in the West as “Sufis”—such as al-Hallâj, Rûmî, and Ibn al-'Arabî—represent a few of the more outstanding Muslims who have spoken for the innermost dimension of the religion. But it should be kept in mind that despite the constant publication of Sufi texts throughout the Islamic world ever since the introduction of printing, the vast majority of Sufi authors have never been published, and even those who have been published remain largely unstudied and unread. The literature is vast, and the modern interest is scant, especially

The Sufis sometimes called direct knowledge of God "unveiling" (*kashf*). Partly because unveiling usually takes the form of a visionary, imagistic knowledge, they made frequent use of poetry to express their teachings about God, the world, and the human soul. Many of them felt that poetry was the ideal medium for expressing the truths of the most intimate and mysterious relationship that human beings can achieve with God, that is, loving Him and being loved by Him. In Islamic civilization in general, poetry is the most important literary form, and it has always been widely popular among the both the literate and illiterate classes. I would argue that in the vast majority of the Islamic world—that is, wherever Arabic was not the mother tongue—the various poetical traditions of the Islamic languages were far more important for propagating the teachings of the Qur'an than the Qur'an itself. And most of the really great and popular poets were either Sufi masters or spokesmen for the teachings of this innermost dimension of Islam.

If we look at the content of Sufi teachings rather than at the peculiarities of Sufi methodology, we can see that the key element that differentiates their approach to explaining the Qur'an's message is to stress the nearness, presence, and immanence of God rather than his distance and transcendence. There are many Quranic verses that speak of God's nearness, such as, "And We are nearer to him than the jugular vein" (50:16) or "And He is with you wherever you are" (57:4). The general approach of the theologians was to interpret these verses as metaphors so as to emphasize God's transcendence and to remove any suggestion of a personal nearness. In contrast, the general Sufi approach was to stress the importance of a more literal understanding of these verses in order to grasp God's concern for human welfare and the ultimate destiny of the human soul. They held that such "anthropomorphic" verses should not be taken as mere metaphors, but rather as statements of the actual situation—though the Sufis never fell into the trap of ignoring the complementary teaching, that is, that God is also distant and transcendent.

The Sufi attempt to balance the demands of transcendence and immanence helps explain why they are especially fond of paradoxes—statements that ignore the law of non-contradiction—which they tend to express as aphorisms and employ frequently in their poetry. One of the functions of these paradoxical explications of God's relationship with human beings is to break down the insistence

of the rational mind that everything can be explained and grasped. In fact, God does not fit into our categories. Everything in our world and our experience must be one thing or another, but God is both nothing and everything. He is both near and far, both transcendent and immanent, absent and present, both this and not this.

Many Sufis maintain, in fact, that true understanding of God can only be achieved through perplexity and bewilderment. The paradoxical and sometimes scandalous utterances that tend to emerge as a result are simply the outward manifestation of inner awe, wonder, and astonishment, which render the rational mind incapable of employing its usual care and precision. According to some Sufis, bewilderment in face of God's reality is in fact the highest stage of human understanding. One of their favorite expressions of this perplexity in God is an aphorism that goes back to Abu Bakr, the close companion of the Prophet and the first caliph after the Prophet's death. He said, in a concise paradox, "Incapacity to perceive is perception." We perceive the things of this world by perceiving them, but we perceive God by the clear recognition of the impossibility of perceiving Him.

So important is the stress on paradox and bewilderment for Sufi rhetoric that it is easy to classify most Sufi authors on a continuum in keeping with the degree to which it enters their discourse. The Sufis themselves frequently call the two extremes of this continuum "sobriety" and "drunkenness," and it is common for them to discuss their forerunners in terms of stress on one side or the other. This pair of terms coincides with many other pairs that also enter into discussions of the nature of the God-human relationship, such as fear and hope, contraction and expansion, gathering and dispersion.

Drunkenness, expansion, and hope correlate with God's nearness. Drunkenness designates the joy of the seekers in finding the eternal source of all joy within themselves. God's nearness in turn is closely related to those of his names that designate mercy, compassion, love, kindness, gentleness, and so on. In contrast, sobriety, contraction, and fear correlate with God's distance and the clear differentiation of the individual from the source of all good. Sobriety refers to the human response to divine names that designate God's majesty, glory, splendor, magnificence, might, wrath, and vengeance.

These two poles of the experience of God become manifest in human cognition through reason and imagination, which are the

"two eyes" with which people see their way to God. The eye of reason knows nothing of God's presence, because its analytical approach can only dissect endlessly and prove that God is nowhere to be found. Sobriety, reason talks of God's distance and transcendence, and all of us rational people are quickly convinced by the reasonableness of its arguments. In contrast, the eye of imagination, unveiling, and *ma'rifa* reveals in God's presence and throws away all pretensions to sober judgment and logical precision.

In short, on one extreme we have Sufis whose expressions and discourse can be categorized as intoxicated by the wine of their Beloved's presence, and on the other extreme are Sufis who soberly evaluate the nature of things and explain in clear and reasonable detail the nature of our existential situation in face of God. It is the sober works that also describe in careful detail the provisions and equipage that travelers will need in order to undertake the long journey to God and then, at the end, to find him present in their own souls, where he had been waiting for them the whole time. The provisions and equipage for the road pertain to the three basic dimensions of Islam—practice, understanding, and purity of heart.

Reading the Sufi writings, we quickly see that poetry tends toward intoxication and prose toward sobriety. But even Sufis who never wrote anything can often be classified as sober or drunk because of the accounts of their lives and teachings that have come down to us. Many Sufi authors make use of both modes of expression and try to strike a happy balance between the two. And by and large, Sufi teachers have come out in favor of the superiority of sobriety over drunkenness.

In the frequent Sufi discussions of the relative virtues of these two, we commonly meet the description of three stages on the Sufi path. The first is the initial sobriety that is achieved through repentance and awakening, when the aspiring seekers turn away from the follies of this world and come to their senses after having been drunk and besotted with the trappings and goals of ordinary life.

After long and intense struggle on the path of self-discipline and purification, the travelers are opened up to the effusions of divine love, mercy, and knowledge. They are so overcome by drunkenness that they lose their rational capacity and tend to express themselves in ecstatic and paradoxical language.

But this is not the final stage. Neither the Prophet nor the vast majority of the great Muslims who followed in his footsteps can be said to have been intoxicated. Practically all of them had reached the furthest stage, which is sobriety after drunkenness. This is the return to the world after the journey to God. Through the journey, the seekers undergo total transformation, and now they return to the world with helping hands. They began as stones, they were shattered by the brilliance of the divine light, and now they have been resurrected as fine jewels—beautiful, luminous, and fixed in the divine attributes.

For those who know something about Sufi teachings, it should be clear that the two higher stages of this tripartite scheme—that is, "drunkenness" and "sobriety after drunkenness"—correlate with the famous expressions *fanā'* and *baqā'*, or "annihilation" and "subsistence." Through the journey of self-purification and devotion to God, the travelers reach a stage where they become fully open to the divine light, and the brilliance of this light annihilates all the human attributes that had held them back from seeing their true selves and their Lord. This annihilation of obstacles and impediments allows them to see that they in themselves had been nothing and are still nothing, because God alone has true reality. Instead of themselves, who had never had any reality to speak of, they now see what subsists after the annihilation of false selfhood. What remains in the station of subsistence is precisely God in his full glory, and this full glory demands the shining of his light. The travelers find that from the beginning they had never been anything but rays of the divine light. They had never had any reality of their own. In their ignorance and heedlessness, they had thought that they were real and God was real, but now, after the annihilation of these false perceptions, they have found the subsisting truth that God alone is real, that God alone shines in the light of this world's darkness, and that perfected human beings—made and then remade in God's image—are nothing but the full radiance of His shining.

This famous pair of terms (*fanā'* and *baqā'*) is derived from the Quranic verse, "Everything on the face of the earth is *annihilated*, and nothing *subsists* but the face of your Lord, Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving" (55:26). The specific divine name with which this verse ends—"Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving"—is especially appropriate in the context of the spiritual

journey, because it alludes to the two-sided perception of things that needs to be achieved. God is the Possessor of Majesty, because He is Great, Distant, Wrathful, Vengeful, King, and Transcendent. His majesty and splendor are such that they annihilate the reality and existence of everything else; only He is truly worthy to be. But God is also "Possessor of Generous Giving," because He is Loving, Merciful, Compassionate, Gentle, Clement, Kind, and Nurturing, and He does nothing but give generously to His creatures. Although His majestic reality annihilates the creatures, His generous giving bestows upon them reality and subsistence.

It is subsistence that is real, not annihilation, for subsistence is the affirmation of an ancient reality, but annihilation is the negation of something that never truly was. In other words, mercy and compassion are primary in the reality of God, not wrath and severity. Here the Sufis typically cite one of their favorite prophetic sayings, "God's mercy takes precedence over His wrath," which is to say that it is the subsistence of mercy that has the final say, not the annihilation that is brought about by wrath, which is in fact a passing accident.

*
* *

One of the most often cited expressions of the final stages of the approach to God is found in a saying of the Prophet. Before I cite it, however, I need to mention a Quranic verse that situates the saying in its proper context. In the verse, God is addressing Muhammad personally. The verse reads, "Say [O Muhammad]! 'If you love God, follow me, and then God will love you'" (3:31). There is hardly any verse in the Qur'an more important for specifying the rationale for Islamic praxis than this verse. Why is it that Muslims strive so hard to follow the Prophet's Sunnah? The answer is simply that they love God and that they have been commanded to follow Muhammad so that God will love them.

In a typical Sufi reading of the significance of the verse, love for God drives the seeker to search for the mutuality of the situation, which is to say that the lover wants to be loved by his beloved. No lover is satisfied short of reciprocity. The Qur'an tells us here that the only way to show that you love God is to follow Muhammad, and this means that you must follow his practices, that is, the

Sunnah. If one sincerely follows Muhammad, this makes one worthy to be the object of God's love.

The prophetic saying that I want to cite in this context refers to the nature of the final stages of the approach to God. In it, the Prophet explains what happens when someone reaches the stage of being worthy for God's love. Note that the saying refers to two types of practices, the "obligatory" or incumbent, and the "supererogatory" or voluntary. Both were established by Muhammad himself, and both are necessary in order to achieve the final goal. The saying quotes the words of God himself (and is thus technically known as a *hadith qudsi*, a "holy saying"): "My servant," God says, "draws near to Me through nothing that I love more than what I have made obligatory for him. My servant never ceases drawing near to Me through supererogatory works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am his hearing through which he hears, his sight through which he sees, his hand through which he grasps, and his foot through which he walks."

In short, once people love God, they put the necessities of this love into practice by following the Prophet. Then they may come to be loved by God. The result of being loved by God is that God's love intoxicates the lover and "annihilates" all human failings and limitations. It drives away the darkness of temporality and contingency, and it leaves in its place the radiance of God's own eternal being. Note here that the hadith says, "When I love him, I am his hearing through which he hears. . . ." As some of the Sufis have pointed out, the words *I am* here alert us to the fact that God is already our hearing through which we hear, our sight through which we see, and so on. The problem is not God's nearness to us, because He is eternally near to us and closer to us than our jugular vein. The problem is our nearness to God, which we cannot see and cannot grasp. We have to achieve the seeing of God's nearness, and the only way to achieve it is to follow the prophetic model as closely as possible.

*
* *

Let me come back to where I began, which is the name and reality of Sufism. When people start naming things, the "reality" that tends to get lost is the presence of God. Naming brings about a certain

distance, differentiation, and sobriety. The Qur'an tells us that after God created Adam, "He taught him the names, all of them" (2:31). Naming things is part of human nature, because God taught human beings all the names at the beginning of creation. But naming things pertains to sobriety, to the separation and multiplicity of created things that allows us to experience ourselves separately from others. In relation to this sobriety and differentiation, the uncreated and undifferentiated represents a kind of drunkenness, because in God's unity all multiplicity, separation, and otherness are effaced. On the path of the return to God, people become drunk because all distinctions blur and because they are drowned in the sweet ocean of love's unity, an ocean that knows nothing of created distinctions.

The "names" that God taught to Adam are bodies that God gives to those eternal meanings and realities that give birth to this world, and like all bodies, they pass and perish. Also like all bodies, they have fixed archetypes in the divine itself. In the same way, our own bodies name the divine spirit that has been blown into each of us, but each body provides the spirit with a different name. As human beings, we differentiate things through our own selves, because we are the diverse images of the one God. In the same way, we differentiate things though naming the things outside ourselves because we are Adam's children.

The difficulty of our situation arises from the fact that we have forgotten that God taught us the names at the beginning, and that, in order to know the significance of the names, we have to know them as God taught them. This is achieved by loving God rather than by loving the names and what the names designate, and loving God is put into practice by following Muhammad. Then God will love us and revivify the names, and then we will see that every name designates nothing but a ray of God's effulgent reality.

If Sufism began as a "reality without a name," it was because those Muslims who loved God at the beginning of Islam simply loved God and therefore followed the Prophet, and they in turn were loved by God. They had no need to name what they were doing. They lived in harmony with their Creator by following His designated messenger. But as time passed, people found it more and more difficult to live up to the reality of love, to imitate the Prophet with perfect compliance, and to achieve the state where God was their hearing and their sight, speaking to them about Himself and

the signs of His presence in all things. Instead, they spoke more and more about how presence with God was to be achieved, and they named it by a name they devised themselves. The name—whether it be "Sufism" or something else—is perishing and of no real account. The reality, however, is everything, and it is this reality that has been the concern of all Muslims sincere in their love for God from the beginning of Islam.

© Copyright, 1999 © 2001 © 2005

This edition printed and distributed by Fons Vitae, Louisville, KY

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed in Canada

ISBN-1-887752-07-2

This edition published by

Fons Vitae

49 Mockingbird Valley Drive
Louisville, KY 40207-1366
email: grayh101@aol.com
website: www.fonsvitae.com

Library of Congress Information

99-62799

ALM 57A

FUN 57A
M 101 101
1 101 101

THE COVER

With thanks to the Abbey of Gethsemani for photograph used, and to Mme. Catherine Schuon for the photograph of the late Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi.

"Yesterday afternoon I finished a remarkable book—the biography of the Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi, who died in Algeria in 1934. One of the greatest religious figures of this century, a perfect example of the Sufi tradition in all its fullness and energy. This is one book that I want to read again. The excerpts from his writings are most impressive and I know I have not begun to appreciate their content."

—THOMAS MERTON, *JOURNALS*, VOL. V

"The book was an inspiration to me and I often think of this man with great veneration. He was so perfectly right in his spirituality. Certainly a great saint and a man full of the Holy Spirit. May God be praised for having given us one such, in a time when we need many saints."

—THOMAS MERTON LETTER TO MARTIN LINGS

"With Shaikh Ahmad, I speak the same language and indeed have a great deal more in common than I do with the majority of my contemporaries in this country. In listening to him I seem to be hearing a familiar voice from my "own country" so to speak. I regret that the Muslim world is so distant from where I am, and wish I had more contact with people who think along these lines."

---THOMAS MERTON, *THE HIDDEN GROUND OF LOVE*

Permissions for published and unpublished material for this volume can be found starting on page 339.

OF RELATED INTEREST
FROM FONDS VITAE

Letters of a Sufi Master by Shaykh al-'Arabī ad-Daraqāwī
translated by Titus Burckhardt

The Sacred Origin and Nature of Sports and Culture
by Ghazi bin Muhammad

Islam in Tibet, featuring the illustrated narrative
Tibetan Caravans by Abdul Wahid Radhu

Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul
by Titus Burckhardt

Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam by Aliah Schleifer

Ibn 'Arabi's Divine Governance of the Human Kingdom
interpreted by Shaykh Tosun Bayrak

Suhrawardi's Haykal al-Nur (The Shape of Light)
interpreted by Shaykh Tosun Bayrak

The Ornaments of Lhasa: Islam in Tibet, video
produced by Gray Henry

*On the Invocation of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in the
Western Church* by Rama Coomaraswamy

Autobiography of a Moroccan Sufi Saint: Ahmed Ibn 'Ajiba
translated from the Arabic by J. L. Michon, and
from the French by David Streight

Moorish Culture in Spain by Titus Burckhardt

Early Sufi Women of as-Sulamī translated by Rkia Cornell

The Stations of the Wayfarer: Manazil as-Sa'irīn, al-Harawi,
translated by Maryam al-Khalifa Sharief

A. K. Coomaraswamy's *Guardians of the Sun-door*

Al-Ghazali's Deliverance from Error and Other Works
[formerly *Freedom and Fulfillment*] by R. J. McCarthy

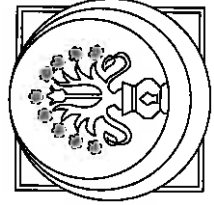
The Architectural Glory of Cairo, Caroline Williams (video series)

MERTON & SUFISM

The Untold Story A COMPLETE COMPENDIUM



Edited by Rob Baker
and Gray Henry



FONDS VITAE