



Ibn 'Arabi, a Sufi for All Ages.

THE
SHAMBHALA GUIDE TO
SUFISM

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1

What Is Sufism?

*Go, soar with Plato to th' empyreal sphere,
To the first good, first perfect, and first fair;
Or tread the mazy round his followers trod,
And quitting sense call imitating God;
As Eastern priests in giddy circles run,
And turn their heads to imitate the Sun.
Go, teach Eternal Wisdom how to rule—
And turn into thyself, and be a fool!*

—ALEXANDER POPE, *ESSAY ON MAN* (1734), 2:23–30

“Dervish” and “Fakir”: The Outsider’s View of Sufism

THE SUBJECT OF SUFISM is difficult to approach. Like any other complex of non-European religious phenomena, what we today call Sufism was not a primary object of interest to Europeans before modern times. It is only during the past two centuries that Europeans (and Americans) turned their attention to the religions of the world as a subject worth investigating seriously. The very concept of religion that they took for granted was in large part based on their understanding of Christianity, particularly of the Protestant variety. The European interest in non-Christian religions grew out of the situation of world conquest and colonialism which became the chief policy goals of European nations. Colonial administrators needed to

know something about the religion of “the natives” in order to rule over them effectively. Scholarship on these religions was carried out by specialists in the languages and cultures of the East—Orientalists, who produced many volumes of studies and translations dealing with Oriental religions. For Americans today, *Oriental* is a quaint term for what we now call Asian, a term associated primarily with China and Japan; we forget that for Europe, the closest region of the East lay in the domains of the Turks, the Arabs, and the Persians. Considerable debate has raged in recent years about the politics of Oriental scholarship, particularly since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978. Some still defend the Orientalist enterprise as a pure and disinterested search for knowledge, while others contend that Orientalists have been accomplices in colonial oppression. Without advocating a simplistic solution to this debate, I would like to point out that scholars who work on non-European studies, particularly in relation to cultures of the Middle East, sooner or later find that their studies have political relevance. The news media, Euro-American foreign policy officials, and heads of Middle Eastern and Asian governments all make use of religious terms and concepts, often for the crudest of political reasons. Studies produced by Euro-American scholars are read with interest in Middle Eastern and Asian countries. The study of Sufism is no different. For this reason, I would like to analyze the terminology that has been used for Sufism, both in European and non-European contexts, with particular attention to the rhetorical implications of disapproval or acceptance that characterize each term. In this way it will be possible to bring out the conflicting tendencies that underlie the modern debate about Sufism.

The beginnings of the modern study of Sufism lie in the colonial period (roughly 1750–1950), when many of the basic concepts and categories that govern our understanding of the term were first invented. Since the very concept of Sufism is hotly contested among both Muslims and non-Muslims today, it is important first of all to

examine briefly the historical development of the European study of Sufism, in order to disentangle the issues underlying the current debate. The modern concept of Sufism emerged from a variety of European sources, including travelers’ accounts of exotic lands and Orientalist constructions of Sufism as a sect with a nebulous relation to Islam. When this picture of Sufism is compared with the internal documentation of Sufi tradition, a number of mismatches appear. Outsider terminology for Sufism stressed the exotic, the peculiar, and behavior that diverges from modern European norms; in the context of colonialism, this terminology emphasized the dangers of fanatic resistance to European rule.

The two terms that best sum up early European attitudes to Sufism are *fakir* (Arabic *faqir*) and *dervish* (the Turkish pronunciation of Persian *darvish*). Both words mean more or less the same: *faqir* is the Arabic word for “poor man,” and *dervish* (probably derived from a term meaning “standing by the door”) is the Persian equivalent. European travelers from the sixteenth century onward have given incidental descriptions of dervishes as mendicants equivalent to Catholic monks or friars, known for their solitary way of life. For Protestants, this comparison alone was enough to convict the dervishes of a gross religious error. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, dervishes became known in a new and more sensational way. European observers, particularly those traveling in Ottoman territories, made much of the groups of dervishes who could be seen publicly performing their rituals. These groups now became known as the dancing, whirling, and howling dervishes—terms that reflect their most obvious external behaviors; in the absence of any context or explanation, the Europeans could only view these as exotic Oriental customs. In the sarcastic verses quoted above from Alexander Pope, the “Eastern priests,” who “in giddy circles run, / And turn their heads to imitate the Sun,” are undoubtedly the whirling dervishes, members of the Sufi order known in Turkey as the Mevlevi. Pope obviously regarded them as deluded followers of Plato,

insofar as they were believed to reject the body for the sake of the soul. Books written by travelers and diplomats, such as *The Dervishes; or, Oriental Spiritualism*, written in 1868 by American diplomat and translator John P. Brown, featured illustrations of the strange customs of dervishes as a staple of the wonders of the Orient (see figure 2, pages 6–7).

The term *faqir* has a more complicated history, because Persian-writing officials of the Mughal empire in India used the term to describe non-Muslim ascetics, such as yogis, along with Sufi ascetics and wayfarers. The British inherited this terminology when they conquered most of India, and in nineteenth-century English, *fakir* (or *fakier*) was used almost exclusively for Hindu ascetics, whether of the organized monastic fraternities or those whom the British described as “wandering rogues.” The accidental resemblance of the term to the English word *faker* seems to have encouraged the impression that these ascetics were all frauds and mountebanks.

In contrast to these outsiders’ impressions, in their original contexts, both *dervish* and *fakir* were terms that signified spiritual poverty, being poor in relation to God, and hence being dependent upon him. As in other religious traditions, poverty for the Sufis was a sign of turning away from the world and focusing on the divine reality. “Poverty is my pride,” the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said. Yet the reports of travelers concerning the fakirs and dervishes of the East created a totally different portrait of bizarre behavior that was already a cultural icon over a century ago. Popular American songs of the nineteenth century refer to the dancing dervish as an image of wild and frantic activity. Magazine cartoons today still preserve the image of the fakir lying on a bed of nails. Travelers’ reports were based on fragmentary information, so that the fakir or dervish might sometimes appear to be a solitary figure but at other times was part of a strange brotherhood with peculiar rituals. To be sure, the negative portrait of the dervish had its analogues in some Muslim countries, such as Persia, where the rise of Shi’ism put organized Sufism into disrepute.

In the nineteenth century, European colonial rule over Muslim countries began in earnest. The curiosity of travelers about solitary fakirs or groups of dervishes engaged in strange rituals was superseded by the more pressing concerns of colonial administrators. The indigenous aristocratic elites of Mughal India, Mamluk Egypt, Algeria, and Java were being displaced by British, French, and Dutch colonial bureaucracies. Centers of traditional learning that had been dependent on the patronage of Muslim rulers lost their support. In many Muslim regions, the Sufi orders, often referred to as brotherhoods or confreries by Europeans, were the only local organizations to remain intact after the onset of colonial rule. In North Africa, French officials paid close attention to “marabouts” (from Arabic *murabit*, a resident in a Sufi lodge known as a *ribat*), fearing charismatic leaders who might organize local tribes. In places like the Indian Punjab, the descendants of Sufi saints were caretakers of what had become popular pilgrimage sites, and the British concocted a strategy of co-opting them into the system as influential landlords. In other cases, Sufi leaders who had extensive followings led resistance to European conquest. In Algeria, the Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir fought the French for years until his defeat in 1847; in his exile in Syria, he wrote extensively on Sufism and supervised the publication of important Arabic Sufi texts. In the Caucasus, Shaykh Shamil of the Naqshbandi Sufi order set up an independent state that frustrated Russian attacks until 1859. The messianic movement of the Sudanese Mahdi, destroyed by British forces in 1881, originated from a Sufi order; British accounts of the defeat of the “dervishes” at the battle of Omdurman formed one of the high points of colonial triumphalism.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the study of the brotherhoods had become a necessary subject for European colonial administrators. In these circles the study of Sufism became a cross between the assembly of police dossiers and the analysis of dangerous cults. Sufi leaders like the Pir Pagaro in Sind were described as hypnotic demagogues whose fanatic followers would kill themselves at a hint



a. A MEVLEEV DERVISH OF DAMASCUS



b. AN ABDAL MARABOUT, OR HOLY MAN, IN A CRAZED STATE



c. A RUF'A'EE DERVISH IN AN ECSTATIC STATE



d. ANOTHER RUF'A'EE DERVISH IN AN ECSTATIC STATE

FIGURE 2. Illustrations of Sufis in *The Dervishes; Or, Oriental Spiritualism* (London, 1868), by American diplomat and translator John P. Brown, with original captions.



e. A SHEIKH OF THE NAKSHIBENDEES SUBDUING A LION BY HIS SPIRITUAL POWERS



f. MEVLEEV DERVISHES UNDERGOING PENANCE



g. A BEKTASH DERVISH INHALING HASHEESH

from the master. In Somalia, the British dismissed the conservative Sufi leader Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abd Allah Hasan as “the mad mulla,” though he was neither mad nor a mulla (traditional religious scholar); he is remembered today by his countrymen as the father of the Somali nation. Probably the most remarkable example of governmental conflict with Sufism occurred in modern Turkey, which banned all dervish orders in 1925; in a case of the internalization of European political anxieties, secular nationalism had apparently eliminated a potential rival with strong claims on the loyalties of Turkish citizens.

The Orientalist “Discovery” of Sufism

Travelers and administrators had been concerned about the social and political behavior of dervishes and fakirs. The term *Sufism* first came into circulation through much more literary channels. Nearly two hundred years ago, several British Orientalists discovered a surprising religious phenomenon that significantly changed their understanding of the East. These eminent scholars, associated with the British East India Company, particularly Sir William Jones (d. 1794) and Sir John Malcolm (d. 1833), were well versed in Persian, the language of international diplomacy and government in Persia, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and most of India. In their historical and literary studies of “the Orient,” which from Europe was viewed as all very much the same, these scholars began to comment on a mystical form of religion that was somehow associated with the followers of Muhammad (or “Mahometans”). The so-called Sooffees appeared wherever the mosque and minaret were found, but they were much more attractive than the hated Ottoman Turks, who a century earlier had threatened to conquer all of Christian Europe. These Sooffees were poets, after all, and they composed odes to the joys of wine-drinking, something no pious “Mahometan” would do. Furthermore, they were fond of music and dance, they were great lovers, and their

bold declarations were an open affront to the Qur’an. Malcolm and Jones saw them as freethinkers who had little to do with the stern faith of the Arabian Prophet. They had much more in common, so went the argument, with true Christianity, with Greek philosophy, and with the mystical speculations of the Indian Vedanta. Literary Sufism had little to do with the scruffy vagabond dervishes and fakirs who disfigured the landscapes and cities of the East. Thus the term *Sufi-ism* was invented at the end of the eighteenth century, as an appropriation of those portions of “Oriental” culture that Europeans found attractive. The essential feature of the definitions of Sufism that appeared at this time was the insistence that Sufism had no intrinsic relation with the faith of Islam.

In retrospect, the unusual perspective of the British Orientalists on Sufism can be partially explained by the eccentric sources to which they were exposed. Jones relied in particular on a Persian text called the *Dabistan*, in which a seventeenth-century Zoroastrian author had presented a complex vision of the religious history of India and Persia, predicated on the notion of imbedding all major philosophical and mystical breakthroughs in ancient Persian history. On this basis, Jones wrote the following description of Sufism:

I will only detain you with a few remarks on the metaphysical theology, which has been professed immemorially by a numerous sect of *Persians* and *Hindus*, was carried in part into *Greece*, and prevails even now among the learned *Muselmans*, who sometimes avow it without reserve. The modern philosophers of this persuasion are called *Sufi’s*, either from the *Greek* word for a sage [i.e., *sophos*], or from the *woollen* mantle [Arabic *suf*], which they used to wear in some provinces of *Persia*: their fundamental tenets are, that nothing exists absolutely but GOD: that the human soul is an emanation from his essence, and, though divided for a time from its heavenly source, will be finally re-united with it; that the highest possible happiness will arise from its re-union, and

that the chief good of mankind, in this transitory world, consists in as perfect an *union* with the Eternal Spirit as the incumbrances of a mortal frame will allow; that, for this purpose, they should break all *connexion* (or *taalluk*, as they call it), with extrinsick objects, and pass through life without *attachments*, as a swimmer in the ocean strikes freely without the impediment of clothes; that they should be straight and free as the cypress, whose fruit is hardly perceptible, and not sink under a load, like fruit-trees *attached* to a trellis; that, if mere earthly charms have power to influence the soul, the *idea* of celestial beauty must overwhelm it in extatick delight; that, for want of apt words to express the divine perfections and the ardour of devotion, we must borrow such expressions as approach the nearest to our ideas, and speak of *Beauty* and *Love* in a transcendent and mystical sense. . . . Such in part (for I omit the minuter and mure subtil metaphysicks of the *Súfi's*, which are mentioned in the *Dabistàn*) is the wild and enthusiastick religion of the modern *Persian* poets, especially of the sweet HAFIZ and the great *Maulavi* [i.e., Rumi]: such is the system of the *Védánti* philosophers and best lyrick poets of *India*; and, as it was a system of the highest antiquity in both nations, it may be added to the many other proofs of an immemorial affinity between them.¹

In later years, nineteenth-century scholars reacted against the unusual historiography of the *Dabistan* and rejected it as a fraud. Recent scholarship has again begun to take this text seriously as part of an important intellectual trend in early modern Persianate thought, but most scholars today would not consider it a basic source for Sufism. Nevertheless, the universal tone of this work fit the mood of romantic enthusiasm that led Jones to master Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit, on his way to founding the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in 1784. For him, all profoundly mystically doctrines were ultimately

the same; they are expressed in “a thousand metaphors and poetical figures, which abound in the sacred poems of the *Persians* and *Hindus*, who seem to mean the same thing in substance, and differ only in expression as their languages differ in idiom!”² The Indian origin of all mysticism became a widely accepted hypothesis in Romantic circles. The universalizing impulse in Jones’s interpretation of Sufism made Islamic connections interesting but incidental.

The detachment of Sufism from Islam took a more explicit form in the work of Sir John Malcolm. As ambassador of the British East India Company to the Persian court in 1800, he had formed a congenial relationship with a leading religious authority of the city of Kermanshah, whom he calls Aga Mahomed Ali. Mahomed Ali was a representative of the Shi’i hierarchy and was totally opposed to the Sufi groups that had recently begun to attract large followings in Persia. He and other Shi’i scholars persuaded the king of Persia to mount a campaign of persecution against the Sufi leaders, on the grounds that they represented moral corruption and the destruction of religion. As an aside, it is necessary to explain that the rise of Shi’ism in Persia since 1500 created a highly ambiguous situation for Sufism, in which the theoretical and practical sides of the movement were radically separated, for largely political reasons. Theoretical mysticism, known as *irfan* or gnosis, has retained a very high reputation in Iran to this day; leading scholars such as Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Mutahhari are well known for their writings on philosophical and theoretical mysticism. On the other hand, anyone who actually practices mysticism in a social context is known instead under the name *darvish*, which in Iran has become a term of contempt suggesting idleness, drug use, immorality, and every other sort of evil. This distinction permitted the religious hierarchy of Iran to eliminate possible rivals to their authority while appropriating those Sufi doctrines which they admired.

In any case, although Malcolm recognized that his Persian contact was biased, in his 1815 *History of Persia* he nonetheless reproduced

the latter's extremely hostile view towards Sufism. Concerning the "Sooffees," he wrote:

We discover, from the evidence of Mahomedan authors, that these enthusiasts were co-existent with their religion. Their rapturous zeal, perhaps, aided in no slight degree its first establishment; but they have since been considered among the most dangerous of its enemies.³

Following Jones, Malcolm accepted the notion of an Indian origin for Sufism:

It is in India, beyond all other climes, that this delusive and visionary doctrine has most flourished. There is, in the habits of that nation, and in the character of the Hindoo religion, what peculiarly cherishes the mysterious spirit of holy abstraction in which it is founded; and we may grant our belief to the conjecture which assumes that India is the source from which other nations have derived this mystic worship of the Divinity.⁴

Yet in his account of Sufism, Malcolm was satisfied to set forth at length the enumeration of its twenty heretical sects according to his priestly informant. They are ultimately dangerous to religion, he claimed, because of their assertion that they attain to union with God:

[They] are also accused by orthodox Mahomedans of having no fixed faith, but of professing a respect which they do not feel for religion, that they may smooth the path of those whom they desire to delude. They pretend, their enemies state, to revere the prophet and the Imaums, yet conceive themselves above the forms and usages which these holy personages not only observed, but deemed of divine inspiration.⁵

From this extensive early account, derived from a hostile Shi'i leader, one could only conclude that Sufism had only the most tangential relation with Islam. Other British ambassadors came to similar conclusions. Mountstuart Elphinstone in an 1808 mission to Afghanistan observed that "the Sooffees . . . consider the peculiar tenets of every religion as superfluities, and discard all rites and religious worship, regarding it as a matter of little importance in what manner the thoughts are turned to God, provided they rest at last in contemplation on his goodness and greatness."⁶

Up to this point, discussions of Sufism were brief observations in the context of remarks on Persian history and culture. The first separate treatment of Sufism in a European language was an article by an officer on the staff of Malcolm, Lt. James William Graham; it was originally delivered as a lecture in 1811 and later published in the *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay* in 1819. Graham was conscious that he was embarking on new territory by attempting to describe "the celebrated though little known subject of Sufism," and he paid due compliments to the essays of Jones and Dr. John Leyden (d. 1811) that had touched upon the subject.⁷ In Graham's article, entitled "A Treatise on Sufism, or Mahomedan Mysticism," he exhibited the same universalizing tendency to abstraction shown by his predecessors. Indeed, Graham went even further; he saw Sufism as an attractive system precisely to the degree that it denies the law of Muhammad and approaches Christianity:

With regard to the religion (if it can be so termed in the general acceptance of that word) or rather doctrine and tenets of the sect of Sufis, it is requisite to observe, first, that any person, or a person of any religion or sect, may be a *Sûfi*: the mystery lies in this;—a total disengagement of the mind from all temporal concerns and worldly pursuits; an entire throwing off not only of every superstition, doubt, or the like, but of the practical mode of worship, ceremonies, &c. laid down in every religion, which the Mahomedans term *Shëryat*,

being the law, or canonical law; and entertaining solely mental abstraction, and contemplation of the soul and Deity, their affinity, and the correlative situation in which they stand: in fine, it is that spiritual intercourse of the soul with its Maker, that disregards and disclaims all ordinances and outward forms, of what sect or religion soever; such as observances of feasts, fasts, stated periods of prayer, particular kinds of meat to be eaten, ablutions, pilgrimages, and such-like other rites and ceremonies which come under the head of practical worship (*Jismani amul*), being the deeds of the law, in contradistinction to mental or spiritual worship (*Roo-hâni âmul*), that is, as I take it to be, grace or faith.⁸

Graham takes this alleged lack of concern with religious law and ritual to be identical with the teaching of Paul's Epistle to the Romans in the New Testament. Further, the Sufi is described as disdainful of the material world and as contemplating his own soul as an emanation of God: "This is the wonderful system of the *Yôgêe* or Indian Ascetic, and *Dnani* or person possessing divine wisdom or omniscience; from whom the *Sûfis* are supposed by some to have borrowed their doctrine." Throughout his discussion, Graham insists on explaining Sufi concepts as identical with Indian, Christian, and Greek ones (the Greek epigraph for the article is the Delphic motto *gnothi seauton*, "Know thyself," and there are extensive quotations of the Hindi poetry of Kabir). Graham does not conceal the fact that he finds the Sufis attractive, as when he observes: "Through my colloquial intercourse with natives of different classes, I have heard with some degree of pleasure many anecdotes of this wonderful order." Perhaps the most remarkable of Graham's statements is when he suggests that the British themselves are regarded as Sufis by their Indian subjects: "We are, generally speaking, at least in this country, looked upon as a species or one kind of *Sûfi*, from our non-observance here of any rites or forms, conceiving a worship of the Deity in mind and adherence to morality sufficient. In fine, the present free-thinker or modern philosopher of Europe would be es-

teemed as a sort of Sufi in the world, and not the one retired therefrom." Graham actually provides much more than his predecessors in the way of descriptions of Sufi teachings and stories, based on Persian treatises that he had gained access to in Western India, although the sources that he used would be considered quite obscure by most scholars today. Nonetheless, the overwhelming impression one would gain from reading this article was that Sufis were wonderful mystics but that they had little if anything to do with the Islamic faith.

The first European book on Sufism, a Latin treatise published in 1821 by a German theologian named Tholuck, freely acknowledged the critical role of the British Orientalists in the discovery of Sufism. Tholuck also indicated what Europeans may have expected from the discovery of such an interesting group, apparently only lightly attached to the Islamic faith; he cites a report from the *Missionary Register* of 1818 claiming "that there is a number of about 80,000 persons in Persia, called Sophis, who about ten or twelve years ago, openly renounced Mahomedanism."⁹ This report, which appears to be a missionary fantasy, still underlines the firm wish of Orientalists to isolate Sufism from Islam. The title of Tholuck's treatise, *Ssufismus, sive theosophia Persarum pantheistica* (Sufism, or the pantheistic theosophy of the Persians), indicates the intellectual categories of greatest importance for this analysis. *Pantheism* is a term for European philosophies (e.g., Spinoza) that consider God and nature to be identical, and *theosophy* (most recently associated with the German mystic Boehme) was used to describe the doctrine that humanity can attain divine wisdom; both terms were derogatory from the perspective of Protestant theology. However inexact the analogies, Tholuck further modified them by attributing Sufism mainly to the Persians; later, under the attraction of racial theory, this conclusion would turn into a theory of Sufism as "Aryan" mysticism overlaid on the "Semitic" legalism of the Arabs. Tholuck's study was quite substantial, however, and in over three hundred pages he undertook to summarize the origins and leaders of Sufism, with

accounts of anthropology, cosmology, free will, prophetology, mystical terminology, and levels of teaching. He had access to a handful of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish manuscripts in the royal library in Berlin, which gave him a relatively wider base of knowledge than Jones or Malcolm had access to. Thus, in reply to the question of the Greek or Indian origin of Sufism, Tholuck was forced to acknowledge that among the earliest followers of Muhammad one can recognize the seeds and elements of what would later be known as Sufism. From its early simplicity, however, Tholuck concluded that Sufism degenerated into mere pantheism, contrary to the very principles of Muhammad. He observed that “the rest of the doctrines of the Sufis, that is, the theory of the divinity in men, the emanation of the world, the removal of discrimination between good and evil, and even the rejection of civil laws (for all these, as our argument shows, are found in later Sufism), derive from one teaching, the conjunction or union with God.”¹⁰ As an academic subject, Sufism was now fully established. The religious and political imperatives of modern Europe had created the term, which was duly entered in the list of doctrines and philosophies deserving the suffix *-ism*.

The most remarkable thing about the “discovery” of Sufism as described above is that it would have been unrecognizable to most Sufis. Although authors such as Graham were aware of major Sufi figures, such as Hallaj and Shams-i Tabriz, and Jones was certainly conversant with the great Persian Sufi poets, these British scholars relied primarily on either poetry or else obscure and biased sources. Tholuck added a few Arabic sources, but he also made more blatant the bias of Protestant theological dogma. By treating Sufism as an abstract mystical philosophy, these scholars entirely ignored the social context of Sufism as expressed in the Sufi orders, the institutions formed around saints’ tombs, and the role of Sufis in politics—points that will be alluded to later in this book. Most importantly, by separating Sufism from Islam, the Orientalists denied the significance of the Qur’an, the Prophet Muhammad, and Islamic law and ritual for

Sufism; yet for most of the people who are called Sufis, all these elements were very much a part of their worldview and their practice. Writing in North Africa in the fifteenth century, the famous Muslim philosopher and historian Ibn Khaldun wrote as follows:

Sufism belongs to the sciences of the religious law that originated in Islam. It is based on the assumption that the practices of its adherents had always been considered by the important early Muslims, the men around Muhammad and the men of the second generation, as well as those who came after them, as the path of truth and right guidance. The Sufi approach is based upon constant application to divine worship, complete devotion to God, aversion to the false splendour of the world, abstinence from the pleasure, property, and position to which the great mass aspire, and retirement from the world into solitude for divine worship. These things were general among the men around Muhammad and the early Muslims. Then, worldly aspirations increased in the second [eighth] century and after. At that time, the special name of Sufis was given to those who aspired to divine worship.¹¹

This attitude towards Sufism was typical of most Muslim intellectuals up through the eighteenth century.

In the years that have passed since the “discovery” of Sufism by Orientalists, a considerable amount of progress has been made. Many more Sufi texts have become available through printed editions in their original languages, both in Muslim countries and in the West. A growing number of readable translations into European languages makes it possible for readers to approach Sufism for study or personal engagement. Nevertheless, we are still far from having the kind of access to Sufi writings that is possible with European literature; certainly less than ten percent of existing Arabic manuscripts have ever been printed, to say nothing of those in Persian,

Turkish, Malay, Berber, Swahili, Urdu, and a number of other languages used by Sufis. More importantly, a look at current studies of Sufism will show that many of the underlying assumptions of the early Orientalists are still active, despite the relatively much larger base of knowledge that is currently available. There are still scholars who cherish the notion that they can discover and announce the true “sources” of Sufism in terms of Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian “influence.” There are many writers who uncritically accept Muslim fundamentalists as the true representatives of Islam, and hence they tacitly accept fundamentalist denunciations of Sufism as marginal to Islam. Preconceptions about the essentially legalistic character of Islam (formerly “Mahometanism”) are used as criteria by which to judge Sufism as a separate enterprise that may be in conflict with religion as such. Writings of colonial officials from the nineteenth century (now free of copyright) are still reprinted in formerly colonized countries, and secularized elites regard these studies as authentic guides to history and culture.¹² Reformist and fundamentalist thinkers have not hesitated to appropriate the Orientalist tendency to venerate past “golden ages”; this strategy permits them to pay respectful homage to selected early Sufis who can be described as pious Muslims, and at the same time to complain bitterly of the decline of modern Sufism into corruption. Those who wish to avoid unwittingly committing themselves to any of these prejudices will be better prepared to do so by becoming aware of this complicated genealogy of the concept of Sufism in the West.

The Term Sufi as a Prescriptive Ethical Concept

How is it possible to tell what Sufism is, and who is a Sufi? In Arabic and Persian, there are dozens of terms for Muslim mystics with distinct and sometimes conflicting meanings, all of which are subsumed by the English word *Sufism*. As with other terms coined during the Enlightenment to describe religions, *Sufism* has now be-

come a standard term, whether we like it or not. It is easy to assume that it is the primary reality or phenomenon that we are concerned with, and that any other terms are simply minor variations on this theme. This assumption is an outcome of the way social and intellectual history has developed in Europe and America. Terms constructed in the form of “isms” describe philosophies and social movements, so that ideally one can reduce them to descriptive definitions based on their essential qualities. This approach to classification, especially in the comparative study of religion, is based on the model of comparative zoology. The primary categories, corresponding to the biological genus, are considered to be the major religions, and sects and particular types of religious practices are viewed as different species or subspecies. There are a number of problems with this approach to the study of religion. It tends to assume that there is an unchanging essence for every religion, and so a sect or school of thought that seems to be in conflict with the dictionary definition of the religion can be dismissed as a deviation, probably due to “influence” from another religion. It is this kind of thinking that has created the bifurcation between Islam and Sufism in Orientalist literature. Islam is assumed to have the essential characteristic of harsh legalism, and Sufism is considered to be indifferent to matters of religious law; thus it becomes easy to posit an external origin for Sufism in India or elsewhere. The increasing stress on sociology and ideology in the study of religion results in the current picture of Sufism as a kind of mystical philosophy found in Muslim countries, which can include figures on the margins of society (dervishes and fakirs) along with politically important mass movements.

This descriptive approach to Sufism contrasts sharply with the use of the term *Sufi* in Sufi texts. There we find a prescriptive use of the term which sets forth goals of ethical and spiritual perfection. The historical origin of the word *Sufi* is fairly well established; it derives from the Arabic word for wool (*suf*), used in the rough garments

worn by ascetics in the Near East for centuries. Some Sufi writers highlight this meaning of the word, and they suggest that wool was the preferred dress of most of the prophets as well. The world-denying attitude suggested by this etymology had a sharp significance in the early Islamic era, when the conquering Arab armies created an imperial court culture of lavish magnificence and self-indulgence. Sufis were able to point to the simple material lifestyle of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) and many of his companions as an important precedent to the ascetic way of life (another etymology, first suggested by the philosopher al-Biruni, links Sufi with the Greek word for wise man, *sophos*, and hence with Greek philosophy; this derivation has not played any role in Sufi literature, however, though it has been revived again by Orientalists beginning with Jones and Tholuck in their attempt to find extra-Islamic origins for Sufism). Despite the importance of clothing in later Sufi ritual, however, the etymological connection with wool was only of secondary importance for the term *Sufi*, compared with its prescriptive meaning.

The creation of the term *Sufi* in its prescriptive sense was largely an achievement of the fourth Islamic century (tenth century CE), though it drew on earlier precedents. If one theorist were to be singled out as the main formulator of this concept, Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 1021) would be a good choice. Sulami, who lived in eastern Iran, wrote numerous works in Arabic, including the earliest major collection of lives of Sufi saints. He constructed a historical interpretation of the Sufis as the heirs and followers of the prophets, drawing a portrait of Muslim spirituality and mysticism that stretched over the previous three centuries. Sulami like other Sufi writers acknowledged that the term *Sufi* did not originate at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, but like other religious technical terms (in law and scriptural study, for example), it came into existence later on to reflect the increasing specialization of Muslim religious vocations. It was observed by Ansari (d. 1089) in his Persian translation of Sulami's biographical work that the first person who

bore the name *Sufi* was a Syrian named Abu Hashim al-Sufi (d. 767), but he adds, "Before him there were saints characterized by asceticism, abstemiousness, and good deeds in the path of trusting God and the path of love. But this name *Sufi* was first used of him."¹³ The Arabic term that we translate as Sufism is *tasawwuf*, literally "the process of becoming a Sufi." *Tasawwuf* is a verbal noun from the particular grammatical structure (fifth form verb) used in Arabic for assimilating or taking on a religious or ethnic identity; thus, *tanassur* means "to become a Christian [*nasrani*]," and *tafarnus* means "to become French." Even though the term was novel, the quotation from Ansari shows how it was used to cover a broad spectrum of spiritual qualities. The early biographies of Sufis by Sulami and others could thus include the lives of religious figures who were not known as Sufis in their own time. In a similar fashion, 'Umar al-Suhrawardi (d. 1234) observed, "God most high mentions in the Qur'an groups of the good and the pious, and he calls some the blessed people, and others the near ones, and there are also the patient, the sincere, the reciters, and the lovers. The name *Sufi* comprehends all distinctions in these names. This name did not exist in the times of the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace), though it is said that it existed in the time of his followers."¹⁴

The literature of Sufism that began to be produced in the tenth century CE employed the term *Sufi* in a deliberate and self-conscious fashion to orchestrate the ethical and mystical goals of the growing movement. A series of writings, primarily in Arabic, expounded the ideals of the Sufis and explained their relationship to other religious groups in Muslim society. It is extremely difficult to reconstruct with confidence the earliest history of Islamic spirituality and mysticism, nor will I attempt such a project here—partly because most of the texts describing early Sufis were written at a later period and reflect contemporary concerns. Nevertheless, early writers on Sufism carry a strong sense of distinctive identity. They refer to the Sufis simply as the people (*al-qawm*), or the faction (*al-ta'ifa*). This sense of self-

consciousness, already evident in the ninth century, was based on the slow formation of small informal groups of like-minded people, who traded comments with each other about their practice of the religious life. Those authors who formulated a comprehensive spiritual discipline around the term Sufi invoked these earlier Muslim devotees as their predecessors. The definitions of Sufism that they propose are historical only in the sense that history furnishes admirable examples of the religious life that may be used as models in Sufi literature. In this way, the term *Sufi* was linked with the Arabic word *suffa* or bench (source of the English word *sofa*), and in this sense it invokes the historical memory of the People of the Bench, a group of poor followers of the Prophet Muhammad who were homeless and slept on a bench in Medina, sharing their meagre belongings and supplies. This derivation clearly attempted to link the Sufis with an early group of ascetic followers of the Prophet, but just as importantly, it established the ideal of shared community as the basis of Sufi mysticism.

The term *Sufi* in this way took on a didactic rather than an informational purpose. Answers to the question "What is Sufism?" multiplied and began to take on a new importance, as they nearly always were placed prominently at the beginning of every new treatise on Sufism. Typically these definitions begin with additional etymologies that connect the term *Sufi* to other Arabic roots, especially *safa'* or purity, and *ṣafwa*, meaning the chosen ones. In this way Qushayri (d. 1074) introduced the subject of the Sufis: "God made this group the chosen ones among his friends, and he honored them above the rest of his worshippers after his messengers and his prophets . . . and he purified them from all obscurities."¹⁵ Qushayri was quite frank in stating that the term *Sufi* does not originate linguistically in any of the roots that have been proposed for it, since most of them stretch the rules of language. "This group is too well known to require definition by verbal analogy and etymological research," he stated. Nevertheless, the poetic and rhetorical effects of these derivations are

clear. The linking of Sufism with purity allows it to be described as the purification of hearts (*tasfiyat al-qulub*), which means a rigorous ethical discipline based on meditative exercises. Introducing the notion of the chosen elite means that God's grace is all-important in any notion of holiness in human beings, in this way cultivating a sense of surrender to the all-powerful creator. So despite the disclaimers of linguistic definition of the term *Sufi*, Qushayri marshaled an impressive list of sayings from different early Sufi masters that create different prescriptive ethical and spiritual goals for those who are attracted to this ideal. Here are some examples that he gave:

Sufism is entry into exemplary behavior and departure from unworthy behavior.

Sufism means that God makes you die to yourself and makes you live in him.

The Sufi is single in essence; nothing changes him, nor does he change anything.

The sign of the sincere Sufi is that he feels poor when he has wealth, is humble when he has power, and is hidden when he has fame.

Sufism means that you own nothing and are owned by nothing.

Sufism means entrusting the soul to God most high for whatever he wishes.

Sufism means seizing spiritual realities and giving up on what creatures possess.

Sufism means kneeling at the door of the beloved, even if he turns you away.

Sufism is a state in which the conditions of humanity disappear.

Sufism is a blazing lightning bolt.¹⁶

Countless other examples of this type could be mentioned.¹⁷ All these definitions are elusive from the perspective of descriptive history and social science. They do not have any clear reference to a

defined group of people. Instead, they accomplish a powerful rhetorical transaction; the person who listens to or reads these definitions is forced to imagine the spiritual or ethical quality that is invoked by the definition, even when it is paradoxical. Definitions of Sufism are, in effect, teaching tools.

The creation of a self-conscious community based on these Sufi ideals had some negative consequences. Some of the most important psychological and ethical goals of the movement would be defeated by egotistical self-absorption in one's identity as a Sufi. From the very moment that the notion of the Sufi appeared, it seems that the idea of the fake Sufi was not far behind. Other examples Qushayri gave include the following:

The sign of the sincere Sufi is that he feels poor when he has wealth, is humble when he has power, and is hidden when he has fame. The sign of the false Sufi is that he acts rich towards the world when he is poor, acts powerful when he is humble, and is famous among his followers.

The foulest of all foul things is a greedy Sufi.

The ambiguity created by insincere and hypocritical pretensions to the Sufi ideal even led to some discomfort with the term. When Shibli was asked why Sufis were so called, he said, "They must still have some ego, otherwise they would not be connected to this term." Ironically, the unease with the term *Sufism* seems to have emerged almost as soon as the term itself became popular. When asked about Sufism, Hujwiri (d. ca. 1075) replied: "In our time this science has been in reality obliterated, especially in this region, for people are all occupied with pleasure, and have turned away from satisfying [God]. The scholars of the age and pretenders of the day have formed an impression of it that is contrary to its principles."¹⁸ Thus lamenting its decline has been part of the definition of Sufism from the beginning, as an illustration of the tension between the ideals of mysticism

and the realities of social practice. The most famous such formulation is attributed to an early Sufi named Abu al-Hasan Fushanja: "Sufism today is a name without a reality, whereas it was once a reality without a name."¹⁹

The formulators of Sufism were keen to emphasize the religious credentials of their movement. The works written to expound Sufism in the tenth and eleventh centuries take great pains to link Sufism first of all with the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad, to emphasize their close relationship with divine revelation and its messenger. Next, these Sufi authors (such as Sarraj, Sulami, Kalabadhi, Suhrawardi) placed great stress on their status not only as complementary to the masters of other Islamic religious sciences (such as law and the study of Muhammad's sayings) but also as superior to them. As an example, the anonymous author of a tenth-century Arabic work, called *The Manners of Kings*, portrayed the Sufis as the true kings of the world from the spiritual point of view. He described jurists, specialists in the sayings of Muhammad (*hadith*), Qur'an commentators, and literary scholars as all being deficient in comparison to the Sufis: "Each one of them is attached to the external form of knowledge, and they ignore its [inner] realities. . . . But I have seen no people more firmly connected to the prophetic example, both externally and internally, both secretly and openly, in terms of law, intention, and practice, than the society known by the name of Sufism."²⁰ In comparison with this Sufi ideal, it was possible to criticize conventional religious scholars as corrupt servants of unlawful secular regimes. This defensive and critical attitude arose partly as the result of the need for a recently self-conscious movement to justify and explain itself in terms of the central concepts of order in Islamic culture. Certain well-publicized heresy trials and attacks on individual Sufis also encouraged Sufi apologists to formulate their teachings with an insistence on widely accepted theological or legal teachings, such as the doctrines of Ash'ari theology or the Hanbali legal school. Descriptions of Sufism, like any other religious point of

view in Islamic society, necessarily employed polemical arguments designed to appropriate the sources of religious authority and legitimacy.

The basic metaphor in Sufi rhetoric, which is also prominent in other major streams of Islamic culture, is the primacy of the inner reality. Using a phrase from the Qur'an (57:3), Sufis invoked the description of God as "the first, the last, the outer, the inner." Stressing the notion of God as the inner aspect (*batin*) of all things required an articulation of the relation between the inner and the outer. This was expressed most fully in a threefold rhyming structure commonly employed in oral instruction: the outward form is Islamic law (*shari'a*), the inner approach is the path (*tariqa*), while God is the reality (*haqiqa*). This kind of rhetorical formula permitted Sufis to position their distinctive practices as the internalization of the external rituals of Muslim religious life. Sufism was a way to proceed from ordinary external life to find the inner reality of God. This hierarchical grading of reality amounts to a theory of esotericism; as the Qur'an states (39:9), "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?" It is important to recognize that this pervasive metaphor of inner reality and knowledge requires the external forms of religion to make any sense at all. The self-articulation of Sufism has in this way presupposed the norms of Islamic tradition at the same time that it pointed beyond the limitations of those conventions.

Actual Terminology Used for Sufis

Despite its importance as a theoretical and symbolic term, the word *Sufi* was not very often applied to actual individuals. Partly this was because of the intrinsic tension between the ideal of selflessness and the egotism inherent in claiming such status. There was a sense, in other words, that a true Sufi would never claim that title. Derivative words were spun off to cover these contingencies, so that a *mutasawwif* was someone who legitimately aspired to be a Sufi, and this

term could be happily adopted by many. Alternatively, someone who falsely claimed to be a Sufi was a *mustaswif*, a term used only pejoratively. But if one looks at literary works that describe the variety of different Muslim mystics, it is remarkable to see how infrequently the word *Sufi* is used. By the fourteenth century, to call someone a Sufi was commonly a sarcastic challenge to pretended sanctity; when the poet Hafiz uses the word *Sufi*, it almost always has this significance. For instance, regarding extravagant claims made by pretenders to mystical experience, Hafiz said:

Come, let us take this Sufi cloak to the tavern,
and take these ecstatic boasts to the fairy-tale bazaar.
We should be ashamed of our stained woolen cloaks,
if we call this kind of skill and art a miracle.²¹

The great Persian writer Sa'di (d. 1292) of Shiraz included an important chapter titled "The Morals of Dervishes" in his classic *Gulistan* (The Rose Garden), in which he employs a wide range of terms for different kinds of mystics, but he hardly ever uses the word *Sufi*. The actual terminology for different Islamic mystical vocations covers a wide range of semantic fields. A sampling of these terms (all Arabic unless otherwise noted) is given below, organized according to the general category of religious practice to which they belong. The abstract and generalizing character of the descriptive term *Sufism* should be evident from the widely varying connotations of the terms most frequently used to describe the many different kinds of Muslim mystics.

Worship. The basic concept of worship is found in the term '*abid*' (also in the form *muta'abbid*), meaning devotee or pious worshiper; the term derives from '*abd*, slave, and has a connotation of total obedience and dedication to God. Persian also uses the word *parsa*, meaning pious and upright in behavior.

Ethics. The most ancient of the terms for ethical practice is *zuhd*,

meaning asceticism and avoidance of the pleasures of the world; the ascetic or abstemious person was called the *zahid*. These ascetics were noted not only for their strong aversion to the world but also for their fear of hellfire; in later times the ascetic was criticized as dry and harsh in comparison with the lovers of God (see below). Ethical virtue and adherence to religious duty are the qualities associated with the *salih* or righteous one; the root is associated with right action, goodness, peace, and creating order. In some regions, particularly North Africa, *salih* is the preferred term for a holy man or saint. Sincerity and truthfulness are the virtues of the *siddiq* or sincere one. The epithet was most famously associated with Muhammad's companion Abu Bakr, who testified with full faith to the veracity of the Prophet's account of his ascension to paradise. *Wara'* or scrupulous observance in avoiding unlawful food and gifts emerges from the intense desire to follow God's commandments in all actions.

Knowledge. Sufism is frequently described in the early manuals as a form of religious learning (*'ilm*) alongside the familiar religious sciences of law and the sayings of the Prophet. A master of this kind of learning was known as an *'alim*, or scholar (plural *'ulama'*). Many of the most important religious scholars in Islamic history were simultaneously engaged in the practices of Sufism, so that titles of the learned such as *mawlana* (our master) are frequently applied to Sufis and religious scholars without any distinction. When mystical knowledge was emphasized over traditional learning, the preferred term was *ma'rifa* or *'irfan*, meaning a special knowledge or gnosis that transcended ordinary rationality. The possessor of this knowledge was known as an *'arif*, or gnostic. Many intellectuals combined their interest in mysticism with the metaphysical curriculum derived from Greek philosophy, which was highly developed in Arabic through translations of Plato and Aristotle as well as independent works by philosophers such as Ibn Sina, also known as Avicenna (d. 1037). The master of metaphysical wisdom or *hikma* was called a *hakim*, or sage.

Traveling. Other terms for Sufism invoke the metaphor of traveling, which is suggested by the common description of Sufism as a way or path (*tariqa*). Treatises on mystical experience describe their topic as traveling (*suluk*). The self-possessed wayfarer on the path was frequently described as a traveler (*salik*; Persian *rahrav*). The importance of this metaphor was heightened by the common Sufi practice of traveling to distant lands, either to seek religious knowledge or as a form of self-discipline.

Love. Perhaps the most common epithets for mystics were drawn from the vocabulary of love and intimate affection. It was a badge of honor for these Sufis to be known as lovers of God, of the Prophet Muhammad, and of their Sufi master. One frequently finds people who are called simply a lover (*muhibb*, *'ashiq*) or by one of the common terms for a friend (Persian *dust*, *yar*). The powers of affection were so central to mystical experience that Sufi masters were often known as "masters of the heart" (Persian *sahibdil*, *ahl-i dil*).

Intoxication. In contrast to the sober and self-possessed traveler, some souls were overpowered by the attraction (*jadhb*) of divine energies. Those "fools of God" lost normal rationality and could appear to be mad. Whether their condition was temporary or permanent, those who were ecstatically absorbed (*majdhub*, also known in Persian as *mast*, or intoxicated) were often regarded as holy, and they were cared for and respected by ordinary people.

Social Ambiguity. The very notion of religious authenticity that underlies the ideals of Sufism was bound to create serious social contradictions as Sufism became more widely spread in Muslim societies after the twelfth century. From early times a group of Sufis had deliberately courted the blame (*malama*) of others, operating from a strong sense of the limitations of conventional social values. These *malamati* or self-blaming Sufis were exceeded by groups who rejected both ordinary society and what they saw as the complacent corruption of mysticism in institutional Sufism. Wandering groups of ascetics wearing animal skins and occasionally iron chains, shaving all body hair, and generally acting in an outrageous fashion, began to

be seen all over the Middle East and South Asia. Various known as *qalandar*, *abdal* (substitutes), *baba* (father), *haydari*, *malang*, or *muwallih* (enraptured), these figures were often viewed as dangerous by political authorities. They have been associated with peasant uprisings, particularly in Anatolia.

Mastery and Discipleship. Among the more important designations for Sufis were those that describe the role of the spiritual master. The most common term was the Arabic word for old man (*shaykh*, Persian *pir*), used as a title of respect. Similar titles include teacher (*ustadh*) and guide (*murshid*). The master or teacher in some ways functioned along the same lines as teachers of standard Islamic religious sciences, with a similar reliance on chains of transmission going back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The disciple or aspirant (*murid*), is said to focus on the master as the object of aspiration (*murad*). Chief disciples are chosen to act as the successor (*khalifa*) or representative (*muqaddam*) of the master.

Sainthood. One of the central terms of Sufism is the Islamic doctrine of sainthood (*walaya* or *wilaya*), which denotes closeness and intimacy with God, as well as protection by God. The saint (*wali*, plural *awliya'*; equivalent to Persian great man or *buzurg*, and Turkish man of God or *eren*) was a figure who could intercede with God, much as a feudal noble could intercede with the king. The saint's closeness to God and consequent authority are themes that go back to the earliest stage of Sufism with its prescriptive ideals and implicit critique of worldly power. Eventually the tombs of saints became centers of widespread pilgrimages, as people of all classes sought the ongoing living presence of the saint as a conduit to spiritual and material goals.

Spiritual Status. The concept of an invisible hierarchy of saints was the logical corollary of spiritual perfection and authority. From a very early period, terms and titles were in use to describe the various levels in this hierarchy, some of which were likened to the key implements used to hold up the universe as a kind of cosmic tent.

Thus we find the pegs (*awtad*) and the pole (*qutb*) among these titles, along with other offices such as the chiefs (*nuqaba'*), the pious (*abrar*), the good (*akhyar*), the substitutes (*abdal*), and the savior (*ghawth*). Out of these, the pole and the savior are both used to designate the single supreme figure of the hierarchy.

In view of the multiple vocations, experiences, and attitudes that underlie these different terms for Sufis, it must be admitted that the English word *Sufism* has to be pretty elastic to accommodate them all. More to the point, *Sufism* as it is used today means all of these internal ideals at the same time that it describes their external social and historical manifestations. We are forced to use *Sufism* both as an insider's term and as an outsider's term, and there will inevitably be tension between the two perspectives. The remainder of this book is an attempt to mediate between these two understandings of Sufism.