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SUFIS: THE MYSTICAL MUSLIMS
(Part Three in a series on Islam from Forward magazine)

by Elliot Miller

A popular expression of Muhammad's religion in the Western world today is Sufism, Islam's mystical way. The current interest in Sufism can be largely explained by pointing to the same factors which account for the popularity of several diverse Eastern mystical traditions among Westerners. These factors include a hunger for lifetransforming spiritual experience, and an attraction to monistic belief systems. British orientalist Martin Lings comments: "A Vendantist, a Taoist, or a Buddhist can find in many aspects of Islamic mysticism, a 'home from home,' such as he could less easily find in Christianity or Judaism."¹

Not only is Sufism making an impact on Western shores in its own right, it has also profoundly influenced such notable founders of new religious movements as George I. Gurdjieff and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. Also, several personalities who have made their mark outside of the field of religion acknowledge the influence of Sufism on their lives, including novelist Doris Lessing, actor James Coburn, poets Ted Hughes and Robert Graves, psychologists Erich From and Robert Ornstein, and the late Secretary-General of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld.

Sufism (Arabic *Tasawwuf*) is a name which probably has its origin in the wearing of undyed wool (*suf*) as a mark of personal penitence. The Sufis are also known as *fakirs* and *dervishes*, both words originally denoting that these were people who believed in being poor (in spirit).

Sufis do not constitute a separate sect of Islam (as do, for example, the Shi'ites), but can be found within both the Sunni and Shi'a sects (although Sunnis tend to be more tolerant of them). Historically, Sufism has encompassed a wide gradation, ranging from devoutly orthodox Muslims to mystics who viewed their connection with Islam as little more than incidental.

All Sufis stress the supreme importance of religious experience, and distinguish themselves among Muslims by their insistence that experience of God (who is often viewed in Islam as remote and unapproachable) can be achieved in *this* life.

EARLY HISTORY

There are three distinct but overlapping periods in Sufi history generally recognized by historians: classical, medieval, and modern. Sufism can be traced back to a pious minority within the early Islamic fold who felt that the more austere aspects of the Prophets teaching were being lost sight of in the midst of political expansion.

Within Islam's first century the Muslim leaders found themselves in possession of a vast empire, and, living off tribute money from the conquered, they "surrounded themselves with captive concubines and slaves, and lived on a scale of luxury unknown to their ancestors."² The movement of protest against this worldliness ultimately resulted in both the legalistic and mystical schools of Islam.

For early Islamic ascetics fear of eternal punishment in hell was the primary incentive to piety. Eventually however, a fervent love for God, displayed by such early Islamic saints as the woman Rabbi'a al-Adawiya (d. 801) became a

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central theme, and provided a basis for emerging Sufi mysticism. Professor E.G. Browne notes that early Sufism was characterized by

... ascetism, quietism, intimate and personal love of God, and disparagement of mere lip service or formal worship. This ascetic *Sufism*...if influenced at all from without, was influenced rather by Christian monasticism than by Persian, Greek or Indian ideas.³

Over two centuries after the time of Muhammad, gnostic influences began to appear in some expressions of Islamic spirituality. Junayd of Baghdad, (d. 910), a transplanted Persian, was especially instrumental in the shaping of Sufism into a pantheistic system. He wrote: "Whatever attains to True Being is absorbed into God and becomes God."⁴ Another Persian, al-Hallaj (d. 922), executed for blasphemy, became celebrated as a martyr among medieval Sufis, particularly Persian poets. Hallaj, who traveled extensively and developed quite a following, scandalized the orthodox with statements like "I am the Truth."

Quietism, with its emphasis that God is all that matters and man is merely an instrument in His hands, provided fertile ground for the pantheistic beliefs that God is all there is, and man and the phenomenal world are merely shadows or emanations of His being.

TRANSITIONS TO MEDIEVAL SUFISM: SOME LEADING NAMES

Ghazali

Likely the most important figure in the history of Sufism is al-Ghazali (d. 1111). Prior to his appearance, Sufism's success had been partial. To be sure, it had become a powerful force among the common people, as it offered a more personal and emotionally satisfying approach to religion than that exhibited and prescribed by the orthodox interpreters of the Qur'an. However, it had not won acceptance from the religious establishment.

The theologians and legalists had gone to great pains to develop an orthodox interpretation of the faith that would protect it from heretical innovation. They perceived that the Sufis' emphasis on experience as a superior source of truth, and their tendency to neglect legal prescriptions, could lead to the corruption of Muhammad's religion. They also feared that their own positions as religious leaders of the people might be supplanted by the popular Sufis. Consequently, the Ulama (religious authorities) sought, unsuccessfully, to silence the mystics. "This conflict between doctrinaire legalist and follower of the Inner Light was fundamental and seemed irreconcilable."⁵

Enter al-Ghazali. "The accepted position of Sufism, whereby it is acknowledged by many Moslem divines as the inner meaning of Islam, is a direct result of Ghazali's work."⁶

Al-Ghazali was orphaned at an early age, and raised by Sufis. Of Persian descent, by the age of 33 he was appointed a professor in Baghdad, where he became recognized as an authority on canon law. In spite of his success, Ghazali entered a period of spiritual crisis. Concerning this he wrote in his autobiography *Deliverance from Error*: "I examined my motive in my work of teaching, and realized that it was not a pure desire for the things of God, but that the impulse moving me was the desire for an influential position and public recognition."⁷ In 1095 Ghazali became a wandering ascetic, returning to the Sufism of his youth. He spent 11 years in meditation and retirement, until a Sultan persuaded him to teach again.

In the public teachings and writings which followed his retirement, Ghazali set forth a synthesis of orthodox theology and mysticism. His greatest work *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences*, argues that only the Sufi emphasis on inner devotion can fulfill the strict demands of the Qur'an. Ghazali's arguments did much to relieve the hostility and suspicion that had developed between the Ulama and the Sufis. He has been widely regarded as Islam's greatest theologian, and the acceptance of his synthesis resulted in a large measure of tolerance (though never a full acceptance) between the legalists and the mystics. The two traditions came to regard each other as having necessary roles to fulfill within the larger Islamic community.

The acceptance of Sufism into the orthodox fold had monumental consequences. Islam "acquired a more popular character and a new power of attraction."⁸ Some historians credit Sufism for Islam's success at establishing itself in points beyond the Middle East. However, once Sufism achieved orthodox status the general distinction between

what was and was not lawful became blurred, and several popular ideas and practices, previously kept under restraint by the Ulama (i.e., the cult of the saints, astrology and divination), became commonplace in the Islamic world.

Arabi

Another important Sufi from the same era is al-Arabi (d. 1240). Raised by a Sufi family in a Spain that had been under Islamic control for more than 400 years, Arabi studied law and Islamic theology before establishing himself as one of Sufism's greatest poets and esoteric philosophers. He created a Sufi literature which did much to promote the cause of Islamic mysticism in many cultures.

While Ghazali stayed within an outwardly orthodox framework, Arabi offered a clearly monistic, gnostic system. "His commentary on the Koran is a *tour de force* of esoteric interpretation."⁹ With Arabi the emphasis on the Sufi path "was shifted from moral self-control to metaphysical knowledge with its sequence of psychological ascent to the 'Perfect Man, the microcosm in whom the One is manifested to Himself."¹⁰ In his *Bozels of Wisdom* Arabi explains: "When you know yourself, your 'I'ness vanishes and you know that you and God are one and the same."¹¹

Arabi's poetic usage of erotic language to signify the relationship of the soul with God set the tone for much of medieval Sufism. Poetry became a favorite medium of expression, the imagery sometimes becoming so sensuous that it is difficult to distinguish whether the "Beloved" being referred to is heavenly or earthly. For the Sufis, this made little difference, since they believed that "'Whether it be this world or that/Thy love will lead thee yonder at the last!"¹²

Rumi

The most important of the Sufi poets is Jalaluddin Rumi (d. 1273). Born to a noble family in Bactria (located in modern Afghanistan), he settled in Asia Minor (Iconium) where he taught, founded the Mevlevi Order (popularly known as the Whirling Dervishes), and wrote poetry in Persian.

Rumi was as much an esotericist as Arabi. He held that the teachings of the Qur'an are allegorical, having seven different meanings. The description of his search for God, which he gives in the following excerpt from one of his poems, reveals his gnostic and pantheistic convictions:

Cross and Christian, from end to end I
surveyed, He was not on the cross. I went to the idol temple, to the ancient
pogoda
No trace was visible there.
I bent the reins of search to the Kaaba,
He is not in that resort of old and young.
I gazed into my own heart;
There I saw him, he was nowhere else,
In the whirl of its transport my spirit was tossed,
Till each atom of separate being I lost.¹³

THE MASTER-DISCIPLE RELATIONSHIP

The master-disciple relationship is a facet of Sufism that was laid down by Ghazali, and has remained central to this day. Ghazali sets forth the reasoning behind it:

The disciple [*murid*] must of necessity have recourse to a director [*shaikh or sheikh*: in Persian *pir*] to guide him aright. For the way of the Faith is obscure, but the Devil's ways are many and patent, and he who has no shaikh to guide him will be led by the Devil into his ways. Wherefore the disciple must cling to his shaikh as a blind man on the edge of a river clings to his leader, confiding himself to him entirely, opposing him in no matter whatsoever, and binding himself to

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follow him absolutely. Let him know that the advantage he gains from the error of his shaikh, if he should err, is greater than the advantage he gains from his own rightness, if he should be right.¹⁴

Once the seeker is initiated, his shaikh subjects him to a rigorous spiritual regimen, designed to induce the desired enlightenment. The discipline can come through a variety of forms, including assigned activity (e.g., sacrificial service of the master), oral instruction (including the use of "teaching stories"), and various spiritual exercises (we shall consider examples later). The precise training that the shaikh employs will vary from disciple to disciple, according to the perceived needs of the individual.

THE SUFI ORDERS

Charismatic and/or devout shaikhs (often possessing pronounced psychic powers) frequently attracted large followings. These gatherings of initiates constituted brotherhoods, or communities, growing around the residence of the shaikh. Gifts from lay supporters enabled the members of these budding monasteries to devote all of their time to spiritual concerns. Succeeding generations would highly venerate the founders of the orders as saints (their tombs becoming monastery focal points), and the successors to the headship of the orders would either be through family line, or by election. Additionally, disciples who achieved a high level of initiation would often bring their masters teachings to new areas, where they would attract disciples of their own, and found new sub-orders. In this way, from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onward, Sufi orders spread throughout the Islamic world.

The two most important Sufi orders are the Qadiri Order, founded by Abd al-Qadir (d. 1166) in Baghdad, and the Shadhili Order, whose founder, al-Shadhili (d. 1258) lived in Alexandria, Egypt. The Qadiri are known for their moderation, while the Shadhili are more given to extravagance and emotion. An important order in India is the Chishti, founded in the thirteenth century. As would be expected, it bears several marks of Hindu influence.

Sufi orders differ from Roman Catholic orders in that they are not under the control of an outside authority and also in that they often do not require celibacy.¹⁵ The chief differences between the orders themselves involve variations in ritual and litany (*dhikr*), and also in attitude (e.g., orthodox/unorthodox; militant/tolerant). Professor AMA Shustery affirms that the current number of Sufi orders reaches above 175.¹⁶

In addition to the established orders, itinerant, independent fakirs, reminders of Sufism's less organized days, persisted throughout the medieval period, and continue down to the present day. They have been described as "holy fools," spiritual ecstasies who were also social eccentrics, openly flaunting the norms of acceptable behavior...."¹⁷

During the period spanning the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, the Sufis reached the height of their influence in the Islamic world. The number of Muslims affiliated with Sufi brotherhoods at that time has been estimated to have been anywhere from 50 to 80 percent of the total population.¹⁸ The Sufis were also Islam's greatest missionaries during these centuries.

DISTINCTIVE SUFI BELIEFS

Based on experience rather than doctrine, Sufism has always been more open to outside influence than other forms of Islam. Because it took root and developed in the centrally located Middle East, it has quite naturally absorbed ideas and practices from several of the world's notable religious and philosophical systems. In addition to early influences from Christianity, one can find elements of Zoroastrianism, Neoplatonism, Hinduism, and other diverse traditions, around its Islamic kernel. As we proceed to examine Sufi beliefs and practices, these non-Islamic influences will be abundantly evident.

In the Qur'an, Allah (God) is not only absolutely singular (barring the Trinity of Christian theology), he is also radically transcendent—separate from his creation. How then can anyone claiming to be a Muslim possibly hold to a pantheistic conception of God in good conscience? Martin Lings, himself a practicing Sufi, gives us an example of how such reasoning is typically carried out:

It is necessary to bear in mind that each of the Names of the Divine Essence comprises in Itself, like *Allah*, the totality of Names and does not merely denote a particular Divine Aspect. The Names of the Essence are thus in a sense interchangeable with Allah, and one such Name is *al-*

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Haqq, Truth, Reality. We can just as well say that there is no truth but the Truth, no reality but the Reality as that there is no god but God. The meaning of all these is identical. Every Muslim is obligated to believe in theory that there is no reality but the Reality, namely God; but it is only the Sufis, and not even all those who are affiliated to Sufi orders, who are prepared to carry this formulation to its ultimate conclusion. The doctrine which is based on that conclusion is termed "Oneness of Being," for Reality is that which is opposed to that which is not; and if God alone is Real, God alone is, and there is no being but His being.¹⁹

As do all pantheists, Sufis run into a morass when they attempt to resolve the problem of evil. In their effort to reconcile the existence of evil with belief that God is all there is, they end up associating evil with the process of creation. E.G. Browne illustrates:

A thing can only be known through its opposite—Light by Darkness, Good by Evil, Health by Sickness, and so on.... Thus Eternal Beauty manifests itself, as it were, by a sort of self-negation; and what we call "Evil" is a necessary consequence of this manifestation, so that the Mystery of Evil is really identical with the Mystery of Creation, and inseparable therefrom. But Evil must not be regarded as a separate and independent entity: just as Darkness is the mere negation of Light, so Evil is merely the Not-Good, or, in other words, the Non-Existent. All Phenomenal Being, on the other hand, necessarily contains some elements of Good, just as the scattered rays of the pure, dazzling white light which has passed through the prism are still light, their light more or less "coloured" and weakened. It is from this fall from the "World of Colourlessness" that all the strife and conflict apparent in this world originate.²⁰

Corresponding to their pantheistic denial of actual evil, the Sufis affirm the inherent goodness of man. The human soul is the microcosm of the Universal Macrocosm (God), related to God as rays are to the sun. It is restless because of its unnatural relation with matter and seeks union with its origin.... Its weakness is in its being tempted by the wrong notion of its being material."²¹

With such a gnostic-like definition of man's problem (the spirit's false identification with matter), we might appropriately expect a gnostic solution, and this is precisely what we find. Commenting on the most standard Sufi text, the *Gifts of the (Deep) Knowledge*, by Shaikh Suhrawardi (d. 1235), Idries Shah affirms: "By divine illumination man sees the world to be illusion."²² Browne adds:

Evil is, as we have seen, illusion; its cure is to get rid of the ignorance which causes us to take the Phantoms of the world of Sense for Realities. All sinful desire, all sorrow and pain, have their root in the idea of Self, and Self is an illusion.²³

To the above summary of Sufi doctrines we can add belief in both the preexistence of the soul, and the soul's survival of physical death. Unlike Indian mystical systems, this is not generally viewed in terms of reincarnation. The soul's sojourn on earth is one stage in a long progression through various worlds of existence. Sufis believe that their homeland is beyond the stars, and to there they will ultimately return. For their time here on earth they purposefully submitted themselves to a state of forgetfulness, although one of the aims of Sufi discipline is to awaken from this sleep. At various points in the soul's evolutionary journey it may take on the nature of an angel, a jinn, a human, a Master, etc.

DISCIPLINE, PIETY, AND MYSTICISM

Sufis have done their best to make a science of the subjective. They have developed perhaps the most systematic, charted, and regulated progression into the mystical there is. For the serious seeker of mystical experience this aspect of Sufism is appealing, for it conveys the impression of a venerable tradition that can be trusted to produce authentic spiritual knowledge.

Believing in the perfectibility of man, the Sufi way is very much concerned with the perfecting of the individual disciple. This endeavor is known as *work* (those familiar with Gurdjieff will recognize his debt to Sufism here). The work is prescribed by the Shaikh, performed by the Sufi, in the context of the community. It aims to break the hold of conditioned patterns of behavior which inhibit the desired spiritual awakening.

Most Sufi orders consider the first work of the disciple to be the observance of traditional Islamic piety: to perform the "five pillars." The Sufis' exceptional spiritual hunger, however, will characteristically drive them to go far beyond the prescribed observations. For example, in addition to observing the nightly fasts required during the month of Ramadan, Sufis frequently engage in voluntary fasts.

The use of dance for spiritual purposes has become one of the most distinctive characteristics of Sufism, though not all of the orders observe it. According to Martin Lings, many Sufis are under the conviction that "the body stands for the Axis of the Universe which is none other than the Tree of Life. The dance is thus a rite of centralisation... intended above all to plunge the dancer into a state of concentration upon Allah."²⁴

Meditation is an essential part of the Sufi's work at self-perfection. Repetition of a *dhikr* or sacred formula (e.g., the name of Allah) is often combined with breathing exercises to induce altered states of consciousness.

As the natural (and, from the Christian perspective, God-given) mental barriers to psychic intrusion are broken down, and a link is established to the spirit world, the Sufi may

see visions, hear the voices of angels and prophets, and gain from them guidance.... It is a condition of joy and longing. And when this condition seizes on the "seeker," he falls into ecstasy. The dervishes in the monasteries may be seen working themselves up into a condition of "ecstasy."²⁵

Such spectacles will not be viewed in the same favorable light by all observers. John Alden Williams points out that

the observer may encounter things which seem to belong in a case book of abnormal psychology, or witness what looks remarkably like demonic possession. But unless he is wholly unsympathetic, he may find also in these sweating ecstasies examples of pure and devoted attendance upon the Holy.²⁶

SUFISM IN THE MODERN ERA

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Islam had accumulated an amazing diversity of religious ideas and customs; several of them quite extraneous to the faith Muhammad had long before bequeathed to his followers. As we saw earlier, the acceptance of Sufism into the orthodox fold had no small part to play in this discoloration of the faith.

Accompanying this proliferation of peculiar beliefs and practices was a multiplication of bizarre ecstasies within the Sufi orders: "With the passing of time and the social decline of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, almost every pervert entered a Sufi order, and almost every madman was accounted a saint."²⁷

Eastern historian S. Ameer Ali points out another aspect of Sufism which contributed to the decline of Islamic civilization:

To the bulk of humanity the call to abjure the world and to betake ourselves to complete absorption in the contemplation of the Divinity is an inducement to mental lethargy. The responsibility for the present decadence of the Moslem nations must be shared by the formalism of the Ash'ri [orthodox theologian] and the quietism of the Sufi Mystical teachings like the following:

the man who looks on the beggar's bowl
as a kingly crown
And the present world as a fleeting bubble
He alone traverseth the ocean of Truth
Who looks upon life as a fairy tale
can have but one result--intellectual paralysis.²⁸

In eighteenth century Arabia, a puritanical revivalist movement known as *Wahhabiya* arose which has done much to turn contemporary Muslim sentiment against the Sufis. For reasons such as those mentioned above, the Sufis were blamed, not only for the pollution of the historic faith, but for the weakened political position of Islamic nations, as

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contrasted with expanding European imperialism. In the twentieth century Sufism has lost the political influence it once enjoyed, and, in Wahhabi-ruled Saudi Arabia, it is officially prohibited. While still tolerated in other Muslim countries, Sufism generally in the Muslim world is hard-pressed because of a resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism and according to some sources, because of the activity of bogus sheikhs and Sufi orders."²⁹

Certainly, Sufism has known better days in its native lands. However, "for the last forty years the direct and indirect influence of the East has prepared the ground in the West for the seed of the Sufi message."³⁰ Idries Shah, the "Grand Sheikh of the Sufis," whose family has reputedly reigned in India's Hindu khoosh since 1221, has devoted his life to demonstrating the applicability of Sufi ideas and practices to today's life in the West. "He has achieved the difficult task of being accepted by the Western scholars as well as by those of the East."³¹

In 1916 the Sufi Order in the West was founded in London by another important Indian Sufi, Hazrat Inayat Khan. His Chishti Order master sent him to the West specifically to spread the Sufi message. Khan died in 1927, but his son, Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, has succeeded at establishing 88 centers in America and 166 worldwide. Pir Vilayat, who turns 70 this year, is a frequent, highly respected speaker on the New Age circuit.

In spite of its popular acceptance, the Sufi Order is looked upon with disapproval by Shah and other more traditional Sufis. This is because, in keeping with its self-determined mission to promote unity among all religions, the Sufi Order does not insist that its members identify with the Islamic faith. It has been rightly described as "one of the most thoroughgoing syncretistic movements in history..."³²

A CHRISTIAN APPRAISAL

The emergence of Sufism in Islam, its historic popularity and its long-term negative effects upon that religion, could all have been predicted beforehand by an informed, perceptive Christian. The reasons for this will become evident as we proceed.

First of all, this Christian observer of world religions would have recognized from history that there have really only been two paths traveled by human beings to the realms of spiritual experience. The first could be described as "natural spirituality," not because there is nothing supernatural about it, but because it is generally accessed by very natural, methodical means (e.g.; meditation, chanting, or ecstatic dancing). The second might be characterized as "supernatural" or "revelation" spirituality, for it is not entered upon by natural methods of altering the consciousness, but opens up to all who respond in faith and obedience to the revelation found in Jesus Christ and the Bible. To simplify matters, I shall summon the imagery Jesus employed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:13-14) and refer to the first path as the "Broad Way," and to the second as the "Narrow Way."

Those on the Broad Way usually assume that what is natural is also right: that the way we humans are now is essentially how we were originally intended to be. Therefore, to be "spiritual" all we have to do — indeed, what we must do — is develop our own inherent spiritual potential. As this "natural spirituality" is cultivated, certain phenomena typically follow, including psychic powers, contacts with spirit entities, and ecstatic or mystical experiences.

Being universally accessible, the Broad Way appears, in some form, in virtually all religious traditions. The very universality of these experiences convinces the advocates of mysticism that it is the one true religion of mankind, and the various religious traditions are merely the cultural packages which contain it.

Since monism and pantheism are philosophical by-products of the mystical sense of oneness with all things, the proponents of natural spirituality also conclude that these world views, coming so *naturally*, must be the correct ones. Consequently, they often attempt to show that monism and pantheism lie at the esoteric heart of all the world's religions.

This thesis is challenged and ultimately destroyed, however, by the historic reality of the Narrow Way (a reality which often escapes the notice of these "natural men" — see I Cor. 2:14). In it, careful investigation will uncover a rich tradition of spiritual experience fundamentally different from that of the Broad Way. This tradition is centered in the redemptive activities of the one God who made a covenant of promise with Abraham, gave His law to Moses, spoke to His people through the prophets, and personally fulfilled these promises, laws and prophecies in the man Christ Jesus.

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On the basis of information that would have been unavailable had God not historically acted to reveal it, followers of the Narrow Way understand that man's natural state is fallen—he is not now as he was originally created to be. Thus the only spiritual realm that he can contact by *natural* means is likewise fallen—and extremely dangerous. To "see the Kingdom of God" he needs a new nature; he "must be born again," supernaturally, by the regenerating work of God's Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8).

As the believer passes through the *narrow* door of Jesus Christ (John 10:7-9) an incomprehensibly *vast* realm of spiritual experience opens up to him. It is the kingdom of the infinite-personal God of revelation, and it is distinctively "not of this world" (John 18:36)—including that kind of spirituality which comes *natural* to this world.

The Narrow Way can lead to very profound encounters with the presence and glory of God. However, no matter how far one advances along it, he never experiences his "I-ness" vanishing, nor is he drawn toward belief in the oneness or divinity of all things. God is experienced as distinct from His creation, though omnipresent and intimately involved with it. God is also revealed as both awesomely righteous and holy, unwilling to tolerate or overlook sin, and yet also as infinitely loving and merciful, unconditionally forgiving and accepting those who come to Him through Jesus, the sin-bearer.

In contrast to the autosotericism or self-purification which typifies the mystical traditions, the dynamic force behind this supernatural spirituality is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, convicting him of sin, teaching, comforting, and progressively conforming him into the image of Jesus Christ. This work of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of the scriptures perfectly complement each other, pointing to the same truths, which are focused in Jesus.

In addition to identifying these two distinct varieties of spiritual experience, our Christian observer would also have recognized that there would be no authentic theism had there been no authentic divine revelation. Indeed, *any* student of man's religions should acknowledge that truly theistic world views can only be found in the "revealed" religions (i.e., religions that claim to be based on truths directly disclosed by God at particular points in history). The Christian can (and I believe should) argue from this fact that the theistic world view is too exalted to have been conceived by unaided human reason—it *had* to be revealed.³³

Islam is the only fully theistic religion apart from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Whereas the New Testament fulfills the Old Testament, the Qur'an contradicts both Old and New Testaments, as we saw in Part Two. Therefore, the Christian maintains that Islam is theistic, not because of any direct revelation granted to Muhammad, but because he borrowed heavily from biblical sources.

Nonetheless, Islamic culture stood to gain certain benefits from its borrowed theism, unavailable to pagan cultures. Not the least of these was an absolute basis, in a moral, transcendent God, for defining good and evil; resulting in a firm, comparatively lofty moral structure to uphold society.

As a *theistic* religion, however, Islam is incapable of delivering a vital spiritual experience. This is because, on the one hand, the Broad Way, which generates pantheism, is inherently incompatible with theism. On the other hand, that which is compatible with theism, the Narrow Way has its origin in the revelation of God. To participate in this supernatural spirituality, one must remain in harmony with true revelation. The work of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Jesus Christ (John 16:14). Therefore, theists like the Muslims who resist His work turn aside from the Narrow Way.

In other words, the Narrow Way is so narrow that it can only be entered through the grace of Jesus Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 15:11). Those who deny that grace and seek instead to win entrance into God's presence through good works will find themselves haunted by a spiritual void and a lack of assurance concerning their personal salvation. Since theism originated in revelation, a theism in conflict with revelation is doomed to spiritual impotence.

Bereft from beginning to end (by rejection of the gospel) of any participation in the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Islamic tradition was left with only one recourse for filling this spiritual void: common occult mysticism—the Broad Way.

This explains the rise and popularity, not only of Sufism in Islam, but also of similar mystical movements in other theistic traditions which either deny or largely ignore the gospel of grace.³⁴ Each of these movements, hungering for something more than a dead, legalistic externalism, has fed on that spirituality which is available to all men. As a

direct result, in each case the monotheism which originally upheld them degenerates into pantheism, and pantheism predictably opens the door to a wide range of pagan beliefs and activities.

Only conservative Protestantism, which on the whole has faithfully emphasized the cross of Christ and personal salvation, has remained almost impenetrable to the inroads of the Broad Way. The reason for this is clear: a personal relationship with Jesus Christ leaves *no spiritual void*.³⁵

In the context of Islam's rejection of the Christian gospel, then, the rise of a mystical movement like Sufism was quite predictable. But mysticism is a dead end—as our previous consideration of Islamic history has indicated.

Nowhere is the bankruptcy of mysticism more evident than when mystics address ethical issues, such as the problem of human evil or sin.

Owing to Islam's Jewish and Christian influences, an emphasis on morality runs through Sufism that cannot be found in such purely pagan mystical traditions as Hindu Vedanta or Tibetan Buddhism. However, Sufis are unable to come up with a satisfying, sustaining basis for ethics out of their monistic, pantheistic world view.

As we saw earlier with E.G. Browne, "Evil is merely the Not-Good, or, in other words, the Non-Existent." Thus we find that the seemingly endless array of evils which stalk human history, mock mankind's potential for greatness, steal hope away from the human heart, and tempt a man to sell his soul in a moment of darkness, are all casually written off as unreal "colourings," *necessary* "self-negations" of Beauty-in-manifestation. Such shallow explanations of something as existentially profound as human evil fail to possess the sensitized conscience. Why should we commit our lives to resisting evil if in fact it is necessary, and, finally, unreal?

The Sufis' understanding of human sinfulness is painfully deficient. Ultimately, the true nature of man's dilemma was lost sight of amid the rapture of intoxicating mystical experience. This blindness can be discerned in Nasrollah Fatemi's affirmation that Spiritual perfection leads to the gnosis of the divine unity and the bridging of the gap between God and man when the latter's soul transcends the confines of personality by losing the conditioned self in the intuition of the one."³⁶

Such talk of attaining spiritual perfection (typically mystic) is self-delusion (see 1 John 1:8), resulting from a bankruptcy of authentic "gnosis" (i.e., self-knowledge). The unpleasant but necessary truth was pointedly stated by the prophet Jeremiah: "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick: who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9).

Man is stricken with a moral sickness that runs to the depth of his being, defiling even his most sincere efforts to apprehend God (Isa. 64:6; Rom. 3:9-19; 7:21). The "gap between God and man" is the result of very real transgressions of the divine law (Isa. 59:1-2). The Bible, then, defines sin in moral and legal terms (1 John 5:17; 3:4), not as ignorance of a "divine unity" which in fact does not exist (the world and/or the human self are *not* a part of God—Ps. 113:4-6; Rom. 1:18-25; Ezek. 28:2). Therefore, subjectively man needs to be healed by a force external to himself, while objectively he needs to have his sins forgiven. Both of these are available *only* in the new covenant made by God Himself in Christ's blood (Jer. 31:33-34; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25).

If the Sufi trusts so strongly in his subjective "intuition of the one" that he does not sense his desperate need to take advantage of God's merciful provision in Christ, he has not begun to attain *useful* knowledge. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7), and such a one needs a healthy dose of it.

Historically the Sufis have always been caught in a bind. It is clear that most of them have desired to be true to the one God of revelation—the God of Abraham, whom Muslims claim to worship. At the same time, their earnest quest for an experience of that God has led them into the realm of pagan spirituality. They need to be shown that the only way to what they have sought for is the Narrow Way. They must face the realities of their own creaturehood and sinfulness, and the acceptance of Jesus Christ which these realities demand. Then they will know an inner fulfillment, peace and joy that neither Islam *nor* mysticism could ever provide (John 7:37-39; 10:10; 14:27; 17:13).

NOTES

¹ *Man, Myth, and Magic—An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Supernatural*, s.v. "Sufis," by Martin Lings.

² John Alden Williams, ed., *Islam* (New York: George Braziller, 1962), 123.

- ³ E.G. Browne, "The Sufi Mysticism: Iran, Arabia and Central Asia," In *The Sufi Mystery*, ed. N.P. Archer (London: The Octagon Press, 1980), 175.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.
- ⁵ H.A.R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism*, 2d ed. (New York: Mentor; 1953), 106.
- ⁶ Idries Shah, *The Sufis* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964), 167.
- ⁷ Williams, 183.
- ⁸ Gibb, 110.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Williams. 141.
- ¹² Nasrollah S. Fatemi, "A Message and Method of Love, Harmony, and Brotherhood," in *Sufi Studies: East and West*, ed. L.F. Rushbrook Williams (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1973), 51.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 70.
- ¹⁴ Gibb, 116-17.
- ¹⁵ *Man, Myth and Magic*.
- ¹⁶ A.M.A. Shushtery, "Philosophy, Training, Orders and Ethics," in *Sufi Mystery*, 71.
- ¹⁷ *Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions*, s.v. "Sufism," by Bruce B. Lawrence.
- ¹⁸ *Abingdon*.
- ¹⁹ Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), 64-65.
- ²⁰ Browne, 187.
- ²¹ Shustery, 70.
- ²² Shah, 297.
- ²³ Browne, 88-89.
- ²⁴ Lings, 84-85.
- ²⁵ S. Ameer Ali, "The Mystical and Idealistic Spirit in the Islamic Expression," in *Sufi Mystery*, 210-11.
- ²⁶ John Alden Williams, 155-56.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 177-78.
- ²⁸ Ali, 208.
- ²⁹ John Dart, "Islamic Sufis Blend Dance, Poetry," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 Mar. 1981, part I-A.
- ³⁰ From an untitled brochure published by The Sufi Order in the West.
- ³¹ F.X. O'Halloran, "A Catholic Among the Sufis," in *Sufi Mystery*, 26.
- ³² Eddie Noonan, "A Random Sampling," *Update 5* (Aug. 1981): 16.
- ³³ "By saying this I do not mean to imply that there is no evidence in nature for a transcendent, holy God. Rather, human depravity characteristically gravitates toward lower, baser concepts of the divine, and this has resulted in a pervasive intellectual blindness (see, e.g., Rom. 1:18-32).
- ³⁴ For examples, in Judaism we find such mystical traditions as the Cabala (a Gnostic-like theosophy formulated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries) and the Hasidim (a movement founded in eighteenth century Europe), both of which are enjoying a tremendous revival today under the name "New Age Judaism." In Roman Catholicism many of the medieval mystics and mystical movements appear to have been *mystics* indeed—in the Broad Way sense. These include the Brethren of the Common Life, Meister Eckhart, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross. Today, twentieth century mystics such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Merton enjoy large followings. Additionally it should be pointed out that the New Age movement has made extensive inroads into both Roman Catholicism and liberal Protestantism.
- ³⁵ This fact can be documented by a literally endless supply of personal testimonies (see, e.g., *Escape from Darkness*, comp. James R. Adair and Ted Miller, Victor Books). On the other hand, the claim that mysticism is spiritually satisfying is open to challenge. Many who have experienced *both* natural spirituality *and* supernatural spirituality (including this writer) agree that while mystical experiences can be extremely stimulating and pleasurable, over the long term they do not so much *fill* one's spiritual void as *numb* his capacity to feel it. In other words, the Broad Way's answer to the fears, loneliness and other pains and longings of personal existence is depersonalization. The Narrow Way, on the other hand, affirms and fulfills personal existence. It does so, first by showing that the Ultimate Reality is personal, and second, by granting a meaningful relationship with that infinite Person.
- ³⁶ Fatemi, 71.