

Islamic Mysticism¹

by

Victor Danner

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FOR some fourteen centuries now, the Spirit has expressed itself within the Islamic world in the most richly varied and original fashions. First of all, in the beginning of Islam, the Spirit manifested itself directly in the Quranic Revelation, especially in the mystical verses of the Quran which the Sufis have always considered as the foundation of the contemplative Path, and in the Sunnah of the Prophet, particularly those aspects that have to do with the spiritual life and that occasionally eclipse the more external or collective forms followed by the generality of believers. Secondly, and with the passage of time, the Spirit affirmed itself in the sacred arts of Islam, such as mosque architecture and Quranic calligraphy, which infuse the Truth into men's souls through aesthetic shock. Thirdly, and finally, the Spirit has revealed itself in the long procession of sages and saints which begins with the Prophet and in the numberless miraculous and charismatic phenomena associated with the holy places and persons of Islam.

That long procession of sages and saints going back to the Prophet is best represented by Sufism. Although the term Sufi did not exist in the first century or so of Islamic history, it did come into being later to designate the person who followed the spiritual Path bequeathed by the Prophet to the contemplative minority of his community. Since then, and for over a thousand years, Sufism has stood for the life of the Spirit within the Islamic religion, not only because of its profound doctrines and methods of spiritual realization, or because of the obvious saintliness of its great adepts, but also because of its periodic spiritual renovations of the Islamic religion.

Sufism is often defined as "Islamic mysticism," which is an appropriate designation, providing that the term "mysticism" is rightly understood. If by mysticism we mean the most spiritual teachings and practices that derive from a given Revelation, then Sufism is indeed Islamic mysticism. But if we mean by mysticism something that is vague and obscure, and perhaps even abnormal, then Sufism is not mysticism at all, if only because it is the most intelligent, the most crystal-clear, and the most normative dimension of the Islamic religion. In truth, Sufism has always considered itself to be the very heart of Islam, which implies a centrality that no other aspect of that religion can lay claim to, for it furnishes perspectives that open up the universal nature of the Islamic Revelation. By comparison, all other interpretations of the Revelation seem quite impoverished: it is as if they see only particular facets of a precious gem, whereas Sufism sees them all simultaneously.

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Since no Revelation is addressed exclusively to one uniform level of comprehension, it follows that there must be different levels of understanding and response. Within Islam itself, it is traditional to speak of the two great dimensions of the Revelation, the esoteric, that has to do with contemplation, and the exoteric, that has to do with action. The prototypes for this division are to be found amongst the Names of the Divinity: *Allah* is called *al-Bâtin* (the Interior) and *az-Zahir* (the Exterior). From the realities symbolized by these two Names flow the esoterism and exoterism of Islam. The exoteric aspect of the Revelation is addressed to the great mass of believers, who are engaged in action; the esoteric aspect is addressed to a small minority of believers who, in addition to the life of action, pursue also the life of contemplation.

If the Islamic Revelation has spoken only to the esoteric minority that followed the life of contemplation, then clearly the vast majority of the faithful would have been stymied in working out their salvation, for they are not predisposed towards contemplation nor do they seek to be united in this life with the Divine Reality. Inversely, if the Islamic Revelation had spoken only to the exoteric majority that followed the life of action, then clearly the minority of the faithful who sought spiritual union with God through contemplative concentration would have had no way of using the gifts of intelligence and good will that Heaven had bestowed upon them for no good reason at all. But the Quran says that God is "the Most-Merciful of the merciful," and thus the Revelation contains directives for those who seek salvation posthumously through good works and directives for those who, on the basis of good works, seek salvation here and now in the love and knowledge of that ultimate reality called *Allah*.

The Quran and the Sunnah (the Norm) of the Prophet are the great foundations of Islam. They complement one another: the Quran is like a static doctrinal element dealing with the total Truth, while the Sunnah is like a dynamic realizational element that actualizes the total human response to that Truth. All authentic Islam, throughout the centuries, has revolved around the Quran and the Sunnah. The sacred Law of Islam, or its *shari'ah*, and the spiritual Path of Islam, or its *tariqah*, are both based primarily on the Quran and the Sunnah.

For the Sufis, the Messenger of Islam brought both a Law and a Path: he did not bring just a Law nor just a Path, for the Islamic Message embraced all aspirations and vocations, great or small, and to have left any out of the picture would have been the sign of imperfection. The Law, with its commands and prohibitions, is concerned with the domain of action; hence it defines the actions that the Muslims must accomplish to merit Paradise after death, which is salvation, and the actions that the Muslim must avoid to keep away from damnation. Because it is occupied with the actions of the individual or of the collectivity, the Law represents exoteric Islam. The Path, for its part, has to do with the domain of contemplation; it represents esoteric Islam, and is often pictured as the radius that connects the circumference of a circle, which is the Law, to the central point that symbolizes *Allah*.

While all Muslims, including those who follow the Sufi Path, are under obligation to follow the Law, the reverse is not the case, and could not be the case, given that most believers are not

interested in spiritual realization. This is not peculiar to Islam: one finds a similar situation in all religions, where the spiritual minority remains, after all, only a minority. To protest against the majority of believers because of their indifference to spiritual realization would be perfectly vain, all the more so in that the Islamic Revelation, like other Revelations, takes into account that very indifference to the contemplative life in the mass of the faithful by offering to them the way of action as a means of salvation. It is as if Heaven, seeing that all men must act simply to exist—but that not all men wish to contemplate God—showed them a way of action that would liberate them from the bond-age of cosmic suffering caused by ill-advised action. And that is the reason for the existence of the Law in Islam, whether we look at it as a Law binding on an individual or a collectivity. In other words, the Law furnishes an earthly equilibrium for man and society with posthumous salvation as its ultimate goal, since the equilibrium of an individual or a society is not an ultimate goal in itself, if only because an individual or a society can be in equilibrium and yet forgetful of the life to come in the Hereafter.

Now, for the Sufis, the Messenger of Islam is the Norm as regards both the Law and the Path. While it is true that the Quran and the Sunnah are the principles on which both the Law and the Path are based, it is also true that the Quran and the Sunnah contain them in unequal distribution. Perhaps it could be said, without fear of contradiction, that the Quran and the Sunnah are weighted in favour of the Law of Islam because it governs the lives of the immense majority of Muslims, who constitute the material substance of the Islamic community and who are not drawn to the way of contemplation. If the Messenger of Islam, in other words, was to be an example for his community, then he had to be imitable even for those Muslims with modest religious aspirations; and that is why the sacred Law of Islam speaks to all Muslims with its famous Five Pillars, leaving to the more serious Muslims the task of adding to those Pillars as they see fit or as they are moved by faith or fervour.

Yet, while the weight of numbers does seem to side with the mass of believers, the Messenger is not reducible to his role as formulator of the sacred Law, for the Quran and the Sunnah, *as* was said, also contain spiritual principles relating to the Path, and therefore to what eventually became known as Sufism. The mystical verses of the Quran, the statements of the Prophet called "*holy hadiths*" (in which the Divinity is seen as speaking through Muhammad), the contemplative aspects of Muhammad's life itself, all point to his role as formulator of the spiritual Path. Let us recall that the Sufi orders all go back to the Founder of Islam through their initiatic chains that are said to transmit the *barakah muhammadiyah*, or the "Muhammadian grace," from generation to generation, which shows the crucial role that the Prophet plays in Sufism.

It is evident that, in the first generation of Islam, the Path and the Law were not as clearly differentiated as they would be later on: the synthetic vision of Revelation existing then tended to blur the distinctions between the esoteric Path and the exoteric Law. It was only in the second or third centuries of the Hijrah, when the initial glow of the Revelation has begun to wane, that we

see the religious authorities, or the '*ulamâ*', beginning to codify their perceptions of Revelation; but it is at this time also that we see the spiritual authorities, or the *shaykhs* of the Path, beginning to emerge with the name of *Safi* (meaning someone wearing wool, or *suf*, and by extension someone who is an adept of the Path). When the masters of the Path surfaced with the term "Safi" and other cognates, they did so by way of distinguishing the spiritual Path, with its total view of Revelation, from the various Sunnite and Shiite sects of the early ages, with their fragmentary and limited view of Revelation. They were determined that the Sufi *shaykhs*, who exercised spiritual authority, should not be confused with the purely religious authority of the doctors of the Law, who were the guardians of exoteric Islam. In so doing, the Sufis preserved the total Message of Islam by keeping alive its spiritual esoterism through these early cyclical phases of the religion. At the same time, by virtue of having made Sufism and the Path synonymous, the Sufi masters clearly established themselves as the real spiritual authorities in the community. By calling themselves Sufis, they drew attention to the fact that they transcended the various ascetical and devotional groups in the Islamic sects of the day, including those that revolved around the still-living Shiite Imams, whose function, as the descendants of the Prophet through 'Ali and Fâtimah, was beginning to take on a special coloration that would eventually isolate Shiism from the greater Sunnite world of Islam.

Because of its universal spiritual perspective, Sufism tends by its very nature to be open to all expressions of the Truth. Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Neoplatonist influences, just to cite these alone, have been found in Sufism, which is not in the least surprising, given the fact that all mystical ways have much in common. But the eclecticism of the Sufis must not be confused with a crude syncretism, nor must one over-emphasize these outside influences, as if Sufism owed its very existence to them. It is the Islamic Revelation that is at the origins of the Sufi Path, not some book on Neoplatonist or Christian thinking; it is the Prophet himself who first embodies the way of mystical realization, not some Christian contemplative hermit or a Buddhist sage.

Seen in the light of Sufism, the Path is really the same thing as the Sufi master, or *shaykh*. The twelfth-century founder of the Qâdiriyyah order of Sufism, 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilâni, once said that the Path is the master and the master is the Path. The thirteenth-century Sufi teacher, Abil 'l-'Abbas al-Mursî, remarked once that Sufism is not to be found in books, which is but another way of saying that the teachings and practices of Sufism are uniquely in the hands of the masters of the Path. This is very clearly pointed out by the Sufi initiatic chain of transmission, or what is called the *silsilah*, which indicates only the names of masters, stretching back from the latest one in a given Sufi order to the Founder of Islam, in uninterrupted succession. Thus, in all epochs of Islam, the first order of the day for the would-be mystic was to seek out an authentic Sufi master and to keep his distance from the frauds and charlatans.

Even so, the Sufi sages have often encountered incomprehension, and even hostility, at the hands of certain religious authorities, and this is not surprising. The letter of the Law, when it falls into the hands of the Pharisees, can snuff out the life of the Spirit. The martyrdom of the

tenth-century Sufi al-Hallāj at the hands of the religious chiefs of Baghdad is a graphic example of an extreme formalism that stifles all spiritual life. But we must not be deluded into false conclusions because of al-Hallaj's case. Let us recall that in all periods of Islamic history there have been illustrious religious authorities who belonged to Sufi circles, so that we cannot picture the doctors of the Law as being uniformly dead-set against Sufism. In the second place, his case does not represent normative Sufism. On the contrary, the great figures of Sufism, such as al-Jīlani, Ibn al-'Arabī, or the Imam Abu 'l-Hasan ash-Shadhili, far from being persecuted, were actually honoured by the notables and the people of their times. And in the third place, once Sufism had been integrated into the Islamic social fabric, the Sufis tended to consider the attacks of isolated religious teachers with a certain detachment and as being more or less inevitable, given the rather narrow view of Revelation which these guardians of the Law had.

That is why the history of the mystical life in Islam is quite different from its analogue in Christianity, where we do not find a division of labour between the religious authority of the official Church, on the one hand, and the spiritual authority of the mystical sages, on the other. Rather, the Christian mystics seem always subject to ecclesiastical intervention, whereas in Islam the Sufi teachers are independent of the religious leaders. Al-Ghazzālī, the eleventh-century Sufi and theologian, is only one of many early Sufis who pointed out that the doctors of the Law must confine themselves to the Law and not pretend to give advice on spiritual realization, since this pertains to the Sufi masters alone. Accordingly, Sufism developed its own teachings and practices, its own institutions, and it had its own guides, all of which set it apart from the more conventional version of Islam. This was recognized in the traditional Muslim world by the great Muslim Caliphs and rulers, who very often ordered the construction of Sufi meeting-houses in their lands, and who established a court protocol for Sufi masters, by way of honouring them; and indeed, very often these rulers would have their own Sufi master whom they would visit in self-effacement. In other words, the spiritual life, or what is called mysticism, was quite widespread throughout the Muslim world and visible to everyone's eyes in its public institutions: it was the normal summit of Islamic existence and not something exotic or tangential.

However, in the abnormal conditions of the modern world, the Path has suffered proportionately. For one thing, a kind of generalized spiritual decline has set in over great areas of the Muslim world, creating an indifference to the religious life that is fostered by modern secularist civilization, which has spread over all of the Orient from its homeland here in the West. For another, modern Western civilization, by intruding itself into an already weakened Muslim world, has succeeded in stripping it of a good deal of its traditional way of life, undermining in the process the visible cultural supports of the Path. And finally, reformers of all stripes, both modernist and conservative, have done their best to hasten the departure of Sufism from their lands. The modernist reformers have sought to do away with Sufism because it reminds them of their traditional Islamic moorings which prevent them from feeling altogether at ease in their modernism. At the opposite extreme are the conservative, puritanical Muslims who

view Sufism as a threat to their attempts to reduce Islam simply to the level of the Law; and they too have sought to eradicate Sufism, with greater or less success.

It is ironic—but a sign of the times, nevertheless—that as Sufism is attacked in the Muslim world from the left and the right, like an unwanted child, it is eagerly sought after by certain Western youth who have become disillusioned with modern technological civilization and its purely materialistic ideologies and sciences. This is a phenomenon that could baffle some Muslims, who might wonder why Western youth are interested in Sufism but not in Islam. They should not be baffled because of course Sufism is the actual heart of the Islamic religion. The mystical life is the essence of any given religion; take it away, and that religion becomes moribund and eventually dies. Many Western youth interested in Sufism forget that it is the spiritual life of Islam. There is no such thing as Sufism *and* Islam, no more than there is such a thing as mysticism *and* religion. It is not by accident that the authentic Sufi *shaykhs* integrate the Law of Islam into their perspective: they are not doing this merely to pay lip service to exoteric Islam, but rather because the Law—especially the saving core of the Five Pillars—plays an indispensable role in re-establishing the equilibrium of their disciples.

It is perhaps understandable that in the Western world Sufism should be considered as divorced from Islam, given the universalist notions expressed by some of the great Sufis of the past. Ibn al-'Arabi and Rûmî, for example, have carried the Quranic thesis of the universality of Revelation to its logical conclusions and left behind remarks that make them out to be universalists without attachments to Islam as such because they recognized the Absolute in all religions. But, in reality, their universalism was accompanied by an actual exclusivism: they were themselves Muslims to the very end of their lives and would not have dreamed of abandoning the Revelation to which they owed their spiritual realization of the Truth. It may come as a surprise, but Ibn al-'Arabi himself wrote hundreds of pages on the Law of Islam, which he would hardly have done if Islam had not interested him at all.

Therein lies a message for the would-be mystic of our days here in the West, or even now in the East. It is all well and good to recognize the unity of the mystical experience in all religions. This recognition, however, should not lull a person into the illusion that the spiritual life, or mysticism, is possible without religion, an illusion that is too rampant in our days. A great Sufi like Ibn al-'Arabi, for instance, was a Muslim mystic, not a Buddhist mystic or a Hindu, and not just simply a mystic in the abstract. There is, perhaps, a point in the life of such a sage when the Islamic forms are left behind, and this is no doubt when mystical union with the Absolute takes place. But that is a spiritual identity that does not abolish the Islamic affiliation of Ibn al-'Arabi's human nature; and indeed, that union could not have come about without Islam as its starting point, to begin with.

In the Muslim world, the understanding of the nature of Sufism is somewhat different from what we find here in the West. There are, of course, those modernist Muslims whose grasp of Sufism comes to them largely through reading the works of Western specialists, who are seldom

concerned, to say the least, with the spiritual consequences of Sufism on themselves or on their readers. Then there are the Muslims who read the traditional Sufi works and are influenced by them to a certain degree but not to the point of actually following the Path. There are also, of course, the Muslims who are hostile to Sufism for various reasons, best known to themselves, and whose hostility can be mild and result from incomprehension or else it can be explosive and proceed from hidden roots within themselves. And finally, there are the hundreds of thousands of Muslims who are in the many Sufi orders that exist throughout the Islamic world and who come from all walks of life. Certainly, not all of them are of the purely contemplative type; perhaps most of them are in the orders largely for devotional purposes, to strengthen their religious life. Many of them owe allegiance to Sufi *shaykhs*, and some of these *shaykhs* are venerable and authentic teachers of the Way.

It is quite certain that the authentic Sufi masters are not as numerous in our days as they were in the past, when the Muslim world was much more faithful to its Revelation and when, as a result, spiritual aspirations were in greater evidence, which in turn called into being a greater number of masters. Nevertheless, real Sufi guides continue to exist even in our times, and for so long as they do, the spiritual life remains a viable possibility in the Muslim world, at least for those who are seekers of the Way.

One might well ask: What is an authentic Sufi master? And this is a question worth asking, if only because lately there have appeared in the Western world individuals openly claiming to be teachers of the Sufi Way but without serious credentials. The least that one can say about them is that their "path", such as it is, is certainly not Islamic, which is as much as to say that it is not Sufi either, for the two go together. It is worth remembering, in response to the question just posed, that the Sufis have always functioned within the dimensions of the Islamic Revelation as regards both their fundamental doctrines on ultimate Reality and their methods of spiritual concentration. That is a matter of the greatest importance, for it is the Revelation itself that guarantees the efficaciousness of their teachings and practices.

If we knew nothing historically of the Sufi teachings and methods in past times, we would not be able to tell if a person claiming to be a teacher was possessed of real credentials or not. There would be no reason why we should follow him and not someone else, since we would not know what the criteria for the Sufi Way might be, to begin with, nor would we have any notions at all about Sufism itself. But we do have historical knowledge of the teachings and practices of Sufism in days gone by, and it is more than sufficient to allow us to see that, without the Islamic Revelation, Sufism could not exist as a way of reaching the Divinity.

In century after century, the eminent Sufis have reconfirmed, not only their love for the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet, but also their real knowledge that the Path is inoperative outside the precincts of the Islamic religion. A person who claims to be a Sufi teacher and situates his instruction and methods beyond the pale of the Islamic Revelation cannot expect to be taken seriously by those who know better, to say the least. If for over a millenium the Sufi

masters—by the thousands, I might add—have taught their disciples within the perspectives of that Revelation, then surely the real guide of Sufism in our times must be recognized by his conformity to this rule. If it were otherwise, then the sincere seeker in our times would be trapped in his illusions: the familiar landmarks pointing to the true teacher would have vanished from the scene. But it is precisely for the seeker that those landmarks have been held in place throughout the long centuries, so that he can discern the orthodox master by well-known signs and not fall prey to false teachers.

Some might feel that man is free to invent his own way to God and that, since God is loving, He would accept any such efforts. Now, the Islamic Path was addressed, not to saints, but to fallen men who had lost that gnosis of the Absolute that characterized Adam and Eve before their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. It is therefore not man who reconstructs, on the basis of his fallen nature, a way of returning to God; it is God who mercifully reveals to fallen man a way of undoing the momentum of the Fall and of rediscovering within himself the sanctity and wisdom that characterized the primordial Paradise.

There would be no need for Revelation—and therefore religion—if all men were sages and saints; the spiritual life would be spontaneously present in everyone. But such is not the case at the present day, nor was it the case when the Islamic Revelation—or any other Revelation, for that matter—descended into this world. Consequently, the Sufi Way must take its bearings on that Revelation. The Quran is said to have descended into this world; the Prophet is said to have ascended through the Heavens to unite with the Divinity. We have there the explanation of the Sufi Way: starting with the merciful descent of the Revelation from God into this world, it follows the Prophet's prototypal voyage back to the Divine Source. In a sense, every Sufi *shaykh* recapitulates the mission of Muhammad: just as the Prophet brought the pagan Arabs of his day into the Islamic faith so that they might be saved from the effects of the Fall and gain Paradise, so similarly the Sufi *shaykhs*, operating within the structures laid down by the Prophet, bring the chaotic substance of their disciples into conformity with the Divine Presence so that it might shine unimpeded in their hearts by the egocentric movements of their souls, and so that they too might accomplish their own contemplative voyage back to the Divine Source of all things.

Mention has been made of the authentic master, but no mention has been made of the authentic seeker or would-be disciple. If it is possible to conceive of false masters, it is possible to conceive also of false disciples; and indeed they were no doubt made for one another. But today we hear of many seekers who want the Path to be on their terms, or not at all. They want the Path to be scientific or psychological or evolutionistic or democratic or pacifistic or all together. But such cannot be called authentic seekers of the Way, for the sign of the true seeker is that he accepts the Path on its terms with self-effacement, not on his terms, which more often than not are totally illusory, which is often the case for those who have been conditioned by modern thinking of different colours. A person whose mind has been stamped by modern evolutionistic ideologies affecting man, society, the arts, religion, or whatever, is hardly inclined

to give credence to the doctrine of the Fall held in common by all Revelations and therefore by all Paths. If already in the past, when men's minds were fashioned by religious ideals and realities, the Sufi masters had to restructure the thoughts and existence of their disciples because they were victims of the Fall—with all the complexes of self-satisfaction and indifference that it engenders—then how much more so must the case be today, when religion is everywhere subverted and men's minds are refractory to revealed Truth?

The Sufi picture of the true disciple is clear enough: he receives everything from the Path; he contributes nothing to it, for he has nothing to contribute. In exchange for his self-effacement, the master gives him a new life. Eventually, his fallen nature is extinguished—the old Adam gradually disappears. It is for the sake of restoring in him the paradisaical mind and being of Adam before the Fall that the Sufi *shaykh* consents to guide him in the Path. If "God is beautiful and loves beauty," as the Prophet said, then it must be obvious that the disciple could not hope to reach the Absolute with an unredeemed mind or with a manner of living that is in flagrant contradiction to the Divine Presence within his innermost heart.

The goal of the Path is of course union with God, a union that is purely spiritual, to be sure, but which is apparently of varying degrees of depth and intensity, according to case. This unitive knowledge of the Real is what the Sufis call gnosis (or *ma'rifah*, as they say), which affects, not merely the thinking mind of the initiate, but also the rest of his being, for nothing in him must be left out of the process of spiritual realization. The many Sufi works that have dealt with gnosis make it clear that it is a wisdom and a sanctity that do not come to anyone who is devoid of the proper attitudes towards *Allah*. It is no doubt for this reason that many eminent Sufis have written manuals that delineate at great length those proper attitudes which the neophyte must rediscover in himself if he is to cast off the old Adam with his complexes that reinforce his egocentrism and make it difficult for him to respect or be drawn to the Divine Presence within himself or within the Creation. Opening up the soul so that it may come to know the Absolute is an art that only Sufism within Islam is best qualified to teach, and within Sufism it is only the accomplished *shaykh* who has mastered it and can teach others with the voice of authority.

It should be evident that not all of the adherents to the Sufi Path reach the end. That was so even in the past, when the substance of the aspirants was much more impregnated with spirituality. In an age such as ours, when the spiritual life seems eclipsed by the prevailing indifference and materialism, it is not at all surprising that the Muslim world has succumbed, in its own way, to the world-wide decline in religious values. Yet it has retained enough of its traditional institutions and ideals so as to allow the Path to remain a plausible choice for those who seek it. It not all of its wayfarers reach the end while yet in this world, it cannot be said that they have wasted their time and effort, if only because for them there is no other meaning to human existence outside the Path itself. A life outside the Path, and within the clutches of worldly phenomena, would be a pure waste of time and effort for such persons. It is the Path alone that awakens the fullness of their intelligence and good will, since it furnishes their minds

with the chance to find repose in the Truth and it permits their souls to cast off those impediments that prevent them from expanding in the life of the Spirit.

Moreover, there are varying degrees of that union which is said to be the goal of the Path. Already to have lived in accord with the dictates of the Absolute constitutes a kind of union with it. In the final analysis, it is that same Absolute that reflects itself in the truths that abide in the mind of the contemplative; it is that same Absolute that reflects itself also in his efforts, his faith, and his good qualities and nature. In other words, the aspirant already "possesses" God within himself, or better, God "possesses" him. Now, that is a kind of union on its own level, and it bears the familiar fruits of knowledge and joyous existence that are present, though in greater abundance, in the loftier degrees of union. So, while it is true that the end of the Path brings with it those great rewards spoken of by the Sufis, it is nevertheless equally true that something of those rewards is already present at the very beginning, when the *shaykh* hands over to the disciple the teachings and practices of the Way.

The Sufi Path is that element of the Islamic religion that goes beyond the characteristic forms of Islam to rejoin the mystical centre in all of the other great religions of mankind. The Vedanta of Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Taoism, just to mention these, are really saying the same thing as Sufism, except that their respective languages differ in formulating the truths of the Way. While it is true that all Paths lead to the same summit—the summit symbolizing the Absolute in itself—it is also true that they start out from different points of departure at the base of the mountain, and it is there that one finds the different religions. The differences are no doubt necessary because the multiple Revelations proceed from varying aspects within the Divinity, to begin with, and are addressed to different humanities. Yet, we can discern the unity of the great religions, not only at the summit, where they all vanish into their common Source, which transcends them all, but also in their mystical Paths, wherein the similarity of attitudes and formulations is a reflection of the immanent Divinity in all Revelations. If this is so, then there has always existed a spiritual unity that underlies the multiple religions of mankind, and the Sufis themselves have said as much.

In the past, those who were interested in the mystical life could afford to ignore the manifestations of the Spirit in other religions. But conditions in our times call for the recognition, on the part of men of understanding and faith, that other Revelations have their own mystical Ways leading back to the Divine Centre. Sufism is not only well-placed to lead others to that recognition of the interior unity of all religions, but by its continued existence in the present-day Muslim world, it also reaffirms the primacy of the contemplative life over the life of action, a primacy that the modernists in all religions have all too easily ignored in their efforts to refashion religion to fit modern industrial civilization.

Now, if all religions are already united in their spiritual essence, and it remains merely for thoughtful people to recognize this, it follows that a new universal religion or mysticism, claiming to unite mankind on the debris of the ancient faiths and mysticisms, would be out of the

question. But it is not vain to expect that the great religions of the world still standing in our midst will someday reaffirm powerfully their mystical life, which connects them all, like the spokes of a wheel, to their common Divine Centre. It is only then, perhaps, that their interior unity will be more widely recognized, without this in any way suggesting that their formal differences should disappear.

But to get back to Sufism: The presence of competent *shaykhs* in the Muslim world proves that the same universal Spirit that first manifested itself in that world some fourteen centuries ago in the Quran and the Sunnah continues to manifest itself today through these saintly guides. Their existence is certainly a sign that the total Message of Islam, which Sufism alone transmits, has not suffered any diminution since the days of the Founder of that religion, whatever might be the case for the ordinary believers. Now, these teachers owe everything to the Founder of Islam, not only historically speaking, but also in a spiritual sense. For it must not be forgotten that it was Muhammad, as the Messenger of Islam, who first brought the spiritual Path to his community and who remains, in the eyes of the Sufis, its most perfect embodiment; and that it is Muhammad, as an ever-present and mysterious Spirit, who leads the sages and saints of Sufism to union with that ultimate Principle that the Quran calls *Allah*.