

THE ORIGINS OF SUFISM

Abū Bakr Sirāj al-Dīn (Martin Lings)

In this revised version of “The Origins of Sufism,” with additional documentation, the article is rich in providing deep insights into the Qur’ānic origins and *taṣawwuf* and its manifestation during the Prophetic era. Citing several verses of the Qur’ān, Shaykh Abū Bakr shows the subtle initial manifestation of *taṣawwuf* in the lives of the Companions. The article is concerned with essentials of *taṣawwuf* and it elaborates on how the remembrance of Allah (*dhikru’Llāh*) and Sufi insistence of following the Path of the Messenger of Allah have remained the unchanging central foundations of Islamic *taṣawwuf*. The article also points out some of the more significant errors in the understanding of *taṣawwuf* by certain Orientalists.

Keywords: Sufism; *taṣawwuf*; Islam; Mystic Path; Making of Islamic Sufism; Early Mystics; Qur’ān and Sufism.

In considering the origins of Sufism—and it is not the origin of the name but of the thing itself which is to be considered here, that is, mysticism in its Islamic form—it is necessary to distinguish its essential features from certain unessential characteristics which it may or may not have. For a brief general definition perhaps we cannot do better than take the two terms *qurb*¹ (nearness to God) and *dhawq*² (taste; that is, direct intellectual intuition) with which al-

1. *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, “Ṭuruq al-ṣufiyya” (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, n.d.), p. 178.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 180. See also Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-*

Abū Bakr Sirāj al-Dīn (24 January 1909-12 May 2005), also known by his original name, Martin Lings, had a unique gift of writing precisely and clearly, but despite this, he was never satisfied with his published works and had the habit of revising them over long periods of time. His widely read *Sīrah*, first published in 1983, is perhaps one of the best examples of this deep involvement with his own text. Every reprint of this exceptional work had subtle revisions. This is also true of “The Origins of Sufism”, which was first published in the *Islamic Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1956): pp. 53-64, and was updated by Shaykh Abū Bakr in 1995 for inclusion in a volume containing his essays; it will be posthumously published by Sohail Academy, Lahore as *Islamic Essays*.

Ghazālī characterizes *taṣawwuf*. The aspiration to ‘nearness’ may be described as an inward fire or as an inward light or as something between the two, according to whether the individual nature in question is more predisposed to spiritual love (*maḥabba*) or spiritual knowledge (*maʿrifa*). Respectively, *dhawq* may be described as a taste of the fragrance of the Divine Beauty, a taste which irresistibly impels the believer to seek to draw near to God; or, since strictly speaking the nearness is already there, it may be described as a taste of the truth that God is *nearer to him than his jugular vein*.³

Essential to Sufism are the doctrine, the grace of *dhawq* (which the doctrine corroborates and clarifies), the spiritual aspiration (which is produced by the doctrine together with an initial degree of *dhawq*, and which gradually increases as the ‘taste’ grows more intense), and all the spiritual practices which constitute the individual effort of the mystic himself.

The composing of mystical treatises or poems has never been an essential aspect of Sufism or of any other form of mysticism. Without belittling the many inspired Sufi writings which have come down to us and which are unquestionably among the great outward glories of Islam, it should be remembered that they are, in relation to the essential, as sparks thrown out by the fire or the light; and it is not every fire which throws out sparks,⁴ nor every light. Moreover, there is the question of time and place to be considered: when the Qurʾān was still being revealed, when the Prophet was still present,

Ghazālī (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1951), pp. 54-61. Mental knowledge even in its highest form, that is, theoretical understanding of the doctrine, is only an indirect perception. The word *dhawq* expresses, by contrast, a direct perception of the mysteries of the next world, and it should be noted that as a translation of *ṣūfī* or *mutaṣawwif*, the word ‘mystic’ is only adequate if used in its original sense, denoting one who perceives, or aspires to perceive, these mysteries. It is used here throughout in this universal sense only, freed from all the narrowing associations by which it has gradually come to be limited in Western Europe. All believers must become mystics sooner or later, in the next life if not in this, and Sufism might be defined as the Islamic way of anticipating the next life in this.

3. Q 50:16.

4. If Nicholson, for example, had kept this in mind, he could never have written of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (21-110/642-728): “*There can be no doubt* [the italics are mine] that his mysticism—if it deserves that name—was of the most moderate type, *entirely lacking* in the glow and exaltation which we find in the saintly woman, Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, with whom legend associates him”; see his *A Literary History of the Arabs*, p. 227. For a most valuable account of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, based on all the available sources, see Louis Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique Musulmane*, rev. ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1954), pp. 174-201.

it was clearly not the time for others to be speaking; nor was it, if one may say so, in accordance with the economy of Providence, that when the mission of the Prophet had been fulfilled, the ensuing silence should be immediately broken;⁵ nor can the first Muslims have been in themselves readily disposed to seek expression for their spiritual experiences. If ever a community was imbued with a sense of the impotence of human utterance, it must have been the community of the Companions and of the generation which came after them. Thus for subsequent Muslim mystics, or, in other words, for those best qualified to make a pronouncement upon Sufism, the absence of first-century mystical treatises has not the least weight in the scale against their conviction that the great Companions were Sufis in all but name; and a Prophet is pre-eminently a mystic, for holiness is nothing other than the fullest realization of

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5. The more explicit and analytical formulations such as those to be found in the Sufi treatises of the third century Hijra and afterwards were providentially reserved for an age when the lapse of time had made men less sharply conscious of the presence, behind them, of the Prophet and his Companions, and when fresh spiritual impetus was called for. Such formulations were also more in accordance with the mental needs of the generations for whom they were made. The inevitable movement from concentrated synthesis to differentiated analysis, which brought about the formation of the four 'Legal Schools' (*madhāhib*) and, on another plane, the definite organization of the Sufi brotherhoods, was in fact bound to produce at the same time a corresponding change in the human soul. Nicholson is referring to this change—which he clearly did not understand—when he says, 'Neither he (the Prophet) nor his hearers perceived, as later Moslems did, that the language of the Koran is often contradictory' (ibid., p. 223). It would have been truer to say that later Muslims were in general less able to make, of two antinomical statements—as for example the Qur'ānic affirmation that man is responsible for his actions and that his actions are predestined—a synthesis through which they might perceive the spiritual truth in question. In other words, serene intellectual activity had given way to feverish mental activity, and it was to meet the needs of this general rationalistic ferment, and also in particular to counteract certain heresies which had sprung from it, that scholastic theology (*kalām*) was developed; and since those who aspired to follow the mystic path were inevitably more mentally dilated than their first-century counterparts had been, it was necessary that the Sufi Shaykhs also should make ample formulations of doctrine in their own domain. It should be added, however, that the Sufis have never set too great a store by these attempts to express what is universally admitted to be inexpressible. 'Take knowledge from the breasts of men, not from words' and 'Whoso knoweth God, his tongue flaggeth' (*man 'arafa Rabbahu kalla lisānuhu*) are among the most often repeated of Sufi sayings.

‘nearness’. But passing for the moment even as far back as the very threshold of Islam, there can be no doubt, that, historically speaking, the roots of Sufism lie in the Prophet’s practice of spiritual retreats⁶ in the cave on Mount Ḥirā’ during the month of Ramadan in the years immediately preceding the first Qur’ānic revelation, a practice which he resumed, if indeed he had ever abandoned it, in the latter part of his life when he used to go into retreat in his Mosque at Medina,⁷ as did also some of the Companions.⁸

The different spiritual practices upon which the Sufic path (*ṭarīqa*) is based may be summed up under the general term *dhikru’-llāh* (remembrance of God), and they have not changed *in any fundamental respect* from the time of the Prophet until the present day. The *dhikr* comprises what is obligatory for all Muslims and what is performed as a voluntary rite (*nāfila*), which includes, in addition to rites in the ordinary sense, such practices as fasting in months other than Ramadan and keeping vigil, every consecrated act being a more or less direct means of remembering God. The Qur’ān uses the word *dhikr* sometimes in this general sense, and sometimes in the more particular sense of *dhikru’-smi’-llāh* (mention of the Name of God), which it enjoins with special insistence. It is this form of *dhikr*, the invocation of the Divine Name Allah, which has always been considered by the Sufis as the most direct means of approach to God. The verse *Invoke in remembrance the Name of thy Lord, and devote thyself to Him with an utter devotion*,⁹ one of the first injunctions received by the Prophet, is in a sense an epitome of Sufi practice, expressing as it does the chief ritual means (*idhkuri’-sma Rabbik*), the whole-hearted effort of the individual soul (*tabattal*) and the end in view (*ilayhi*).¹⁰

6. In virtue of following this practice of the Ḥunafā’, Muḥammad was already, before his mission, a representative of all that was left of the Abrahamic tradition. In other words this practice is a thread of continuity between Abrahamic mysticism and Islamic mysticism.

7. ‘The Prophet was wont to make a spiritual retreat (*Kāna ya’takif*) during the middle ten days of Ramadan. Then, one year, having remained in retreat until the twenty-first night, which was the night preceding the dawn on which he was wont to leave his retreat, he said, “Whoever hath been keeping retreat with me, let him keep it for the last ten days of the month”’ (Bukhārī, *Tarāwīḥ*, 7).

8. In this connection it may be noted that ‘Umar was told by the Prophet to make a spiritual retreat in fulfilment of a vow which he had made as a Jāhilī before entering Islam; see Bukhārī, *Tarāwīḥ*, 22.

9. Q 73:8.

10. Massignon writes: ‘Contrary to the Pharisaical opinion of many *fuqahā’*, an opinion which has been accepted for the last sixty years by many Arabists, I have had to admit, with Margoliouth, that the Qur’ān contains real seeds of mysticism, seeds capable of an autonomous

In addition to the Supreme Name *Allāh*, other Divine Names are also invoked in fulfilment of the injunction *God's are the most Beautiful Names, so call on Him by them*;¹¹ and a *dhikr*, as it were parallel to the invocation, is the recitation of the Qur'ān.

There are also numerous litanies (*awrād*) which consist for the most part of Divine Names¹² or short formulae, interspersed with passages from the Qur'ān.¹³ The repetition of formulae a specific number of times is based on

development without being impregnated from any foreign source' (*La passion d'Al-Hallaj, martyr mystique de l'Islam* [Paris: P. Geuthner, 1922], p. 480). This is refreshing compared with what is often said on the same subject; but it is, to say the least, an understatement. When we read the early Meccan Surahs we are conscious of a small spiritual elite whose lives were utterly dedicated to God and whose intensity of worship reached far beyond the norm. *Flee unto God* (Q 51:50); *Prostrate thyself and draw nigh* (Q 96:19); *Glorify Him the livelong night* (Q 76:26); and *Keep vigil all the night save a little* (Q 73:32) strike the keynote of the period. The path of Islam was still the purely mystical path of doing one's utmost, unalleviated as yet by the establishment of a legal minimum. *Thy Lord knoweth that thou keepest vigil nearly two thirds of the night, or half the night or a third thereof, thou and a group of those that are with thee* (Q 73:20); *Their sides shrink away from their beds, and they call upon their Lord in fear and in longing* (Q 32:16); *They seek His Face* (Q 6:52; 18:29). Such verses as these—and one could go on quoting in the same way at considerable length—would be for the Sufis, even if they had no other criteria, the clearest indication of the full flower of mysticism; for we have here the Divine acknowledgement of whole-hearted and sustained spiritual effort, to which, as they well know, God never fails to respond. For the reasons why a new religion leaps as it were to its spiritual zenith which it attains with relative instantaneousness, and not by gradual development, see Abu Bakr Siraj ed-Din, "The Islamic and Christian Conceptions of the March of Time," *Islamic Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (December 1954): pp. 233-34.

11. Q 7:180. It is no exaggeration to say that calling on the Name of God has been one of the chief practices of the mystics of all the religions that history can account for.
12. Often a sequence of 99 Names is recited in accordance with the *ḥadīth*, 'God hath Ninety-nine Names, He that telleth them (*man aḥsāhā*) shall enter Paradise' (Muslim, *Dhikr*, 2).
13. The *wird* can only be called a later introduction in that its component parts are woven together into one whole, in that it is usually recited with a rosary, which is no more than a convenience, and in that it is prescribed, according to the disciplines of the Sufi orders, for regular daily recitation at certain times, often after the dawn and sunset prayers, regularity being a necessary safeguard against human

aḥādīth such as, ‘Verily each day there is a mist over my heart until I have asked forgiveness of God one hundred times.’¹⁴ It will be sufficient to consider here, by way of example, one of the most widely practiced of these *awrād*, one which, in addition to being the principal *wird* of several different brotherhoods, constitutes the essence of other more elaborate recitations, and represents principles which are fundamental to all mysticism. The first of the three main formulae of this *wird* is in fact the *istighfār*, asking forgiveness of God. The second formula is *al-ṣalāt ‘alā-l-Nabī*, the invocation of blessings and peace upon the Prophet,¹⁵ to which is appended the invocation of blessings and peace upon his Family and Companions. The third formula is an affirmation of *tawḥīd*: ‘There is no god but God, alone, unseconded. His is the Kingdom and His the Praise, and each thing He determineth.’¹⁶

In relation to the first formula, which is a means of purification from faults, the second marks the aspiration to the plenitude of virtue, to the summit of created perfection, affirming the ideal expressed in the verse, *Verily ye have a fair pattern in God’s Apostle*¹⁷, whereas the third formula represents the Transcendent Perfection of the Divinity. The ‘alchemy’ of the second formula may also be understood in the light of those many *aḥādīth* which state that whole-hearted love of the Prophet is an indispensable condition for obtaining faith, as, for example: ‘Not one of you believeth until I am dearer to him than his son and his father and all men together.’¹⁸ It is clear from such formulations

weakness in degenerate times. The various formulae in themselves must have been recited assiduously by the Prophet and many of his Companions, since they are prescribed either by the Qur’ān or in Traditions.

14. Muslim, *Dhikr*, 12; cf. Bukhārī, *Da‘wāt*, 2.

15. Enjoined in Q 33:56. Cf. also the following *aḥādīth*: ‘Of all men he hath most claim upon me on the Day of Resurrection who invoked most blessings upon me’ (Tirmidhī, *Witr*, 21); ‘An Angel came unto me and said: “God saith: None of thy people invoceth blessings upon thee but I invoke blessings upon him tenfold”’ (Dārimī, *Riqāq*, 58); cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 12: 520 §1 7561.

16. This particular arrangement of the Qur’ānic phrases is taken from a *ḥadīth* which says of him who recites the formula two times: ‘None is better than this to bring before God except a man who reciteth it yet more often’ (Bukhārī, *Da‘wāt*, 66).

17. Q 33:21.

18. Muslim, *Īmān*, 16. Cf. also those *aḥādīth* which mention love of the Prophet together with love of God, as, for example: ‘He in whom are three things hath found thereby the sweetness of faith: he unto whom God and His Apostle are dearer than aught else besides, and who, loving another, loveth him only for the sake of God, and who hateth that he

that *Īmān* in its original sense far transcends the current conception of faith. Moreover, the Prophet's manner of expression, inasmuch as he speaks of 'the sweetness of faith' (*ḥalāwatu-l-īmān*) and uses elsewhere such phrases as 'he hath tasted the flavor of faith' (*dhāqa ṭa'ma-l-īmān*),¹⁹ shows that he is speaking of a degree of direct intellectual perception of Truth. Now in every act of perception the object perceived is reflected in the eye as in a mirror; and the gist of the above-quoted Traditions is that the imperfect self-centred soul is only capable, at the most, of vague and fragmentary reflection. The purpose of the reiterated invocation of blessings upon the Prophet is, to bring about a shifting of the center of one's consciousness from the limited ego to the universal soul²⁰ which he typifies. Only this soul, of which every part is, after its own fashion,²¹ a mirror for the Truth, can be the perfect organ of faith. Thus the second formula of this *wird* is a means of attaining to the highest degree of faith accessible to the created being as such; and the third formula stands for the Faith which God, the Supreme *Mu'min*, has in His Own Divinity—Faith to which the creature can only attain through utter extinction (*fanā*).²²

should return unto disbelief after God hath saved him from it even as he hateth that he should be thrust into the fire' (Muslim, *Īmān*, 15; Bukhārī, *Īmān*, 13).

19. Muslim, *Īmān*.

20. It is only from this universal center of consciousness, from which oneself and one's neighbor are both viewed objectively, that it is possible to achieve the spiritual altruism that accords with the saying of Christ: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself', and with the *ḥadīth*: 'Not one of you believeth until he loveth for his brother what he loveth for himself' (Muslim, *Īmān*, 17).

21. Faith is not only in the intelligence but also in the character; or, in other words, it may be said that the whole psychic substance of the spiritual man is permeated by his intelligence, so that he has faith not only through what he knows but also through what he is. Thus, for example, the virtue of mercy in the soul is as an eye which perceives the Mercy of God, whereas the virtue of patience perceives His Eternity, and the virtue of purity His Holiness.

22. The words addressed by Kharrāz (d. 286 AH) to the Prophet: 'Forgive me, but love of God hath made me forget love of thee', and similar utterances by Rābi'a and other Sufis—to which may be added the words spoken by Abu Bakr at the death of the Prophet—are not a denial of the necessity of loving the Prophet, nor a belittlement of the importance of invoking blessings upon him. They are an expression of *tawḥīd*, and mark, as it were, a passage from the second to the third formula of the *wird*, a passage, moreover, which everyone must make. It should be noted, nonetheless, that Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī, who went to greater lengths than Kharrāz in his expressions of *tawḥīd*, said from

One of the chief aids to concentration during the *dhikr* has always been solitude reinforced by fasting, that is, the already mentioned spiritual retreat (*i'tikāf* or *khalwa*). Another aid, the complement of this, is its opposite pole, namely the performance of the *dhikr* in the company of others, that is, in the 'session of remembrance' (*majlis al-dhikr*), which takes its name from such *aḥādīth* as: 'God—Blessed and Exalted is He—hath Angels, a glorious company of travelers, who seek out the sessions of remembrance, and when they find men assembled that they may remember God they stay with them and make a canopy of their wings one over another until they fill all the space that is between them and the lowest heaven.'²³

This summary account²⁴ of the chief spiritual practices of the Sufis may be taken as a commentary on the words of Junayd: 'All the mystic paths (*ṭuruq*)

another point of view: 'If a single atom of the Prophet manifested itself to creation, naught that is beneath the Throne would endure it' (Kalabādhī, *Ta'arruf*, Ch. 24; in Arberry's translation, *The Doctrine of the Sūfīs* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977], p. 54). It is impossible not to be misled by the writings of the mystics if one is not prepared for this continual shifting from one point of view to another, each standpoint being adopted with that whole-heartedness of which the mystic alone is capable, and often being affirmed with the tone of the absolute, as if no other point of view were possible.

23. Muslim, *Dhikr*, 8. Cf. Bukhārī, *Da'wāt*, 68. While there have been no fundamental changes of spiritual practice, there have inevitably been certain developments as regards unessential features of the communal *dhikr*. An extreme example of such development is to be found in the ritual dance of the Mawlawi dervishes; but it must be remembered that the subjection of the body to a rhythmic motion is no more than an auxiliary; its purpose is simply to facilitate that which constitutes the *dhikr* in the fullest sense, namely the concentration of all the faculties of the soul upon the Divine Truth, represented by the Supreme Name or by the *Shahāda*, or some other formula which is uttered aloud or silently by the dancers. We do not know exactly what the Companions did in their 'circle of remembrance' (*ḥalaqatu-l-dhikr*) (see Muslim, *Dhikr*). There can be little doubt that their *majālis* were more informal and less organized than those of the subsequent mystics. Nonetheless, in virtue of the genius for rhythm which the Companions, inasmuch as they were Arabs, undoubtedly possessed, it is difficult to believe that they did not make some spontaneous rhythmic movements of the body while repeating the words of the *dhikr*.
24. Despite—or perhaps because of—its summary nature, it may claim to give a far sounder impression than do many other more detailed and encyclopaedic accounts, in which rare practices, even some which are condemned by the great majority of Sufis, are listed side by side and on an equal footing with practices of universal importance.

are utterly barred except to him who followeth in the steps of the Apostle', 'Our school (*madhhab*) is bound up with the principles of the Book and the Wont', and 'This our lore (*ilm*) is anointed with the sayings of God's Apostle.'²⁵

The Qur'ān was revealed as a means of grace for the whole Islamic community, not only for an elect, nor yet only the generality of Muslims. It has therefore, providentially, an aspect of unfathomable synthesis in virtue of which it is like a vast treasury, both as a whole and also in single verses (*āyāt*, miraculous signs) a treasury from which everyone is free to carry off as much as he has strength to bear. The entire path of the mystics lies virtually in the words, *Lead us along the straight path*,²⁶ and *Verily we are for God, and verily unto Him are we returning*,²⁷ and *Prostrate thyself and draw nigh*²⁸—words which are only limited in so far as the intelligence of him who recites them is limited. The same immense possibilities lie ready to be opened up by such words as *...that they may increase in faith upon faith*²⁹ and *God leadeth to His Light whom He will*.³⁰ Moreover, the single words *īmān* and *nūr* as also *yaqīn* (certainty), comprise a boundless range of spiritual vision, just as a boundless vista for the vision is comprised in the words *ākhirā* (the Hereafter) and *janna* (Paradise); and side by side with the Qur'ān, confirming and clarifying this vista, the Night Journey of the Prophet, which is for Islam the prototype of the mystic path, actualizes the whole hierarchy, from the state of earthly existence to the Divine Presence Itself.

In speaking to his closest followers, Christ said: 'It is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.'³¹ In speaking to the whole community of Muslims, the Qur'ān generalizes the same idea in the words: *We exalt in degree whom We will; and above each one that hath knowledge is one that knoweth more*;³² and just as Christ spoke to the multitude in parables, the Qur'ān presents great mysteries by means of aphorisms which

25. Qushayrī, *Risāla* (Cairo: Dār Jawāmi' al-Kilām, 1940), p. 20.

26. Q 1:6.

27. Q 2:156.

28. Q 96:19.

29. Q 98:47.

30. Q 24:35.

31. Matthew 13:11.

32. Q 12:76. 'Alī said: 'Relate traditions unto men according to their knowledge. Desire ye that they should belie God and His Apostle?' (Bukhārī, *Ilm*, 50); and Abū Hurayra said: 'I have treasured in my memory two stores of knowledge which I had from God's Apostle. One of them I have divulged, but if I divulged the other, my throat would be cut' (Ibid., 42).

are too elliptic to 'cause offence', but which have miraculously, at the same time, an overwhelming directness, as, for example, the already quoted words: *We are nearer to him than his jugular vein*, and also: *Wheresoe'er ye turn, there is the Face of God*,³³ and *There is no god but He: all things are perishable but His Face*.³⁴ There is no question here of any divergence of interpretation; the difference between exoterism and esoterism³⁵ as regards such statements as these is in depth and fullness of interpretation, as between one who takes them 'as a manner of speaking', allowing them to pass over his head, and one who takes them with all seriousness, meditating deeply upon them, and following them up to their imperative conclusions. Such also is the difference between exoterism and esoterism as regards the capacity to take in the significance of the Divine Names. The same applies to many Traditions, such as the *ḥadīth qudsi*: 'My slave seeketh unremittingly to draw nigh unto Me with devotions of his free will (*nawāfil*) until I love him; and when I love him, I am the Hearing wherewith he heareth, and the Sight wherewith he seeth, and the Hand wherewith he smiteth, and the Foot whereon he Walketh.'³⁶

Over and against the opinion of most Orientalists, according to whom the great spiritual lights of Islam scarcely begin to appear before the third

33. Q 2:115.

34. Q 27:88.

35. Generally speaking, the Qur'ān represents the faithful as one long-drawn-out hierarchy consisting of innumerable degrees, but on occasion these degrees are resolved into two groups, the higher of which may clearly be termed esoteric in relation to the lower. We have seen that the Sūrat al-Muzammil (Q 73:20) makes a distinction between the generality of believers and a small nucleus which followed the practices of the Prophet with special fidelity, *ṭā'ifatun mina-lladhīna ma' ak* (a group of those that are with thee). In the Sūrat al-Wāqī'a (Q 56:8-10), the higher and the lower group of the faithful are named respectively *as-sābiqūn* (the foremost, who are further described as *al-muqarrabūn*, those brought near to God), and *aṣḥābu-l-yamīn* (those of the right), the rest of mankind being accounted for in a third group, *aṣḥābu-l-shimāl* (those of the left, the damned). The Sūrat al-Muṭaffifīn (Q 83:7, 18, 21) makes an analogous threefold division: *al-muqarrabūn*, *al-abrār* (the righteous), and *al-fujjār* (the iniquitous). Similarly the Sūrat al-Insān (Q 76: 4-6) makes a distinction between *'ibādu-llāh* (the slaves of God), *al-abrār*, and *al-kāfirūn* (the infidels). Sacred texts, however, cannot be subjected to any system, and it would be wrong to consider these three threefold divisions of mankind as corresponding to each other exactly. For a fuller consideration of the terms in question see Chapter 18 of my *Book of Certainty* (London: Islamic Texts Society; Reissue edition, 1996).

36. Bukhārī, *Riḳāq*, 37.

generation,³⁷ there stands the opinion of Muslims in general and of the Sufis in particular that starting from the spiritual summit represented by the Prophet and his Companions there could be no question of further advancement but only of falling away, and that although there have been many holy men and women scattered throughout the later generations, sanctity has never been so general in Islam as it was at the beginning. Thus Ibn Khaldūn says, in speaking of the mystic path:

Our great ancestors, that is, the Companions and the Successors and the generation which followed them, ever held this path to be the path of truth and right guidance. It is based on unfailing perseverance in worship, utter devotion to All-Highest God, turning away from the adornments of this world, renunciation of what most men seek after in the way of pleasure and dignity, and isolating oneself from all mankind in spiritual retreat (*khalwa*) for the sake of worship. Now these were the general practices of the Companions and the Muslims of old (*al-salaf*). Then in the second generation and afterwards, when worldliness spread and men tended to become more and more bound up with the ties of this life, those who dedicated themselves to the worship of God were distinguished from the rest by the title *al-Ṣūfiyya* (Sufis) and *al-Mutaṣawwifa* (those who aspire to be Sufis).³⁸

This passage is well known to Western scholars, and one might have expected them to pay more heed to it. Still more, one might expect them to be guided, in what concerns Islamic mysticism, by those whom they all admit to be its masters. Yet the 'official' Orientalist thesis³⁹ runs directly counter to

37. Even Massignon, in speaking of the second generation (*al-Tābiʿūn*), says: 'The asceticism of this period is still very simple; the interiorization of the cult is still rudimentary; at the most one finds evidence of abstinences, spiritual retreats and supererogatory prayers' (*Essai*, p. 165). This brings us to the very heart of the divergence in question: for the *Mutaṣawwif* the words 'at the most...spiritual retreats' amount to a contradiction in terms, since he knows that the *khalwa* or *i'tikāf* is of infinite possibility.

38. Abū Zayd ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, ed. Khalīl Shaḥāda (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1408/1988), chapter 17, *fī ʿilm al-taṣawwuf*.

39. The accumulated bias of four centuries of humanism, aggravated by one of evolutionism, coupled with the fact that from the third generation of Islam onwards there is a gradual increase of outspokenness on the part of the mystics, makes it difficult for most western scholars not to see in this crescendo a kind of progress, despite what they may know, in theory, of the 'goldenness' of silence, and despite the opinions of the Sufis themselves.

the convictions of Muḥāsibī, for example, Tustarī, Junayd, Ḥallāj,⁴⁰ Sarrāj, Makkī, Kalābādhī, Qushayrī, Hujwīrī, Ghazālī, Ibn al-‘Arabī, not to speak of those who came before and after them. Not only are the heads of the Sufis bowed before the Prophet, but also they are reverently devoted to the first four Caliphs and the other great Companions,⁴¹ upon whom they daily invoke a multitude of blessings, tracing back through them to the Prophet their mystic lineage,⁴² and looking back to them as to patterns of spiritual perfection and

40. ‘The lights of all prophethood shone forth from his [Muḥammad’s] light...

His existence was before the nothingness (which preceded creation); his name was before the Pen. All sciences are as a drop from his sea and all wisdoms as a sip from his river, and all time is but as an hour of his enduring. In him is Reality (*al-ḥaqq*) and in him is Truth (*al-ḥaqīqa*). He is the first in Union and the last in Prophethood; the inward in Truth and the outward in Knowledge’ (Ḥallāj, *Ṭā-Sīn al-Sirāj*).

41. Especially to the six who, together with the first four Caliphs, make up *al-‘ashara al-mubashshara*, the ten who were given the good news of Paradise by the Prophet in their lifetime. Tustarī maintained that love of the Companions was a legal obligation. The words of Junayd: ‘The noblest utterance upon *Tawḥīd* is the saying of Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq: “Glory be to Him who hath made for His creatures no means of attaining unto Knowledge of Him save through their impotence to attain (in themselves) unto that Knowledge”’ is quoted by Sarrāj, Qushayrī, and Hujwīrī. The fact that Ibn al-‘Arabī finds fault with this particular formulation (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ch. II) does not alter his general attitude. Moreover, in a Qur’ānic commentary attributed to him (Bulaq, 1283), which, if not directly his, is none the less the work of his followers, the affirmation that of the saints of the highest category (*as-sābiqūn*) there are *many among the earlier generations and few among the later generations* (Q 56:13-14) is glossed: ‘Many among the earliest members of this community, that is, those who saw the Prophet and were born in time to benefit from the spiritual vigor of the Revelation during his life, and those of the second generation who were born shortly after his death and who saw his Companions, whereas the later generations are those between whom and the Revelation “much time had elapsed so that their hearts were hardened”.’

42. In his *Essai*, Massignon points out ‘defects’ in some of the usually accepted chains of spiritual descent from the Prophet; nonetheless, this book serves above all to affirm the unbroken continuity of Islamic mysticism by showing that in every generation there were spiritual masters, each with a group of disciples. It also serves, incidentally, to furnish complete historical ‘chains’ for the first three centuries of Islam, as, for example: al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī > Thābit al-Bunūnī > Bakr ibn Khunays > Ma‘rūf al-Karkhī > Sari al-Saqatī > Junayd. These last three links are in the chain most often given by the Sufis

to their times as to the Golden Age of Islamic mysticism.

When the Jews criticized Christ's disciples for not fasting, he replied: 'Can the children of the bride-chamber fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.'⁴³ These words express the universal truth that during a period of Divine intervention spiritual conditions upon earth are quite abnormal as compared with the general conditions of the times which immediately precede and follow that intervention. It is true that the special conditions which marked the presence of Christ on earth differed in secondary details⁴⁴ from those which marked the twenty-two years of the Prophet's mission. But in their fundamental privileges both periods were alike. *It is not God's wont that He should send a folk astray after He hath guided them until He hath made clear unto them that against which they should be upon their guard.*⁴⁵ Until a new religion is firmly established, the people for whom it has been revealed are safeguarded against serious error. It is true that there is spiritual guidance at all times for those who seek it; but at a time of Prophetic mission guidance is thrust upon many who do not seek it,⁴⁶ whereas for those who do seek it there is guidance upon guidance. Now certain factors such as asceticism (*zuhd*) and reliance upon God (*tawakkul*) enter into every mystic path. But although a change of spiritual conditions will not eliminate one of these constants, it may bring about a change of predominance from one to the other. It is clear that

themselves. No less historical are the opening links, 'Alī (d. 40) > al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110) > Ḥabīb al-'Ajamī (d. 156) > Dā'ūd al-Ṭā'ī (d. 165) > Ma'rūf etc. The criticisms to which these links have been subjected by Dhahabī and others are purely conjectural. Moreover, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (*Ithāf al-firqa fi rafw al-khirqā* in *al-Ḥāwī li 'l-fatāwā*, II, p. 102) has most convincingly shown that Ḥasan al-Baṣrī had ample opportunity of receiving spiritual instruction from 'Alī. Massignon maintains (p. 179), contrary to the generally accepted opinion, that Ḥasan al-Baṣrī was not the direct disciple of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (at whose death he was barely 20) but of 'Imrān ibn Ḥusayn al-Khuzā'ī (d. 52). However that may be, al-Ḥasan could have met seventy of the men of Badr; and though he never saw 'the two lords of the elders of the people of Paradise', he was for many years the contemporary of 'the two lords of the youth of the people of Paradise'.

43. Mark II:19; cf. Matthew IX:15; Luke V:34.

44. To take the nearest example, they differed as regards fasting.

45. Q 9:115.

46. The abnormal strength of the pull of truth at such a time measures out the full extent of the perversity of those who resist it. Hence the extreme guilt of such persons as Abū Lahab and Abū Jahl.

at a time of guidance upon guidance, a time of acute consciousness that *there is no living creature but He graspeth it by its forelock*,⁴⁷ the virtue of *tawakkul* will be in such evidence⁴⁸ as to impose itself upon *zuhd*, which will thus tend to take the form not so much of deliberately regular ascetic practices as of reliance upon God to indicate, through the course of events and through other signs, what sacrifices He demands.⁴⁹ The life of one who takes part in the founding of a new religion is, in the very nature of things, a tissue of renunciations.

The aspect of the mystic path which concerns individual effort is summed

47. Q 11:36.

48. The Companions of Christ, who did not deliberately fast, were told, on being sent out to preach, 'Take nothing for your journey, neither staves, nor scrip, neither bread nor money; neither have two coats apiece' (Luke ix:3); and the same virtue of *tawakkul*, in a more Islamic mode, was demanded again and again of the Companions of the Prophet.

49. This must not be taken to imply that there was no regular asceticism among the Companions apart from the fulfilment of the obligations of the *Shari'a*. But they were clearly less free to plan their lives in advance than were other generations. Also it was required of them that they should partake to a certain extent in the function of the Prophet. Since their actions were precedents, they were not free to go beyond certain bounds, just as they were not free to affirm openly anything which, according to the limited intelligence of some believers, would be misunderstood and might cause a deviation. It would be wrong to say, however, that whereas the later saints of Islam unfurled the standard of their sanctity the first saints were unable to do so. The standard of sanctity is always unfurled, but it may take many different forms. The first four Caliphs, for example, have left upon history the indelible impression of men who, while fulfilling the worldly obligations imposed on them by Providence, had realized the Prophet's own extreme objectivity and detachment as expressed in his saying, 'What have I to do with this world? Verily I and this world are as a rider and a tree beneath which he taketh shelter. Then he goeth his way and leaveth it behind him' (Ibn Mājah, *Zuhd*, 3). The impression of men who succeeded pre-eminently in fulfilling his injunction, 'Be in this world as a stranger or a passer-by' (Bukhārī, *Riqāq*, 3); 'pre-eminently', because, although it is difficult to generalize, have we not also, from that generation, an unmistakable impression of psychic compactness, of close-knit integration of the soul's elements? This does not mean that some of the later Sufis did not achieve a full-souled sincerity equal to that of the greatest of the Companions, but it may well be that, living in a far more disintegrated age, they had a greater struggle to bring in the 'lost sheep' of the soul—*wa 'llāhu a'lam*.

up in the already quoted *ḥadīth qudsī*: ‘My slave seeketh unremittingly to draw nigh unto Me with devotions of his free will until I love him.’ Mysticism is in fact nothing other than the art of pleasing God,⁵⁰ since to succeed in this means an unveiling of the mystery of nearness.

To earn the right to say, as did the Companions of Christ and of the Prophet, ‘We are the helpers of God’ (*naḥnu anṣāru’Llāh*)⁵¹ clearly means pleasing God in an exceptionally high degree.

The Sufis of the second and third centuries knew that the Companions of the Prophet had gone forward upon the crest of a great spiritual wave and that they themselves were in the backwash of that wave, at a time of general disintegration, of cosmic reaction against ‘guidance upon guidance’, when the normal conditions of the age had resumed their course quite literally ‘with a vengeance’. Struggling against this current, weighed down by the rest of the community, they went to lengths of asceticism hitherto unknown in Islam.⁵² Yet they none the less envied the owners of such *nawāfīl* as the initial migration from Makka and fighting at the Battle of Badr. The following *ḥadīth* is often quoted in their treatises: ‘How knowest thou that God hath not looked upon the men of Badr and said: “Do what ye will, for I have forgiven you”?’⁵³

Laylatu-l-Qadr is better than a thousand months, inasmuch as the Angels and the Spirit descend therein,⁵⁴ and the superiority of that night may be extended, in a certain measure, to the whole period of the Qur’ān’s revelation⁵⁵ and,

50. This is, considering all its implications, a full definition of what Sufis—but not always Orientalists—mean by *taṣawwuf*.

51. Q 3:52; 61:14.

52. It must be remembered that even those of them who had come to the end of the mystic path could not share the universal Prophetic responsibility in the way that the Companions had done, for the principles of Islam were already firmly established and the precedents set. Nonetheless, apart from their immediate responsibility to their disciples, they were not without their function as regards the community as a whole. Yaḥyā b. Ma‘ādh said, ‘The hunger of the penitents is an essay, the hunger of the ascetics is policy and the hunger of the saints (*al-ṣiddīqūn*) is bounty’ (Qushayrī, *Risāla*, p. 17). The extreme asceticism of many of the later great Sufis in Islam was a bountiful affirmation—much needed at a time of spiritual shortcoming—of the transcendence of the next world over this.

53. Muslim, *Faḍā’il al-Ṣaḥāba*, 36.

54. Q 97:3-4.

55. Umm Ayman was seen in tears and was asked if she was weeping for the death of the Prophet. She replied: ‘Not for him do I weep. Know I not that he hath gone to that which is better for him than this world? But I

analogously, to the whole period of any other Prophetic mission. In such times it is 'natural' that the boundaries between Heaven and earth should be much less rigorously defined and that the earth should lie more open to the descent of spiritual influence,⁵⁶ which means, inversely, that Heaven is more open to human aspiration, the two great outward signs⁵⁷ of this mutual receptivity being, as far as Islam is concerned, the descent of the Qur'ān and the Night Journey. The Companions of the Prophet—and the same must apply to the Companions of other Prophets—lived in an atmosphere that was vibrant with spirituality, an atmosphere of 'sober intoxication', in virtue of which mysticism was too much of a norm to have a special name. Hujwīrī quotes

weep for the tidings of heaven (*akhbār al-samā'*) that have been cut off from us' (Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* IV:127). These words clearly refer not only to the Qur'ān itself but also to the pageant of tidings that came to the Companions through the *aḥādīth*, general tidings as in the Prophet's descriptions of Paradise, to which a whole book is devoted in most of the canonical collections, and particular ones as in such sayings as 'For three doth Paradise long, for 'Alī, 'Ammār, and Salmān' (Tirmidhī, *Manāqib*, 33), and 'Shall I not be abashed before a man [Uthmān] at whose purity the Angels themselves are abashed?' (Muslim, *Faḍā'il al-Ṣaḥāba*, 26), and in his answers to questions as in the following: 'The mother of Ḥāritha ibn Surāqa came unto the Prophet and said, "O Prophet of God, wilt thou not tell me of Ḥāritha"—now Ḥāritha had been slain on the day of Badr, smitten by an arrow that came none knew from whence—"so that if he is in Paradise I may bear my loss with patience, and if not, I may do penance for him by weeping." The Prophet said: "O Mother of Ḥāritha, in Paradise are many gardens, and verily thy son hath gained the all-highest: *al-Firdaws*"' (Bukhārī, *Jihād*, 14).

56. One might almost say that there is a certain normality in, for example, the cry of Anas ibn al-Naḍr as he advanced to his death at the Battle of Uḥud: 'Paradise! By the Lord of Naḍr, I scent the perfume of Paradise coming from the other side of Uḥud' (Ibid., 12).
57. There was also a profusion of other lesser signs, for it is a 'scientific' necessity that during the mission of a Prophet the nearness of Heaven should cause the natural laws that govern the state of earthly existence to be continually eclipsed; and the canonical books of *aḥādīth* do in fact record a continual flow of wonders, great and small. A curious reason sometimes given by Western scholars—and westernized Orientals—for sweeping aside all those miracles accepted by Bukhārī, Muslim, and others is that the Prophet himself disclaimed—so they say—any supernatural powers. It is true that the Qur'ān bids him tell the Quraysh that he cannot perform the particular wonders they demanded of him. But it is totally untrue, for obvious reasons, that he ever denied the power of God to work a miracle at his hands.

Abū al-Fushanjī (d. 348) as having said: 'Today *taṣawwuf* is a name without a reality but formerly it was a reality without a name,' and Hujwīrī himself adds, 'In the times of the Companions and their successors—may God have mercy on them!—this name did not exist but the reality thereof was in every one.'⁵⁸

Dhūn-Nūn al-Miṣrī said: 'The repentance of the generality is from sins, whereas the repentance of the elect (*al-khawāṣṣ*) is from heedlessness (*ghafla*).'⁵⁹ Spiritual vigilance, the opposite of *ghafla*, was forced on the Companions both by the hopeful and dreadful expectancy of further Revelation and by the sense of being doubly scrutinized, not only inasmuch as no detail escapes the Divine Omniscience, but also in that a special intervention was being made on their behalf,⁶⁰ as was demonstrated to them again and again by verses which bore directly upon their lives, both public and private, as well as by the march of events. Also, apart from such particular verses, considering the Qur'ān as a whole, it must be remembered that no less a thing than the very establishment of Islam depended upon the force of the impact of the Revelation upon those who received it. Therefore it may be concluded that the Revelation took that particular form which, of all others, was most calculated to move that particular generation of Arabs;⁶¹ and since no two generations are exactly alike, it may be said—generally speaking—that no later generation has quite equaled the Companions as regards perfect receptivity to the Qur'ān. Without too much insisting on this last point, we should none the less remember that no later Muslim souls have been subjected to hearing the newly revealed verses from the mouth of the Prophet himself, or from one who had just heard them from the Prophet. It is understandable that many of the Companions would continually throw themselves down upon their faces, weeping; it is also understandable that such a generation did not need an amply formulated doctrine of *fanā'* (extinction).

Besides the Revelation and other supernatural signs, there is the miracle

58. Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, Nicholson's translation (NY: Pir Press, 1999), p. 44.

59. Qushayrī, *Risāla*, p. 9.

60. The Prophet was told, *Verily thou art beneath Our Eyes* (Q 52:48), just as Noah had been told to build the ark *beneath Our Eyes* (Q 11:37). The virtue of *iḥsān* as defined in the *ḥadīth Jibrīl*: 'Worship thy Lord as if thou sawest Him; for if thou seest Him not, verily He seeth thee' (Muslim, *Īmān*, 1), has always been the very compass of Sufī orientation, and it is clear that conditions can never be so generally favorable for realizing that virtue as at a time when everything conspires to proclaim the truth 'Verily He seeth thee'.

61. Or that Providence caused to be born into the world at that time and place a nucleus of men preeminently fitted to receive the Qur'ān.

of nature itself to be considered. This is shared alike by the mystics of all religions, and has always been one of their most trusted stepping-stone to spiritual vision.⁶² But there is one 'sign' of nature, the highest of all, which is witnessed only by those who are privileged to live at one of the great cyclic moments of history. Apart from the function of a Prophet as transmitter of Revelation, and as an immediate oracle for the solution of every spiritual problem, it can be no light thing to stand in the presence of one who has been providentially endowed with all-surpassing beauty and majesty of soul and body that he may be the magnetic center of a new religion, the presence of one who is *'alā khuluqin 'azīm...*⁶³

In short the life of the Companions was a series of spiritual impacts for which there is no counterpart in later years, and to which the nearest equivalent *in effect* is to be found in the regular disciplines comprised within the meaning of the term *Taṣawwuf*.

62. Passionate love of nature was one of the great qualities of the pre-Islamic Arabs, and it would seem that the immediate purpose of some of the most overwhelming passages of the Qur'ān, specifically and searchingly addressed in many cases to those endowed with intellectual intuition (*ūlu 'l-abṣār*, *ūlu 'l-albāb*, and the like) was to bring to perfection, in the best of those Arabs, the rare qualifications which they already virtually possessed for reading the book of nature, or in other words, it was to enable their passion to burn up with the flame of spiritual recognition of the mysteries which lay behind *the signs on the horizons*.

63. Qur'ān 68:4.