The Arabic word ṣufi, from which English "Sufism" is derived, was first used to designate a certain type of religiosity in the second/eighth century. The original meaning of the word seems to have been "someone who wears wool," though other derivations have also been proposed. Once the word came into use, Muslim scholars never reached any consensus as to what exactly it implied. Down into the seventh/thirteenth century, it was generally used to characterize certain saintly figures and their teachings, and from then on it was also applied to various "orders" (lit. "paths," ṣīraq, sing. ṣīrafah), within which teachers guided students on the quest for God. Many scores of such orders still flourish in the Islamic world, each of them tracing its lineage back to one or more founding saints and eventually to the Prophet. For centuries, the orders played a dominant role in the religious life of the Muslim community, but more recently the politico-military forms of Islam known as "fundamentalism" have to a notable degree obscured their presence, at least to the media.

Modern-day scholars commonly take the word "Sufism" as a synonym for mysticism, spirituality, or esoterism, all of which suggest something of what the word has connoted. For the purposes of this essay, Sufism can best be understood in relation to the structure of the Islamic tradition. The twin foundations of Islam—the Qur'an and the Sunnah—provide guidance on three levels: activity, understanding, and transformation; or practice, thought, and spirituality. As Muslims drew out the implications of God's Guidance on the level of practice and activity, they gradually brought into being the realm of jurisprudence (fiqh) and the schools of the Revealed Law (the maddhab of the Shāafi‘īs). As they pondered the implications of Divine Guidance for a correct understanding of God, the cosmos ("everything other than God"), and human embodiment, they gave rise to schools of thought like kalam (theology) and philosophy. At the same time, many Muslims—often the same figures involved in the first two realms—held that the goal of both right activity and correct understanding was transformation of the soul, that is, achieving inner conformity with al-Înâq, "the Real," the Supreme Truth and Absolute Reality that is God Himself. It is these Muslims who were often called "Sufis" by their contemporaries or by later generations.

The outstanding characteristic of the Sufi approach to the Islamic tradition has been to focus on assimilating the soul to the Divine Word, always on the basis of the
model established by the Prophet. Addressing him, the Quran says, "Truly thou art of an exalted (ţazim) character (68:4)." It was lost on one that the Quran uses the same adjective to refer to itself—"the Mighty (ţazim) Quran" (15:87). The exaltedness of the Prophet's character derives precisely from the fact that he had assimilated the Quran into his very being. This is how Sufis have understood the saying of the Prophet's wife 'A'ishah, when she was asked about his character after his death. She replied, "Have you not read the Quran? His character was the Quran."[14]

The Quran's role in the soul's transformation is implicit in the accounts of the Prophet's ascension (mi'raj) to God, the "Night Journey," to which reference is made in 17:1: "Glory be to Him Who carried His servant by night. Laylat al-irād, "the Night of the Journey," or al-mi'raj, "the Ascend," was understood as the fulfillment of laylat al-qadr, "the Night of Power," (97:1-9). Having brought the Divine Word down to the Prophet on the Night of Power, Gabriel took him up to meet God on the Night of the Journey. He could encounter God precisely because "His character was the Quran," which had descended into his soul and transmuted it into a luminous lamp (35:46) in answer to his prayer, "Make me into a light."[15] The Quran itself, after all, is the light (6:48), revealed by the Light of the heavens and the earth (24:35) to bring forth mankind out of darkness into light (4:17).

The Path of Transformation

Sufi teachers frequently spoke of the goal of the Islamic tradition as "realization" (tasbīḥ), a word derived from the same root as the Divine Name al-Haqq, the Real, the Right, the True, the Appropriate. Appropriately, realization means to actualize truth (haqq) and reality (haqīqāt) and in Sufism it came to designate the end result of following the path to God. To achieve realization means to reach the Real, to see and understand all things in light of the Real, and to act rightly and appropriately in all situations. This demands the transformation of the very being of the seeker, and it is precisely the role of Sufi writings to explain the nature of this transformation, to describe the path that can lead to it, and to offer practical instructions and means on how one can travel on the path.

The notion of "path" is central to Muslim self-understanding. During every cycle of the daily prayers Muslims recite al-Fatihah (Sūrah 1). After praising God and declaring

human neediness, the sīrah voices the heart of the religious quest: Guide us upon the straight path (18). It is this very path (sīrah) that is embodied as the bridge (sīrah) over Hell that everyone must attempt to cross on the Day of Resurrection. Those who follow the Divine Guidance in this life will pass over safely, and those who ignore it will fall into the Fire. The Quran makes "guidance" (badda) the general attribute of prophets, and it ascribes "misguidance" (dā'ah) to Satan. Addressing the Prophet, it says, "Truly thou dost guide unto a straight path (4:158)." But it also reminds us that the Prophet guides only on the basis of God's Guidance, and that God alone is the ultimate Guide: Surely thou (Muhammad) dost not guide whom thou loves, but God guides whomsoever He will (28:76).

Qur'anic words for "path" or "road" play a prominent role in conceptualizing the tradition. Sīrah designates the general path of right guidance, especially in the phrase "the path of God." Shari'ah, "avenue," comes to designate the specific path of right practice codified in Islamic law and jurisprudence as well as prophetic guidance generally (especially in the plural form, sharā'ī, "paths, i.e., religions"). Tariqah comes to mean the path of spiritual discipline, the inner journey toward right understanding and right conformity with the Real that is taught by the Sufi masters (shaykhs, sīrah); hence its use to denote the Sufi orders.

In summarizing the nature of the path to God, teachers often spoke of "purification of the soul" (tasākīnah al-nafs), an expression derived from 9:7-9. Purification demands eliminating blameworthy character traits (uqūlīqītū māksūdāh) and acquiring praiseworthy character traits (uqūlīqītū hayīdūtū). Akhbār, or "character traits," is the plural of akhlīqūs, "characters," and is used to designate the science of ethics (tīm al-akhībār). Among all of God's servants, the one who had the most "exalted character" was Muhammad, literally "the Praised One," also called Ahmad, "the Most Praised" (61:6). The Quran speaks of God as "the Praised one" (al-Haqq). The implication being that no one else is truly worthy of praise. If the Quran calls the Prophet both "Muhammad" and "Ahmad," this is because his character conforms to God's "character," which is to say that "his character was the Quran," God's Speech and Self-Expression.

In short, all those who want to purify their souls must follow the straight path, the path of God. This requires imitating the Prophet on two basic levels: right activity, by following the Sunnah; and right understanding and realization, by following the tariqah. Imitating the Prophet can lead to the recovery of the soul's primordial nature (sīrah), created in God's "image" or "form" (sīrah). Hence Sufis commonly spoke of the goal as "coming to be characterized by the character traits of God" (al-takāddūtu bi-akhībār Allāh), and they understood that the Prophet's "exalted character" derived precisely from his being characterized by the entire range of Divine Names and Attributes, his full realization of the Reality of the Real. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) devotes a chapter of his commentary on the Divine Names to this process and, following terminology long since used by both Sufis and philosophers, he refers
to the goal as the actualization of one's innate ta'ālāb, "being like unto Allāh," that is, "deification" or "theo-emancipation."54

The fact that Sufis have focused their attention on achieving spiritual transformation helps explain their dedication to what one scholar has called the "Qurānization of memory." This meant not only that they, like other Muslims, put great stock in the memorization and recitation of the Quran and invocation of the Divine Names contained in the Quran, but also that they voiced their teachings in Quranic terminology and kept in mind that the purpose of all their efforts was to assimilate the Divine Word. Always the goal was for the soul to be transmuted into the Divine Light, the living reality of God's Self-Expression. This special dedication to the Quran can be observed clearly among the Sufi teachers of the early generations, who are remembered mainly by aphorisms that elucidate the spiritual significance of key Quranic words and phrases. When later Sufis began to write detailed expositions of the human situation vis-à-vis God and the cosmos, they filled their works with commentary on Quranic verses. One of the best examples here is Ibn 'Arabi (d. 687/1286), whom the Sufis call "the Greatest Master," because of the unsurpassed depth and profundity with which he explained the nature of the path to God. His monumental al-Farākān al-makhtyārī (The Mexan Openings) is nothing if not a series of meditations on the Quran and its inner meaning.

In the Sufi reading of the Islamic tradition, every human being is called to undertake the path of spiritual transformation. All have inherited the knowledge of the names that God taught Adam (4:15), and all are capable of recovering this primordial, Adamic knowledge by assimilating the Quran. In two verses, the Prophet is instructed to say, I am only a human being like you (18:10; 42:6). Like us, he had inherited knowledge of the names from Adam, but unlike us, the verses go on to say, God sent down upon him the revelation of His Unity. It was this event that allowed him to follow the Divine Guidance back to its source and recover the primordial human nature, the fāthah. As mortals like him, we can follow in his footsteps.

God's Signs

One might say that the goal of Sufi theoretical teachings is to provide a cosmic anthropology combined with cosmology, that is, an exposition of human nature with respect to God's purpose in creating the universe. Right understanding of human nature must begin at the beginning, which is God, the assertion of whose unity, awwal, is the first principle of Islamic faith. Tawbīh is expressed most succinctly by the first


which is the visible world, or dry, which is the spiritual world and everything beyond, but that it is inscribed in a clear Book (6:32), and that is you.6

Everything in the universe, the soul, and the Qur'an is a sign/verse. All signs need to be deciphered through both negation, "no god," and affirmation, "but God." With regard to negation, signs have no reality compared to God's infinite Reality; as for affirmation, each sign points to the Real, for all qualities derive their sustenance from His Qualities. Inasmuch as all things denote God's Names and Attributes, everything in the entire universe is a taghlib, a "theophany," a Divine "Self-Disclosure" (taghlib). This word is taken from a verse in which Moses asks God to show Himself: God replies that Moses will not be able to see Him. And when His Lord manifested Himself (taghlib) to the mountain, He made it crumble to dust, and Moses fell down in a swoon (7:143). The blinding light of theophany negates the mountain and its viewer, just as every sight, seen with the eye of discernment, negates the unreal and affirms that there is nothing real but the Real. Each of the cosmic signs/verses is a specific thing, event, word, or sentence, but each also points to something else beyond itself. The signs/verses that make up the Qur'an are also pointers: yet the Qur'an is the clear Book (15:2) and the clear Qur'an (15:3), providing the clarity and insight with which to interpret the signs in the cosmos and the soul. To understand this Divine Guidance, however, people must dedicate themselves to what the Book asks from them, not least following God's path and careful study of His Word. Without understanding the written signs of the Qur'an, they will never be able to decipher the cosmic and inner signs. They will then be hostile of their own role in creation and unable to deal with the world and themselves appropriately and rightly (ka' th-nq), that is, in conformity with the Reality of the Real.

The Face of God

The Qur'an sometimes speaks of God's Self-Disclosure as His "Face" (wa'af), as in 3:116: Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God. In other words, God discloses Himself in everything, so each is a sign affirming God's Reality and negating its own independent reality. At the same time, however, each thing is simply itself, so it is a veil that conceals the Divine Face disclosed within it. A second verse suggests something of the two-sided nature of the Divine Self-Disclosure with its grammatical ambiguity: All things perish, save His Face (2:88), a sentence that can equally well be read, "Each thing perishes except its face," that is, the thing's face. If we take the pronoun to mean "His," then the verse affirms the permanence of God and negates the permanence of all things. If we take it to mean "its," then its thing's face, that is, its aspect of relation to God, is permanent, but not the rest of the thing. Ibn 'Arabi explains that this permanent face of a thing is its immutability, which is always going upon God, a reality that is ultimately nothing other than the Face of God gazing upon it. He calls this immutability Reality God's "Specific Face" (wa'af khlib), meaning that God in His infinite Knowledge has an infinity of Faces, each of which is turned toward a specific thing to bring it into existence and sustain it.

The Qur'an tells us that seekers of God desire the Face of God (70:18), and it praises those who turn their faces to Him: Whosoever submits (Islam) his face to God and is virtuous (mustash), has indeed grasped the most unfailing handhold (7:124). By submitting their faces to God, seekers find their own true faces, which are the same as the Specific Faces that God has turned toward them. The two faces are ultimately one, for "there is no face but God's Face." Those who seek God's Face, then, are striving to recognize the Face of God that is their own true self.

This quest to recognize God's Face helps explain one of the senses of the famous hadith, "He who recognizes himself recognizes his Lord." This hadith, which is constantly cited in Sufi texts, is usually translated, "He who knows himself knows his Lord." The verb 'anafa, however, designates recognition (i.e., re-cognition) rather than simple knowing (which is designated by 'alma). The use of this specific word suggests that the knowledge gained from coming to know oneself is in fact a renewed knowledge of what one already knows in one's inmost being. Indeed, so important is this notion of "recognition" that Sufism is often called ma'rifah or 'iffan, both of which are verbal nouns from the verb 'anafa. If scholars usually translate these two words as "gnosis," it is because this English word means immediate knowledge of spiritual truth, and this suggests something of the nature of the self-recognition that is simultaneously God recognition.

It is worth recalling here that the Qur'anic term dahr denotes both the "reminder" that comes from God and the "remembrance" that is the human response to that reminder. At the same time, the word also means "to mention" or "to invoke," and the Qur'an frequently encourages mentioning or invoking the Name of God as a means of remembering Him, as in 96:55: Invoke the Name of thy Lord morning and evening. This Qur'anic teaching is the basis for the universal practice of remembering (dahr) God's Name (or "invocation") found in all the Sufi orders. The Qur'an's use of this word and its cognates shows that, in the Qur'anic view of things, we already possess the knowledge that we are being reminded of, but we must recover it. In short, true recognition of oneself demands seeing oneself as a Face of God and understanding that "everything is pertaining but His Face," which is none other than one's true face.

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7. This hadith is not found in the standard collections and is rejected by most Hadith experts, some of whom ascribe it instead to the Prophet's companion 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. See Muhammad ibn al-Munawwir, ArRi' al-Mafrif fi magamat al-Shaykh Abi Sa'id, ed. M. R. Shafi'i (Khalil: Tijani, 1374/1955), 774-75.
because Rumi was able to capture in a non-technical, everyday language, understandable to any Persian speaker, what he himself calls "the roots of the roots of the roots of the religion"—which is an apt description of the Qur'an itself, the foundation of everything Islamic.

The basic theme of most popular poetry, especially Sufi poetry, is love, with all of its ups and downs, its joys and sorrows. The contours of Sufism as a cosmic and spiritual anthropology can perhaps best be seen by looking at a few Qur'anic verses about love and the manner in which these verses were understood. The most commonly cited is no doubt 55:4. God will bring a people whom He loves and who love Him, usually in the abbreviated form, He loves them, and they love Him. The theologian Ahmad al-Sam'āni (d. 584/1190) explains that God mentions His Most Beautiful Names in the Qur'an so as to clarify to His servants that they must negate Divine Attributes from themselves and affirm them for God alone. God speaks of His Exaltation and their abasement, His Knowledge and their ignorance, His Holiness and their taintedness, His Life and their death, His Unity and their multiplicity. But when He gave news of love, just as He affirmed love for Himself, so also He affirmed love for us—He loves them, and they love Him. 9

Notice that this verse speaks of both God and human beings as lovers and beloved. Taubah alerts us to the fact that there can be no true lover and no true beloved but God. So in what sense can human beings be called lovers of God and why should they be the objects of God's Love? We can begin by recalling that the Prophet said, "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty." With regard to beauty, this means that nothing is truly beautiful but God, and that no one truly loves but God. Nonetheless, God created human beings in a beautiful form: He formed you and made beautiful your form (4:164). Our forms are beautiful because God created us in His own "form," which is to say that He in-formed us with the Most Beautiful Names. God loves beauty: so He loves the beauty of human forms, which is to say that He loves the manifestation of His own Most Beautiful Names in creation.

Why, then, did God create the universe in the first place? In the Qur'an He says, I did not create jinn and mankind, save to worship Me (31:36), the last phrase of which can also mean "to serve Me." Fulfilling the proper human role as God's vicegerent demands serving the Lord, and no service is greater than negating oneself and affirming God, annihilating blameworthy character traits and allowing the Divine character traits to subsist. But what does service/worship have to do with love? Here Sufi texts like to quote the hadith qudsi, "I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to

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8. Rumi begins the Arabic introduction to his great work with these words: "This is the book of the Mathnawī, and it is the roots of the roots of the roots of the religion, unveiling the mysteries of caring [as God] and certainty, it is God's greatest jurisprudence [Sūfī Allāh al-akbar], God's brightest Path [Sūfī Allāh al-akhush], and God's most manifest proof [Sūfī Allāh al-a'khar]."


10. Muslim 4.41 (no. 279).
be recognized; so I created the creatures so that I would be recognized.\(^{11}\) In other words, God created the universe because, as the verse of mutual love puts it, He loves them; that is, He loves human beings; so He gave them the capacity to recognize Him and to love Him in return. By recovering their fitrah, they recognize themselves as God’s servants, and they recognize their Lord as the possessor of the Most Beautiful Names, which are also the Most Lovable Names, for beauty attracts love. Recognition, in other words, turns their love toward God, and love demands devoted service.

So, there is no lover but God, and He loves them, that is, human beings created in His form, for they are the Self-Disclosures of His Most Beautiful Names. And there is no beloved but God, which is to say that human beings love God and God alone, whether they know it or not. This is because no one is beautiful but God; so all love is attracted to His Beauty. Sufi authors are especially fond of explaining this truth, for it goes against common sense, which tells us that we love this person or that thing. Indeed, the Quran remarks, Made to seem fair unto mankind is the love of passions, among them women, children, heaps-up heaps of gold and silver, horses of mark, cattle, and tillage (7:14). But why do these things seem fair? The reason is that they love Him and they see the Beauty of God’s Face in His signs without being aware of it. As Râmi puts it, the objects of love are gold-plated by God’s Attributes. People should strive to recognize that it is not these objects per se that they love, but God. Ibn ‘Arabi explains the point in this way, referring first to a series of beautiful women celebrated in Arabic poetry.

No one loves anyone but his own Creator, but he is veiled from Him by love for Zaynah, So‘id, Hind, Layla, this world, money, position, and everything loved in the world. Poets exhaust their words on all these existing things, but they do not know. The gnostics [i.e., those who “recognize” themselves and God] never hear a verse, a riddle, a panegyric, or a love poem that is not about God, hidden beyond the veil of forms.\(^{12}\)

The significance of the verse of mutual love becomes a bit clearer as soon as we reflect upon what lovers desire. If He loves them and they love Him, both God and human beings desire the same thing, which is to be together. To use the technical language of Sufism, they desire union (wajd), not separation (fitnah), for love can never be consummated at a distance. It is equally true, however, that lovers cannot come together unless they are at first apart. It is precisely the desire for union that incited the One Reality to bring about duality and separation in the first place. His Command when He desires a thing, says the Quran, is only to say to it, “Be!” and it is (16:82). This desire to create things is none other than the Hidden Treasure’s love to be recognized, for without a separate creation, there would be none to recognize Him and none to love Him.\(^{13}\)

So the goal of God’s creative activity is not, as some might think, to fill the world, but rather for God and His loved ones to come together, as they were before creation. Râmi explains this game of love when he says that all of us are used to be fish swimming in the ocean of Divine Unity, unaware of our distinction from the water. Then God threw us up on dry land, the realm of separation, longing, pain, and suffering. Only by tasting separation can we remember the joy of water and desire to return to it. Once we return, we will swim in the Ocean of Unity again with full awareness of the joy of consummated love.

The most explicit reference to union with God in the earliest Islamic sources is probably the sound hadith quadi in which God speaks of the servant who seeks nearness to Him through good works. When the servant advances on the path, then, God says, “I love him, and when I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, the eye with which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks.”\(^{14}\) This hadith has been the subject of endless interpretation in Sufi texts, for it describes in concrete terms the fruit of His love for them. But they love Him also plays a basic role: the servants’ love for God drives them to follow the path of guidance. If their love were to be misguided, then they would be attracted to the gold plating rather than to God; so they would not advance on the path. To advance they must act beautifully and virtuously (fitlah) and come to be characterized by beautiful character traits. The only way to accomplish this is to follow the footsteps of the Prophet. The Prophet is instructed, Say, “If you love God, follow me, and God will love you” (33:2). When God does love us, then He will be the hearing with which we hear, the eyes with which we see, and the heart with which we love.

“God is beautiful, and He loves beauty.” Clearly the Prophet, the last of the prophets and the “most praiseworthy” of God’s creatures, is the embodiment of human virtue and beauty. As the hadith quadi puts it, “But for thee [O Muhammard], I would not have created the spheres.”\(^{15}\) God created the universe out of His Love to be recognized, and the Prophet fulfilled this role in the most perfect manner, making him God’s foremost beloved and the model that all lovers should follow. By following the Prophet, they can actualize the Most Beautiful Names within their own character, and it is the beauty of the reflection of these Names in human beings that God loves. It is of course also true that God loves all human beings, and indeed

\(^{11}\) This saying is much quoted in later texts from around the seventh/eighth century on, but most Hadith scholars do not consider it authentic.

\(^{12}\) Quoted in Chittick, Sufism, 67.

\(^{13}\) In other versions, the hadith of the Hidden Treasure reads “I desired [anawat] instead of ‘I loved’ (‘udhayn), Theologians usually classify ‘love’ as a specific form of desire.”

\(^{14}\) Al-Bukhari 6:38 (p. 608).

\(^{15}\) The saying is commonly quoted in Sufi texts, but it is not attested in the standard sources. Some Hadith scholars have it in this form: “But for thee, I would not have created the Garden and the Fire.” But al-Zamn al-Farizani, Abidah bi Madhahib (Tehran: Amie Kub, 1967/1968), 115.
all creatures. He made beautiful all that He created (13:17), and He loves the beautiful. So also the fruit of His "love to be recognized" was the creation of all creatures, not just human beings.

Nonetheless, the Quran never mentions explicitly any creatures other than human beings as the objects of God's Love. Specifically, it says that God loves the beautiful-sons (those who have hair, in five verses), the God-fearing (three verses), the just (two), the self-purifiers (two), the repentant, the patient, and those who trust in Him. It also says that there are people whom God does not love: unbelievers, wrongdoers, workers of corruption, transgressors, and those who are immoderate, proud, and boastful. In other words, the Quran tells us that God has a special love for those who choose to follow His ways, and this love is not exactly the same as the love that brought the universe into existence. The ways of God followed by those whom He loves are encapsulated in the beautiful example (3:182) and exalted character of the Prophet.

Explicating the path of becoming adorned by beautiful character traits provides the basis for numerous books by Sufi masters. Probably the most famous of these in the West is Manṣūḥ al-nafāṣ (The Language of the Birds), by Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār (d. 618/1222), a book-length Persian poem that has been translated into English several times. The title refers to a Quranic verse in which Solomon is said to know the language of the birds (71:16). In 'Attār's reading, the verse is allegorical to Solomon's prophetic knowledge of human souls, who alone among all creatures have the potential to fly into God's Presence. Each of the birds in the tale represents a human type with its own strengths and weaknesses. After a great deal of discussion and debate, thirty birds agree to set out on a quest for the Simorgh, the fabulous king of the birds who dwells in a faraway country. With much hardship they fly over seven mountains, each higher than the previous one, and each representing a stage on the path to God, a character trait that must become a permanent quality of the soul. The seven stages—seeking, love, recognition, independence, unity, bewilderment, and poverty—are based on Quranic terminology and reflect centuries of SufI teaching and practice aimed at recovering the fīrah and achieving "deformity." Reaching the end of the path, the birds find that all of their own character traits have been annihilated and only the traits of the Simorgh subsist. The "thirty birds" (ṣūrah) come to recognize that from the outset, they had been the Self-Disclosure of the Simorgh.

Sufi teachers enumerate the stages on the path to God in many different ways, but their common insight is that the Quran and the Sunnah provide the guidelines for the realization of the Divine Form that is latent in every soul. Each human being is called to recognize the Hidden Treasure, to recollect the names taught to Adam, to love the true Beloved, and to be embraced by the true Lover. To be fully human demands actualizing and realizing the meaning of taqwīd in the depths of the heart. Rūmî sums up the Quranic path of Sufism: