

# *Sufism in the World of Islam & Orientalist Scholarship*

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When the Taliban destroyed the famous statues of the Buddha in the Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan more than a decade ago, the outrage of the global community, including that of prominent Muslim religious leaders, was matched perhaps only by the pious euphoria of Afghanistan's hardliners. They had finally succeeded in removing visible signs of idolatry from their landscape, and fulfilled, at least in their own eyes, a long overdue religious mission. In the words of the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, "Muslims should be proud to destroy idols. Our destroying them was an act of praise for God"<sup>1</sup> Yet such extreme acts of puritanical iconoclasm at the hands of Muslim fundamentalists, at least within modern history, have more than often been directed towards the religious symbols of their co-religionists, "fellow believers." As the world recently witnessed in the wake of the Arab Spring, it was not only the long entrenched rulers who were the targets of popular outrage. Sufi shrines, lodges and mosques also came under attack at the hands of Salafi/Wahabi led political activists who did not fail to take advantage of the breakdown of law and order to cleanse their societies of what to them were blatant symbols of polytheism (*shirk*) and heretical innovation (*bid'a*). Indeed, in Tunisia, the country out of which the entire popular movement arose, dozens of Sufi shrines were destroyed in the wake of civil unrest. Libya also witnessed the destruction of historic, century-old Sufi grave sites and mosques on the grounds that they were centers of "black magic" and "grave worship." The destruction of Tripoli's al-Sha'ab al-Dahman mosque, the burial site of numerous saints including that of the 16<sup>th</sup> Sufi scholar Sidi 'Abdallah al-Sha'ab was sanctioned (according to Reuters) by no less than the Interior Ministry itself.<sup>2</sup> The wave of fundamentalist fervor, long suppressed by secular Arab rulers, and which has formed an undeniable element of the Arab Spring was felt even as far as Mali, which itself saw the destruction of century-old shrines at the hands of the Salafi group, Ansar Dine, in Timbaktu, also known as the "city of 333 saints." The political group's spokesperson echoed the sentiments of Mullah Omar to justify the destruction of the sites: "God is unique," he stated, defiantly adding, "all of this is *haram*. We are Muslims. UNESCO is what?"<sup>3</sup>

Ansar Dine's claim that "all of this *haram*," that is to say, forbidden by religion, reflects a general sentiment found among Muslim fundamentalists of all stripes across the world, namely that Sufism, its cultures and its doctrines remain foreign to the spirit of true Islam. Such sentiments, moreover, are not confined simply to hardline Islamists and militants. They can be found throughout the Islamic world today, even among the most peaceful of Salafi/Wahabi oriented Muslims. (Not all fundamentalists are violent or even political). Indeed, anyone who has travelled throughout the Islamic world is aware of the tensions -- sometimes subtle, sometimes overt -- within the *ummah* on the thorny question of Sufism.<sup>4</sup> The suspicion within which the

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<sup>1</sup> Musharbash, "The 'Talibanization' of Pakistan."

<sup>2</sup> RT, "Libya's Sufism being Bulldozed." See also Kirpatrick, "Libya Officials Seem Helpless."

<sup>3</sup> The Telegraph, "Timbuktu Shrine Destruction."

<sup>4</sup> Carl Ernst relates a telling anecdote of his experiences in Pakistan, reflective of general attitudes across the Islamic world: "a peculiar thing happened whenever Pakistani acquaintances questioned me about my work. Sometimes, when informed that I was studying Sufism, the questioner would sit back and observe in a dismissive way, 'Well, you should know that Sufism has nothing to do with Islam.'" On other occasions, my interlocutor would lead forward

tradition is viewed in certain pockets of the contemporary Islamic world is however, as most students and scholars of Islamic intellectual and cultural history are aware, a relatively modern phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> While the reasons behind the emergence of these attitudes in recent centuries are complex and variegated, and cannot be entirely separated from the Islamic world's encounter with Western modernity and the impact of colonialism, there are two things that are clear. First of all, the oil boom in Saudi Arabia which began more than half a century ago years gave the nation the necessary financial resources to export its puritanical and anti-Sufi version of Islam through the Islamic world and beyond. Its position as the geographical heartland of Islam allowed the state to use this privileged status to give a certain degree of credence to its religious interpretations. Secondly, and more relevant to us in the field of religious studies, in so far as the relation of Sufism to Islam is concerned, fundamentalists have shared with Western scholars of Islam for a large part of Orientalism's history the problematic view that Sufism is indeed alien to "pure" Islam, that in its doctrines and practices it is fundamentally incompatible with the teachings of the Quran and the religion's founding prophet. In this regard, there has been a meeting-of-minds between two camps which, on this particular issue at least, can only be described as strange bed fellows.

### **Sufism in Western Scholarship: A Brief Overview**

The academic study of Sufism in Western scholarship began more than two centuries ago. Drawing on the work of Edward Said, Carl Ernst has demonstrated that it had its origins largely in the need of European colonialists to better understand the religions, cultures and beliefs of the people they governed.<sup>6</sup> With the exception of some familiarity with the ideas of such figures as Rabi'a (d. 801), Ibn al-Farid (d. 1235) or Sa'di (d. 1292) in the pre-colonial period, very few in Europe or North America possessed any serious knowledge of the Sufi tradition (Chodkiewicz 12; Schimmel 7-8). We find mention of strange mendicants and exotic Easterners engaging in wild dances and chants, performing miraculous feats, or begging for money in the travelogues of a wide range of adventurers and diplomats. These exotic characters became standard articles of attraction in travel packages that were offered to Europeans who had the means to journey to the so-called Orient. These packages included, for example, "la grande tour" which provided an opportunity to venture into Ottoman territory and visit places such as the capital of Constantinople as well as various regions of the Balkans. Egypt was also a popular destination site, no doubt because it was home to the pyramids. The tales these travelers brought back with them helped create an image of exotic and "mystical" Orientals that proved difficult to shake, even for more probing and culturally self-reflective European intellectuals.

The attention given to Sufism only took a serious scholarly turn after the colonial powers began to administer their new holdings in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The religion of the "natives" became important to state interests. Scholars who specialized in the languages and

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enthusiastically and say something like, 'You're working on Sufism! Wonderful! Let me tell you, my grandfather was a *pir* [master], and I can take you to visit his tomb if you wish.' Ernst, *Sufism*, xi.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Ernst, *Sufism*, 16-17, and von Schlegel, "Translating Sufism," 578, as well as the more confessional but probing Muslim reflections of Lombard "Decline of Knowledge," and Winter, "The Poverty of Fanaticism."

<sup>6</sup> Ernst, *Sufism*, 1-18. For overviews of the study of Sufism in Western scholarship, see (besides Ernst above) Arberry, *An Introduction*; Brewster, *The Study of Sufism*; Knysh, "Historiography;" Nasr, *Studies in Sufism*; and Sijbrand, "Orientalism and Sufism." See also Schimmel's introductory comments in *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*.

cultures of the East – Orientalists – were recruited and trained to study eastern religions. It was only natural that their study of these other religions would be undertaken largely through a Christian lens. The orientalist Sir William Jones (d. 1794) and Sir John Malcolm (d. 1833), both of whom were associated with the British East India Company, had knowledge of Persian. This granted them access to certain Sufi texts, although their sources were limited and therefore prevented them from developing an accurate grasp of the tradition in question.<sup>7</sup> While they were familiar with the writings of some of the great Persian Sufi poets, such as Hafiz (d. 1389) and Rumi (d. 1273), the poetic imagery and metaphorical use of language so characteristic of Sufi literature were taken at face value, and appeared to violate the norms of Islamic orthodoxy.<sup>8</sup> The poetic celebrations of wine-drinking, love, music and dance seemed to be at odds with the rigid spirit they had come to associate with Islam. This perception was also due to the misguided belief that the Sufis considered the rituals of not only Islam but all religions to be superfluous, hindrances to the real goal of mystical union. Similar misinterpretations of Sufi texts also led to the belief that they were freethinkers who had more in common with Christianity, Greek philosophy and Hindu metaphysics than anything Islamic. It is not surprising therefore that Sir Malcolm wrote regarding the “Sooffees” in his two volume *History of Persia*, that “[t]here can be no doubt that their free opinions regarding its dogmas, their contempt of its forms, and their claim to a distinct communion with the Deity, are all calculated to subvert that belief for which they outwardly profess their respect.”<sup>9</sup>

The first independent treatment of Sufism in Western scholarship of Islam was produced by Lt. James William Graham, an officer working on the staff of Sir Malcolm, himself a Brigadier General in the colonial army. Originally delivered as a lecture in 1811 to the Bombay Literary Society, it was later published as “A Treatise on Sufism, or Mahomedan Mysticism.” Authored at the request of Malcolm,<sup>10</sup> the work clearly revealed a marked debt to his scholarship as well as that of Jones and Graham Leyden<sup>11</sup> (d. 1811). In the 34-page article Lt. Graham rearticulated the general sentiments of his predecessors within a more focused treatment of Sufism, particularly in regards to the supposed disregard the proponents of this tradition had for the rituals and norms of the shariah. It was this alleged disinterest in matters of “practical worship (*Jismâni âmul*)” in favor of “mental or spiritual worship (*Roohâni âmul*)” that led Graham to draw comparisons with Paul’s attitude towards Jewish Law, thereby highlighting the superiority of the ethos of real Christianity – and by extension Sufism – over that of Judaism and Islam.<sup>12</sup> Sufism was privileged in Graham’s eyes precisely to the degree that it resembled the true spirit of Christianity. The theological argument which seemed to underlie his entire treatment and which he summarized in his conclusion was that Sufism stood in relation to Islam in a manner which was somewhat

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<sup>7</sup> For more on William Jones, see Arberry, “New Light on Sir William Jones”.

<sup>8</sup> Ernst, “Between Orientalism,” 110; Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm, *History of Persia*, 2:382-283. For his entire treatment of Sufism, see 2:382-425. Some of the more seemingly far-fetched ideas he ascribes to the Sufis are relatively accurate though simplified representations of their doctrines, especially Ibn al-‘Arabi (d. 1240). See in particular, 403-404.

<sup>10</sup> The manuscript of Graham’s lecture was used by Malcolm for his treatment of Sufism in *The History of Persia*, published four years before Graham’s own treatise saw the light of day. See for example Malcolm, *History of Persia* 2:394.

<sup>11</sup> Leyden was himself the author of a significant article on Bayazid Ansari (better known as “Pir-i Roshan” or the “father of light”) (d. 1582/85), and his movement in Afghanistan. Published in *Asiatic Researches* in 1810, Leyden’s own admiration of the Sufis is clear from the tone of the article, as is his belief in the incompatibility of Sufism and Islam. See Leyden, “On the Rosheniah Sect.”

<sup>12</sup> Graham, “A Treatise on Sufism,” 97. See also Jones, 2:387.

analogous to that of Christianity's relation to Judaism. In both cases, a superior religion of spirit and grace emerged out of and completed an inferior religion of law and works.<sup>13</sup> Sufism was in effect the New Testament of Islam.<sup>14</sup> The only difference was that Sufism, for all its wisdom and beauty, did not express the perfection of Christianity, and Islam, unlike Judaism, was not the result of an authentic experience of revelation, but of a borrowing of some Christian and many Jewish elements, though in a manner that was, to quote his own words, "greatly interpolated and misinterpreted".<sup>15</sup> Aside from these issues, his treatment itself is a captivating read, filled with interesting anecdotes and thought-provoking speculations for the theologically minded.<sup>16</sup>

The manner in which these writers distinguished Sufism from Islam proved to be rather pervasive. Other scholars took their cue from the British orientalists, although we do begin to notice a growing acknowledgement of Sufism's roots in Islam, however slight, in some subsequent works. The German missionary and theologian Friedrich August Tholuck (d. 1877) published the first comprehensive study of Sufism, entitled *Ssufismus, sive Theosophia Persarum Pantheistica* (*Sufism, or the pantheistic theosophy of the Persians*) just a decade after Lt. Graham delivered his lecture. In his study, Tholuck was able to discern, perhaps for the first time, the seeds of a "mystical" trend in early Islam and even Muhammad himself, but he argued that it quickly transmuted into a pantheistic doctrine that soon came to stand outside the pale of orthodoxy. As the first major study of Sufism in a European language, with little to rely on by way of previous European scholarship, it was only natural that the work would have its limitations. Some of these can be attributed to Tholuck's reliance on a range of miscellaneous, even eclectic works which he listed in the opening of the study.<sup>17</sup> While the Persian sources were well-chosen, the same cannot be said of the Turkish or the Arabic material. Besides two books by Ghazali, the remaining few Arabic works were of little direct relevance to the study of Sufism much less Sufi "pantheism."<sup>18</sup> This was at least to some degree excusable considering the primary focus of the work, namely Persian theosophy. The many weaknesses of the study, to which Arberry drew attention,<sup>19</sup> can also be explained by the fact that Tholuck, though a linguistic prodigy and precocious student, was a mere 22 years old when his book was published, the same year in which he graduated with a licentiate of theology. His Latin work on Sufism would nevertheless leave a definitive mark on subsequent Western scholarship.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Graham, "Treatise on Sufism," 111, 126-128.

<sup>14</sup> The particular description is not that of Graham but an Op-Ed piece which recently appeared in the *New York Times* (August 2010). See Lipton, "Secular Sufism," 428. That the author of this piece would describe Sufism's relation to Islam in a manner that so perfectly conforms to Graham's own treatment of this subject two-centuries earlier illustrates what Said would identify as the closed, self-perpetuating, genealogically transmitted nature of Orientalist discourse.

<sup>15</sup> Graham, "Treatise on Sufism," 126.

<sup>16</sup> See also the comments of Arberry, *An Introduction*, 11-13; Ernst, *Sufism*, 13-15; and Lipton, "Secular Sufism," 429.

<sup>17</sup> Tholuck, *Ssufismus*, 1-25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-23.

<sup>19</sup> Arberry, *An Introduction*, 16-19.

<sup>20</sup> Tholuck later published influential works in the area of Christian theology and biblical exegesis. For details on his life, work, and influence, see "Tholuck" (*New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker House, 1954: 420-421]), Burrage, "Two Eminent Teachers," 92-95. For a more comprehensive and detailed biographical sketch authored while he was still alive, see Schaff, *Germany*, 278-294, who draws attention to his role as a leading Protestant theologian in Europe.

One of the most curious features of treatments of Islam and Sufism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, evident, for example, even in the subtitle of Tholuck's study, was the manner in which they tended to reflect certain theories of race which were circulating at the time. In the context of the study of Sufism, the more sophisticated theoretical and metaphysical expressions of the tradition were often attributed to Persian, namely Aryan or Indo-European influences. The Sufism that was most diametrically opposed to Islam was not the Sufism of the early nascent period, a tradition marked heavily by an otherworldly asceticism, as much as it was the Sufism of the later period. This was a time of philosophical flowering which owed more to external Persian influences than to the original Semitic sources. In this regard, the distinction between the Sufism that was more compatible with the spirit of Islam and the one that was fundamentally at odds with it was in essence the distinction between Semitic and Indo-European religion, or between Semitic and Aryan Islam.<sup>21</sup>

An example of the influence of these racial theories can be found in the work of the British imperial agent and Orientalist, Edward H. Palmer. In the preface to his *Oriental Mysticism: A Treatise on Sufiistic and Unitarian Theosophy of the Persians*, published in 1867, almost 50 years after Tholuck's work, Palmer went so far as to propose that Sufism in its philosophical formulations was ultimately little more than a "development of the Primæval Religion of the Aryan race," one which steered a middle-course between the total pantheism of the Hindus and the "deism" of the Qur'an.<sup>22</sup> By describing the tradition as "the religion of beauty," he was clearly calling to mind Hegel's (d. 1931) famous description of the religion of ancient Greece, as well as contrasting it with what for the German philosopher was "the religion of sublimity."<sup>23</sup> This latter category included not only Judaism but Islam, religions which in Hegel's eyes were marked by belief in a sublime, jealous God who elicited fear and obedience and demanded an observance to laws and commandments. Both were "instantiations of a single religious type."<sup>24</sup> Palmer intended to demonstrate his thesis of Aryan origins more thoroughly in a later work, but his ambitions were cut short by premature death at the hands of Bedouins in the Sinai, to whom he was sent as a kind of spy in 1882 on behalf of the Empire to report on anti-British sentiment.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The term "Aryan Islam" is Masuzawa's, who uses it to describe the German theologian Otto Pflieger's (d. 1908) theories of Islam's relation to Sufism, a product, in his eyes, of "Persian Islamism." Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 202, 197-204.

<sup>22</sup> Palmer, *Oriental Mysticism*, x-xi. For many 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, the eastern Indian religions, though part of the larger family of Aryan religions, were marked by certain chaotic excesses that were supposedly lacking in the pre-Christian religions of Europe, believed to be more balanced, orderly, and beautiful (Masuzawa 189-190). It is therefore significant that in his attempt to identify Sufism with the primal religion of the Aryans, Palmer distances Sufi doctrine not only from the Semitic doctrines of the Qur'an, but also the supposed extremes of Hinduism. Malcolm, perhaps also under the influence of such currents in European thought, similarly argued that despite the similarities between Hinduism and Sufism, the proponents of the latter avoided the "dreadful austerities," and practices "abhorrent to nature," common to Hindu visionaries (vol. 2, 397). As for Palmer's somewhat bizarre categorization of Qur'anic theology as deistic, this may be due to an influence of Hegel's interpretation of Islam as offered in his terse remarks in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. For the German philosopher, Islam was deistic because it rejected the incarnation.

<sup>23</sup> Palmer, *Oriental Mysticism*, x; Hegel, *Lectures*, 208.

<sup>24</sup> Dudley, "The Active Fanaticism," 122.

<sup>25</sup> Bidwell, "Edward Henry Palmer," 48-49; Said, *Orientalism*, 223. Curiously, Arberry fails to mention any of the political circumstances surrounding his death in his brief synopsis of his work, informing us only in passing that "he was murdered in the prime of life by Bedouins of the Egyptian desert" (Arberry, *Introduction*, 23), as if he was an entirely innocent victim of Arab violence. On the intersections between Palmer's orientalism and his political

As for the actual text itself, it was largely a synopsis of a short Sufi treatise which was also utilized by Tholuck.<sup>26</sup> For all its shortcomings, Palmer's work demonstrated that Orientalists were at their best when they confined themselves to philology and textual analysis and resisted the appeal of grand theorizing.

The theory of Indo-European origins of Sufism was also argued for by the Dutch scholar, Reinhart Dozy (d. 1883), in his *Essai sur l'histoire de l'Islam* originally published in 1897. On the question of whether Muslim mysticism had its origins in Islam, Dozy's response was negative. The historical factors which contributed to the development of Sufism came largely from Indian and Persian sources.<sup>27</sup> While Dozy acknowledged that the Sufis considered the origins of their own doctrines and practices to lie in Islamic revelation, he felt compelled to set the record straight. "Instead of developing the life of the soul," he wrote of the Qur'an, it "rather prescribes a certain number of religious practicalities and moral deeds," reiterating the common trope of Islam as an unimaginative, ossified, legalistic, and ritual-bound religion, fundamentally incompatible with the higher yearnings of the spirit for God. "The dogma of the Koran," he stated in no uncertain terms, "presents an obstacle to mysticism."<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the most well-known interpretation of Islam through the lens of 19<sup>th</sup> century racial and linguistic theories lay in the works of the celebrated Orientalist Ernst Renan (d. 1892). While Renan was not a scholar of Sufism *per se*, his own ideas contributed immeasurably to the conclusions that would be drawn by contemporary "Sufiologists." For Renan the superiority of the Indo-Europeans over the Semites lay precisely in the fact that the former had a much more sophisticated and developed imagination and capacity for reason than the latter. They had evolved in a manner which the Semites, shackled by their own languages and psychological makeup, could not.<sup>29</sup> The "Semites are rabid monotheists who produced no mythology, no art, no commerce, no civilization," he wrote, adding that "their consciousness is a narrow rigid one." Elsewhere he observed, in even stronger terms, that "[o]ne sees that in all things the Semitic race appears to us to be an incomplete race, by virtue of its simplicity. This race – if I dare use the analogy – is to the Indo-European family what a pencil sketch is to a painting; it lacks that variety, that amplitude, that abundance of life which is the condition of perfectibility."<sup>30</sup> It is no surprise therefore that many 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars who discerned in the Sufi tradition highly developed artistic, poetic and metaphysical expressions of the human spirit would only naturally trace the origin of such expressions to Aryan (i.e. and Persian and Indian) and not Semitic influences.<sup>31</sup> (Renan would become the subject of an extensive, acidic analysis in Said's *Orientalism*).<sup>32</sup>

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involvements, see Said, *Orientalism*, 223. For a more comprehensive treatment of Palmer's life and works, see Bidwell (1986).

<sup>26</sup> Palmer, *Oriental Mysticism*, ix. The work in question is identified by Palmer as 'Aziz b. Muhammad Nafasi's [= Nasafi] *Remotest Aim*.

<sup>27</sup> Dozy, *Essai sur l'Histoire*, 316-317.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 315. For his treatment of Sufism, see 314-339. Said felt that the tenor of Dozy's writings reflected an "impressive antipathy" towards all things Oriental, Islamic and Arabic. Said, *Orientalism*, 151.

<sup>29</sup> Arvidsson, "Aryan Mythology," 336-338; Olender, *Language of Paradise*, 51-81.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Said, *Orientalism*, 149.

<sup>31</sup> For an excellent overview of the contrasting conceptualizations of the Aryans and the Semites in 19<sup>th</sup> century European thought, see Arvidsson, "Aryan Mythology," 336-342, and Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*. On Islam as a Semitic religion, see Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 179-206. See also the insightful

A response to Renan's racial and linguistic theories as well as other incriminating observations about Islam was formulated by one of the founders of Islamic modernism, the theologian and reformer Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897). While Afghani was himself of Persian background, he argued that Renan's ideas surrounding the intellectual inferiority of the Semitic race were flawed on a number of grounds, including the fact that the sophisticated scientific, artistic and philosophical legacy which the early Arab Muslims inherited and quickly assimilated came to them through the Hellenized Semites of the Near-East. Moreover, Arab culture and language so deeply permeated the intellectual and cultural landscape of the Islamic world in its golden age, that to suggest that the philosophical, scientific and artistic developments of the medieval Muslims were almost entirely the result of the Indo-European presence in Islamdom was to ignore the weight of history.<sup>33</sup> Yet even though Afghani objected to many of Renan's ideas, as a thinker relatively well-versed in the ideas which were circulating in European intellectual circles in his time, including the growing body of Western scholarship on Islam, it appears that he himself could not escape the influence of Orientalist scholarship. In this regard, we begin to see the effects that such scholarship could have on the self-perception of the subjects of this very scholarship, an influence made possible by the uneven relationship of power between the colonizing Orientalist and the colonized Oriental. It is not surprising therefore to find in Afghani the beginnings not only of Islamic modernism -- the result of Islam's encounter with the colonial West -- but also of a reaction to the pervasiveness of Sufi culture in the Islamic world. Afghani's attitudes towards Sufism can also be better understood when we consider that as a pan-Islamic, anti-imperialist political activist, he was deeply affected by the technological and military might of the European powers. The Sufism which had so thoroughly permeated the Muslim culture of his day could not but have contributed, in his eyes, to the decline and decay of the Islamic world. Muslim weakness was inseparable from the emergence of certain forms of Sufi piety and their pervasive presence among Muslims. While Afghani was not opposed to Sufism as a whole, his generally critical attitude towards certain features of the tradition significantly impacted the thinking of his students and followers, the most notable of them being Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), one of the founders of the Salafi movement. The ideas of Afghani and Abduh, as well as the latter's student, Rashid Rida (d. 1935) regarding Sufism would eventually become a hallmark both of Islamic modernism and fundamentalism. Over time these reformist articulations of Muslim faith -- flip-sides, ultimately, of the same coin -- would gradually become more pronouncedly anti-Sufi.<sup>34</sup>

Another response to Renan's theories on race was formulated by the celebrated Hungarian Islamicist, Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921), who was also a friend of Afghani. Described in an obituary as "deeply pious in his own soul, and passionately attached to his own [Jewish] faith,"<sup>35</sup> Goldziher may have felt at least partially subject to the attacks of the scientific racism of the French philologist and historian. He lamented the fact that Renan's race-psychology had, in his own words, "become an incontestable scientific dogma to a large proportion of the professional world," and that it was being "treated by learned and cultivated people not specially engaged in

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treatment by Lipton, who traces the historical background to modern, popular depictions of Sufism, mostly in the United States: "Secular Sufism," 427-431.

<sup>32</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 130-151.

<sup>33</sup> Keddie, *An Islamic Response*, 88; Kohn, "Afghani on Empire," 407.

<sup>34</sup> See Ernst, *Sufism*, xvi-xvii; Hourani, *Emergence*, 90-102, and; Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis*, 86-108.

<sup>35</sup> Gottheil, "Ignaz Goldziher," 193.

this study as an actual axiom in the consideration of race-peculiarities.”<sup>36</sup> In response, Goldziher sought to demonstrate that mythology and the capacity for complex imaginative thought are in fact the precursors or foundations of all religions, and not absent in the Semitic traditions. On the question of Islam, he argued that the particular manner in which the religion developed had less to do with its Semitic origins than with competing historical factors and trends within the Arabian and larger Near-Eastern social context out of which it.<sup>37</sup> While Goldziher did not deny that there were racial categories, he did contest Renan’s claim that the Semites were incapable of producing mythology and higher culture like the Indo-Europeans. Yet, on the question of Sufism and its relation to Islam, Goldziher, like other European scholars of his time, did not stray from the standard narrative. In an essay on the historical development of Sufism published in 1910, in which he expanded some of the ideas he introduced in a previous essay published in 1899, Goldziher reiterated the general consensus of his time, that Sufism was largely the product of foreign influences – Neoplatonic, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist – and not an indigenous, natural and internal outgrowth of the Arabian Prophet’s own teachings, (with the exception of certain ascetic elements which could be traced back to the Meccan Period of Islamic revelation).<sup>38</sup> For Goldziher, Sufi doctrine, as a general rule, arose not through a process of Scriptural exegesis but eisegesis in which an alien worldview was grafted onto a religious text that in its fundamental characteristics was not amenable to it. “The Sufis, insofar as they saw any value in taking their stand on Islamic ground, or at least in being acknowledged as standing on such ground,” he observed, “read their world view *into the Qur’ān* and the sacred traditions” [italics mine].<sup>39</sup> As a general rule, Goldziher displayed an impatient and often unwarranted tendency to ascribe historical influences to any similarities he discerned between Sufi doctrines and practices and those of the surrounding non-Islamic religions. This is particularly evident in the way he compares Sufism and Buddhism,<sup>40</sup> without considering that a meditative interiorization of consciousness, the hallmark of Sufi and perhaps all introspective religious piety, might have led to similar if not identical experiences and corresponding conclusions about the nature of ultimate reality. In his excessive historicizing, he was simply a child of his time. One of Goldziher’s more important and lasting contributions to the development of Sufi studies in the West, however, was the distinction he pressed between the asceticism of the formative period and of the mysticism which followed it, between *zuhd* and *tasawwuf*.

A more circumspect approach to Sufism’s relation with Islam was taken by Goldziher’s younger contemporary, Reynold A. Nicholson (d. 1945), whose academic accomplishments included the first complete English translation of Rumi’s multi-volume *Mathnawi-i ma’nawi*, a project he worked on for the last twenty years of his life.<sup>41</sup> Nicholson argued against the theory that the more philosophically oriented strain of the Sufi tradition, what he called “theosophical

<sup>36</sup> Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-11. See also: Arvidsson, “Aryan Mythology,” 327; Conrad, “The Pilgrim from Pest,” 124.

<sup>38</sup> Even here, however, his general position was that Christianity was the main influence for the asceticism which characterized early Sufism. “With the expansion of Islam, particularly in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, the ascetically minded [Muslims] gained a much broader scope for observing such models [of asceticism]. The experiences they gained from their contacts with Christianity became a very school of asceticism in Islam. Ascetic inclinations now manifested themselves in a heightened degree, and conquered ever-growing groups of Muslims” Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology*, 130.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 140. For some reflections on Goldziher’s theories regarding Buddhist influences, see Duka, “Influence of Buddhism,” 125-141.

<sup>41</sup> Arberry, “Professor Reynold A. Nicholson,” 91.



mysticism,” was of Persian instead of Semitic origin, by noting, among other things, that the earliest figures to contribute to its development, namely Abu Sulayman al-Darani (d. 830) and Dhu al-Nun (d. 856), “probably had not a drop of Persian blood in their veins.”<sup>42</sup> Instead, Nicholson posited Neoplatonic influences as a more plausible explanation for the development of *ma‘rifa* or gnosis-centered Sufism.<sup>43</sup> He was willing to concede however that the more ascetic, otherworldly strain of the earliest period was a “native product of Islam.”<sup>44</sup> Like a probing scholar who refines his views in light of new evidence, Nicholson modified his own position following the evolution of his own understanding of the formative period. In a letter to Arthur J. Arberry (d. 1969), his most distinguished student and a preeminent specialist of Sufism in his own right, Nicholson expressed his belief that while Hellenistic influences were instrumental in the development of the early theosophical tradition, they were simply one of various competing forces.<sup>45</sup> Even though Nicholson modified his position, he still seems to have retained his initial position that Sufism as a whole was not an organic outgrowth of “pure” Islam,<sup>46</sup> no doubt because of his presumption that Islam was overly legalistic.<sup>47</sup> In relation to Goldziher, however, one notices a more tempered, nuanced, and even less confident view about the origins of Sufism, as well as a greater recognition of the Islamic seeds of the tradition.<sup>48</sup>

As Knysh has poignantly noted, the influences emphasized by scholars tended to reflect their particular training as well as intellectual and even ideological orientation.<sup>49</sup> The Dutch scholar Arendt Wensinck (d. 1939), for example, who specialized in the study of Eastern Christianity and Judaism, stressed the role played by these traditions, particularly in their more Neoplatonic formulations, while minimizing other, mostly Indian, influences. He went on to argue that the very mystical tradition that was formed through Eastern Christian and Jewish influences would later contribute to the development of its own precursors, particularly Christianity, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Similarly, the Swedish scholar, Henrik Nyberg (d. 1974), a specialist in Greek and Hellenistic thought, felt that Sufi metaphysics could be adequately explained by recognizing its Greek antecedents. In a study of Ibn al-‘Arabi (d. 1240) published in 1919,<sup>50</sup> he presented the Andalusian thinker as essentially a Greek philosopher whose use of Islamic scripture was little more than “window-dressing” carefully employed to hide sources fundamentally alien to the

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<sup>42</sup> Nicholson, “A Historical Enquiry,” 316.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 316-320.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>45</sup> Arberry, *An Introduction*, xx.

<sup>46</sup> Knysh, “Historiography” 221-222.

<sup>47</sup> Take for example his remark in the preface to his translation of Hujwiri’s *Kashf al-mahjub*, where he states regarding the author’s intentions, “that he is anxious to represent Sufism as the true interpretation of Islam,” but then goes on to assert immediately afterwards that his aims in this respect are betrayed by the contents of the *Kashf* itself (Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, xiii). As a point of illustration he draws attention to Hujwiri’s claim that the ultimate purpose behind the pilgrimage (and indeed all rituals in Islam) is the contemplation of God, and that the rites are less important than the inner states they are meant to create. In citing Hujwiri’s treatment of the pilgrimage as evidence of his claim, Nicholson fails to consider those Qur’anic verses (such as 2:177 or 22:37) where it is made clear that piety should not be reduced to mere observance of ritual forms. Moreover, nowhere in Hujwiri’s discussion of the pilgrimage does he suggest that the rites may be done away with altogether.

<sup>48</sup> See for example the poem quoted by Arberry, which Nicholson composed near the end of his life. It not only reflects Nicholson’s predilection towards mysticism, (if we are to assume, as Arberry did, that it was indicative of his teacher’s personal beliefs), but also a thoroughly Islamic spirit. Arberry, *Mystical Poems of Rumi*, 23-24.

<sup>49</sup> Knysh, “Historiography,” 222.

<sup>50</sup> The work included the Arabic text of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s *Insha’ al-dawa’ir* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1919).

spirit of the religion he claimed to represent.<sup>51</sup> Later, Robert Zaehner (d. 1977), a Hinduism specialist, sought to demonstrate the essentially Hindu foundations and character of Sufi metaphysics. The arguments themselves were based on the entirely speculative Indian identity of an obscure teacher of Bayazid Bistami (d. 875), mistranslations of Sufi texts, and unnecessary comparisons with Hindu Scripture.<sup>52</sup> The underlying premise at work behind his analyses was exemplified by his wry conjecture that a young Westerner could only take an interest in Islam when “Islam itself is turned upside down and becomes Sūfism”<sup>53</sup> in other words, when Islam is emptied of itself and infused with an alien Eastern philosophy. In his theorizing of Sufi origins, Zaehner did little more than recast the ideas of Max Horten (d. 1945), that German Orientalist about whom Arberry said, “[n]o scholar has labored more industriously or written more copiously to prove the Indian origins of Sufism.”<sup>54</sup> The theory of Indian origins, however, was circulated even in the time of Graham and Malcolm.<sup>55</sup>

As far as the arguments for more exclusively Christian origins of Sufism were concerned, they were put forward by a number of scholars, including Henri Lammens (d. 1937), the well-reputed Belgian historian of early Islam, for whom the Qur’an was, in his own words, “little adapted to stir the inward and truly spiritual emotions.” The Jesuit Orientalist felt that while the Scripture served its purpose well for a “religion of warriors and shepherds,” it was entirely unsuited for “finer spirits.”<sup>56</sup> The arguments for Christian origins were also proffered by the British scholar of early Sufism, Margaret Smith (d. 1970),<sup>57</sup> and to a lesser extent by the Swedish Bishop Tor Andrae (d. 1947), both of whom had a deeply personal appreciation for the Sufi tradition. Perhaps the most notable exponent of the theory of Christian origins, its principal advocate, was the Spanish priest and Arabist, Asin Palacios (d. 1944), an indefatigable scholar responsible for significant contributions to the study of Ghazali (d. 1111) and Ibn al-‘Arabi. Beneath his vast literary output, however, there lay the theme of Christian origins, the belief that the highest metaphysical expressions of Sufism were, in the final analysis, little more than *islam*

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<sup>51</sup> Knysh, “Historiography,” 222.

<sup>52</sup> These were unnecessary because the very Sufi ideas for which he claimed Indian origin could just as easily be drawn from indigenous Islamic Scriptural sources. For an even-handed, penetrating critique in which the aforementioned (and other) weaknesses of Zaehner’s theories are brought to light, see Arberry, “Bistamiana,” 28-37. See also Massignon’s criticism of the theory of Indian origins, Massignon, *Essay on the Origins*, 57-68.

<sup>53</sup> Zaehner, “Why Not Islam?,” 167.

<sup>54</sup> Arberry, *An Introduction*, 38.

<sup>55</sup> Graham, “A Treatise on Sufism,” 98; Malcolm, *History of Persia*, 2: 397, 424; cf. Massignon, *Essay on the Origins*, 57-58. Graham did not seem to necessarily ascribe to this view; he notes simply in passing that “the Sūfis are supposed by some to have borrowed their doctrine [from the Indians]” (98). Malcolm on the other hand took a more definite position, at least in regard to the Sufis of Persia: “[they] have borrowed much of their belief and many of their usages from India” (2: 397).

<sup>56</sup> Lammens, *Islam*, 112. For his full treatment of Sufism, see 111-139.

<sup>57</sup> Smith felt that even those ideas within Islamic mysticism which could be traced back to the religion’s founder were of Christian origin. She writes that “Muhammad, from what he saw and heard around him of Christian asceticism, and from the fragments of Christian mystical teaching which came to his knowledge, laid the foundation, perhaps all unwittingly, of a doctrine of mysticism...” Smith, *Studies in Early Mysticism*, 152. It is true that in her conclusion she concedes that Islamic mysticism had its ultimate origin in the universal human desire for contact with God (“Mysticism in its essence represents a spiritual tendency which is practically universal” [256]), but its particular expression within the world of Islam took place through doctrines and symbols that were largely of Christian origin, and so we return to the theme of Christian origins, to the idea that Sufism was “influenced in the main by the teaching of Christian mysticism” (244). For her general treatment of this subject, see chapters 6-8 as well as the conclusion of her 1931 (reprinted in 1973) study, *Studies in Early Mysticism*, 103-152, 244-257.

*cristinizado*, “Christianized Islam.” Like Wensinck, Palacios acknowledged the influence which Muslim thinkers had on the development of Christian spirituality, but this influence was itself retraceable to Christianity, and this explains why it was so easily integrated into medieval Christian thought. Palacios’s zeal to trace Islamic spirituality’s Christian foundations led to him to identify Christian sources for Muslim traditions, aphorisms, sayings, or ideas remotely similar in form or content.<sup>58</sup> In Palacios’s scholarship, Arberry discerned a tendency, also evident among many others, “[t]o argue, tendentiously ... that all that in their view is good in Islam is of foreign influence, and must be traced to one or other non-Islamic source.”<sup>59</sup> That Arberry was cognizant of this proclivity among scholars, almost 40 years before Said’s *Orientalism* brought such orientations to the forefront of debate within the field of Islamic Studies, admirably reveals his awareness of some of the weaknesses of the scholarly tradition of his time.

One of the most important figures in the field of Sufi studies was the French Orientalist and later Melkite Priest, Louis Massignon (d. 1962), an eclectic figure<sup>60</sup> whose conversion to Christianity was inspired by his experiences in the Middle-East. The influence he wielded as a Catholic theologian and France’s leading Islamicist allowed him to contribute to a shift in the official position of the Church vis-à-vis Islam. Massignon’s most lasting contribution to the development of the study of Sufism in the West, apart from his magisterial four-volume study of the mystic-martyr Hallaj (d. 910), was in his demonstration of the principally Qur’anic origins of Sufism. It was to this subject which he devoted a significant portion of his concise but monumental work published in 1922, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane (Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism)*. “[T]he Qur’an,” he famously wrote in the monograph, “through constant recitation, meditation, and practice, is the source of Islamic mysticism.”<sup>61</sup> Massignon spent the opening chapter of the *Essay* demonstrating not only the Scriptural basis of Sufism, but also the numerous shortcomings and oversights of attempts to identify foreign sources. He felt that in the absence of incontrovertible evidence, textual and otherwise, to substantiate cases of “borrowing” (which, in his eyes, his scholarly peers had failed to present), it was more reasonable to assume that the mystical tradition of Islam grew primarily out of its own rich and fertile soil. Massignon also drew attention to certain pivotal moments in Muhammad’s own life, part and parcel of Muslim dogma, which became a basis for the mystic quest within Islam. While his argument for Sufism’s Islamic origins did not convince all his peers, his general position came, within time, to exert a powerful sway in the field of Sufi studies, particularly within the post-Saidian climate of Middle-Eastern and Islamic Studies as Islamicists began to take more seriously the tradition’s understanding of itself and its own

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<sup>58</sup> Arberry, *An Introduction*, 53-55; Knysh, “Historiography,” 223.

<sup>59</sup> Arberry, *An Introduction*, 55.

<sup>60</sup> Julian Baldick has with great insight drawn attention to many of the tensions in Massignon’s own extremely active life and the manner in which they colored his scholarship; Baldick, “Massignon,” 29-39. Some of his conclusions about the French scholar, however, appear quite speculative and unjustified. As a case in point, he calls into question Massignon’s own account of being threatened by execution, noting that “this is probably the result of confusion [on his part]” (31). As evidence, Baldick simply observes in passing that Massignon had contracted malaria, providing no further medical or historical reason for how such a monumental “confusion” could have arisen. For critical assessments of Massignon’s scholarship, see also Waardenburg’s “L. Massignon’s Study of Religion and Islam” and “Louis Massignon (1883-1962) As Student of Islam.”

<sup>61</sup> Massignon, *Essay on the Origins*, 73.

narrative.<sup>62</sup> In this regard, Massignon may be rightly credited with introducing something of a paradigm shift within the field of Sufi scholarship.

Massignon's own project, however, reflected, as in the case of all scholars, (particularly in the humanities and social sciences), his own subjective orientation. In his specific case, this orientation was determined by a particular kind of relationship with Islam that was colored by France's colonial involvements in the Arab world, his close relationships with some of the leading religious and intellectual figures of his day, as well as unique existential concerns which provided the underlying narrative to his vast literary output. One of the salient features of this output – both a strength and weakness – was the manner in which his interpretation of Christianity's relation to other faiths bore upon his work. This was a strength because the ecumenical spirit of his deeply Catholic personality, shaped by intimate encounters with generous, hospitable Muslims in the Islamic world as well as at least a partial recognition of the divine origins of Muhammad's revelations,<sup>63</sup> allowed him to overcome some of the academic hubris which characterized so much of the Orientalism of his day. But this theological orientation was also a weakness, because, as a pious doctrinally-bound Christian, Islam, even within its Sufi formulations, was, in the final analysis, unable to offer what Christianity could in its completeness. For Massignon, Islam was at heart, as Said poignantly observed, little more than an "imperfect substitute in the East for Christianity."<sup>64</sup> The closest the religion of the Prophet was able to approach the perfection of the religion of Christ was through its own Christ-like figure, Hallaj, whose spiritual achievements, in Massignon's eyes, strangely surpassed even those of Muhammad.<sup>65</sup> In espousing such a position, the French Orientalist faintly echoed the ideas of Graham, who, as we saw above, found in Sufism an imperfect reflection within Islam of Christian spirituality. Massignon's overall position, however, differed from that of Graham both in terms of the depth of its complexity and range of scholarship, as well as the deeply sympathetic attitude which guided his study of "the religion of Ishmael's tears."

A slightly different approach to Sufism's relation with Islam was taken by Massignon's younger contemporary, Arberry, who saw in Sufism an expression of a universal mysticism, but one that in its formal expression was inextricably bound to Islam. The relation between Islamic mysticism and Islam was analogous, in his eyes, to the relation between mystical movements in general and

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<sup>62</sup> This turn coincided with a general theoretical shift in the humanities and social sciences which became prominent in the 70s and early 80s due to feminist theory, post-modernism, literary theory, and later, post-colonial theory (indebted heavily to Said). Their emergence allowed for the accepted canons of knowledge and their supposedly objective nature to be more thoroughly interrogated; Hermansen, "Academic Study of Sufism," 30. For some brief personal reflections on Said's influence on Middle-Eastern and Islamic studies, see Martin, 902-904. See also Ernst, "Between Orientalism," and "The West and Islam?"

<sup>63</sup> "Muhammad *did not make* the Qur'ān," he wrote in the *Essay* (98, n.4). He was also of the view that Islam was the result of genuine divine inspiration, that it was a "supernatural" religion, unlike Buddhism and Hinduism, which were in his view "natural" religions. See Laude, *Pathways to Islam*, 130; Massignon, "Three Prayers of Abraham, 1989.

<sup>64</sup> Said, *The World, the Text, the Critic*, 285.

<sup>65</sup> This is because the martyr of Baghdad, for Massignon, reached a *unio mystica* which even the Prophet could not, having gone no further in his own nocturnal mystical ascent than the *distance of two bows length or closer* (Q 59:3) which purportedly separated him from complete union with the divine. It did not occur to Massignon that the two bows were interpreted by some Sufi authors to refer not to a distance which remained untraversed, but two arcs (descending and ascending) which when brought together symbolized the completion of a circle, and hence a return to the divine point of one's origin.

the religious systems out of which they emerge.<sup>66</sup> Unlike many of his fellow academics, he was less interested in determining Sufism's supposedly foreign sources than in appreciating the integral unity of Sufi thought and practice. As an outstanding translator of the Quran, he was also able to discern, like Massignon, the Scriptural origins of the peculiar features and characteristics of the Sufi tradition. While Arberry was nowhere nearly as politically involved as Massignon, nor played an important role in fostering irenic Christian-Muslim relations, he was by no means a disengaged scholar whose devotion to the study of Sufism was guided by mere intellectual curiosity. In a brief autobiographical account published after his death,<sup>67</sup> he confessed of the effect which the life-long study of the Muslim mystics had on his inner life. Drawing attention to the the Divine Light of which the Quran speaks in the famous Light Verse (24:35), he wrote:

Once this light has shone in the heart, no darkness can overcome it. I believe that light to be a reality, because I myself have experienced it. I believe it also to be the Truth, and I think it not appropriate to call it God. I am an academic scholar, but I have come to realize that pure reason is unqualified to penetrate the mystery of God's light, and may, indeed, if too fondly indulged, interpose an impenetrable veil between the heart and God. The world in which we live is certainly full of shadows. I have had my full share of personal sorrows and anxieties, and I am as acutely aware as the next man of the appalling dangers threatening mankind. But because I have experienced the Divine Light, I need not wish for any higher grace

I have now for some years resumed my Christian worship, in which I find great comfort, being no longer troubled by the intellectual doubts generated by too great a concern for dogma. I know that Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Parsi – all sorts and conditions of men, have been, are and will be always irradiated by that Light 'kindled by a Blessed Tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West' [Q 24:35] – the Universal Tree of the truth and the goodness of God. For God, being the One Universal, has an infinite solicitude and love of each particular, and suffers His light to shine into every human heart open to receive it.<sup>68</sup>

While Arberry's own faith in Christianity was restored through an encounter with Islam, much as in the case of Massignon, Islam was not for him, as it was for the French Islamicist, "an intimation of the promise of Christianity."<sup>69</sup> This may have been largely due to the fact that the British Orientalist was not as bound, as Massignon was, by official Christian doctrine or theology. Indeed, it was Arberry's own prolonged exposure to the "light of the mystics" which allowed him to see beyond those very dogmas which prevented him from taking seriously the

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<sup>66</sup> Arberry, *Sufism*, 12.

<sup>67</sup> It is not clear whether he ever intended to publish the account, which makes it all the most fascinating. The editor of the work in which the *Apologia Spiritualis* appears, (a revised version of Arberry's *Mystical Poems of Rumi*, first published in the year of his death), simply notes that it "was found among Arberry's papers." Arberry, *Mystical Poems of Rumi*, 21.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>69</sup> Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam*, 131.

faith of his upbringing, a faith which in his younger days, he had considered giving himself entirely to through the priesthood.<sup>70</sup>

Arberry's own outlook regarding the universality of mysticism was not far removed from that of French thinker, René Guénon (d. 1951),<sup>71</sup> who although not an academically trained scholar of Sufism, nevertheless exerted a tremendous influence on the course of Sufi studies in Europe and North America. The convert to Islam and initiate of the Shadhili-Hamadani Sufi Order, who later took up residence in Egypt in a traditional house not far from the Pyramids after "abandoning" modern Europe, was in his day one of the most prolific proponents of what would come to be better known as the school of Perennial Philosophy or Traditionalism. Educated in philosophy and mathematics, he dabbled in his youth with the occult, but quickly turned against it as well as forms of what he believed to be "pseudo-traditions" in favor of authentic traditions (the major world religions), particularly those which still offered legitimate forms of initiation. Due to his influence on a range of European and North American intellectuals with whom he was in correspondence, as well the writings of some of his close collaborators, most notably the younger Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998),<sup>72</sup> his role within the development of Sufi studies cannot be underestimated. Indeed, it is discernible to this day in varying degrees among some of its most prominent scholars. Despite his many remarkable insights into Sufi doctrine, the more radical nature of his writing (to which Arberry would certainly not have subscribed) made it difficult for his ideas to gain any real circulation within mainstream academic circles.

One of the hallmarks of Guénon's oeuvre was his unflinching criticism of modernity, in all its modes, articulated most forcefully in *La crise du monde moderne* (*Crisis of the Modern World*, authored in 1927, and then later in *La règne de la quantité et les signes des temps* (*The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*). His critique of the modern world, in some cases almost prophetic,<sup>73</sup> extended into the domain of Orientalist scholarship, which for him, being marked by the very spirit of modernity, was unable to penetrate into the real meaning of the rites, rituals,

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<sup>70</sup> Massignon and Arberry were not alone in being inspired to take their own faiths more seriously as a response to an encounter with Sufism. R. J. McCarthy (d. 1981), wrote in the introduction to his translation of Ghazali's autobiographical *Deliverance from Error*: "My reading of Ghazali has made me, or at least has incited me to be, a better practicing Catholic in the fullest sense of the term. It has not moved me, despite my real admiration, and even veneration, for Ghazali to embrace Islam. Rather it has made me more aware of the great spiritual riches at hand in my own Catholic tradition. My experience has been, though on a lesser level, somewhat like that of Louis Massignon and Harvey Cox" McCarthy, "Introduction," 51.

<sup>71</sup> For a brief assessment of his life, work and influence, see Nasr, "Studies in Sufism," 100-104.

<sup>72</sup> For more on Schuon, see the recently released anthology compiled by James Cutsinger, *Splendor of the True: A Frithjof Schuon Reader*. See also Nasr, "Studies in Sufism," 107-109.

<sup>73</sup> Consider, for example, his prediction of an impending global environmental crisis. Referring to the technological developments arising from the application of modern science, he wrote almost a century ago that the "inventions, whose number is at present growing at an ever-increasing pace, are all the more dangerous in that they bring into play forces whose real nature is quite unknown to the men who utilize them." He went on to add: "The danger inherent in these inventions, even in those that are not expressly created for a purpose destructive to mankind – but which nonetheless cause just as many catastrophes, without mentioning the unsuspected disturbances that they create in the physical environment – will undoubtedly continue to grow, and that to an extent difficult to foretell, so that [...] it is by no means improbable that it will be through these inventions that the modern world will bring about its own destruction, unless it can check its course in this direction while there is still time." *Insights into Islamic Esoterism*, 90-91. Guénon's insights would be developed in much greater detail by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. See for example his *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, based on lectures he delivered at the University of Chicago in 1966, as well as his more recent *Religion and the Order of Nature*.

and doctrines of the religious traditions of the world, and could therefore not but reduce the sacred to the profane. In the case of Sufism, it was this very inability to penetrate into the inner meanings that prevented Orientalists, for Guénon, from being able to discern the integral unity between the Islamic tradition's esoteric kernel or *haqiqah* and exoteric husk or shariah. In this regard, Guénon felt that there was uncanny resemblance between more literally minded believers or "fundamentalists," on the one hand, and "modernists" on the other, no matter how educated they might be. Both shared an inability to understand the real meaning of symbols, to see beyond forms and appearances into the inner essence of religion. While this inability reduced many of the religiously minded to superficial, excessively literalist and dogmatic interpretations of religion, it reduced Orientalists to reductive, historicist analyses that in the end, because of the very worldviews they were operating within, made it virtually impossible for them genuinely understand the nature of religion, and, for our purposes, Sufism's intimate relation with Islam. "If it is 'difficult to determine the beginning of Sufism in Islam,'" wrote Guénon, "it is because traditionally it has not and cannot have any other beginning than that of Islam itself. It is in such matters that it is advisable to be wary of the abuses of the modern 'historical method.'"<sup>74</sup>

It is worth drawing attention in this context to the fundamental difference between Guénon's critique of Orientalism and that of Said. At some risk of simplifying, it could be said that for Said, the problem with Orientalist discourse rested largely on epistemological problems which were of a "horizontal" nature. They centered on an inability of cultures and civilizations to represent their others in a manner that was not in some form or another self-serving and self-privileging, particularly in circumstances which involved long-standing historical conflicts. For Guénon, on the other hand, the epistemological problems were of an entirely different order, being instead of a "vertical" nature. Orientalists, for the French writer, were unable to understand the religions of the East because they had lost the ability to understand their own religions, to perceive and discern the meaning of the sacred within their own world. This was itself the result of a gradual historical devolutionary process the signs of which did not fully appear until the Renaissance and Enlightenment.<sup>75</sup> On the principle that only like can know like, Guénon argued that a society which could not understand the real nature of its own religions would be ill-prepared to penetrate into the deepest mysteries of the religions of others, particularly when those very religions would be analyzed through the same tools, and within the same secular framework, that one's own religions had been studied and dismantled, and through which the inner meanings of those religions had been closed off. For Guénon the problem with Orientalism had little to do, as it did for Said, with self-representation, being able to define one's own religion or religious identity, or giving voice to the voiceless. An Easterner who represented her tradition through the tools of Western scholarship would, for Guénon, fare no better in her task than a full-fledged European Orientalist. Conversely, a Westerner who grasped the inner meaning of religion through a higher intuition into its esoteric content, made possible, for Guénon, through initiation, would be in a much better position to understand the religions of the East than an Easterner whose mode of thinking had been completely modernized and stripped of its own traditional character. Naturally, the underlying presumption on Guénon's part was that there was a perennial philosophy, an essence which in some mysterious form lay at the heart of

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<sup>74</sup> Guénon, *Insights into Islamic Esoterism*, 70.

<sup>75</sup> Although the mechanism which began this process would for Guénon have emerged earlier.

all authentic religious traditions, so that to grasp the truth of one tradition in its totality would be to grasp, by extension, the truths of all religions.<sup>76</sup>

Since the time of Guénon, the postulate of a common transcendental essence which, when expressed in a world of multiplicity, creates the variety of world religions, much in the same way that colorless light appears in the world through in the form of various colors, has become the subject of vigorous debate within academic contexts, confessional Sufi circles, and beyond. Said's postmodernist anti-essentialism, no doubt, coupled with his general agnosticism on matters of religion (despite his nominal Anglicanism), would render him unreceptive to such ideas, aside from their potentially instrumental value in being able to foster and contribute towards greater understanding among religions in a fractured world.

### Recent Developments

Since the time of Massignon, the field of Sufi studies has expanded tremendously. This brief overview is not meant to be an exhaustive survey of the scholarship of Sufism from its inception in the late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> century up until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but a brief synopsis of some of the principle trajectories and figures involved in the discipline with a particular focus on how the relation between Sufism and Islam was conceptualized. While it remains outside its scope to explore post-Massignonian developments, and identify the individuals responsible for the expansion of this body of knowledge, it is sufficient to note that a remarkable amount of work has been done by the French Orientalist's academic successors, some of whom began to publish their findings while he was still alive. Among the many who stand out are H. Corbin (d. 1978), Fr. P. Nwyia (d. 1980), T. Izutsu (d. 1993), F. Meier (d. 1998), A. Schimmel (d. 2003), R. Gramlich (d. 2006), B. Radtke, S. H. Nasr, C. Ernst, M. Chodkiewicz, C. Addas, J. Morris, W. Chittick, S. Murata, V. Cornell, M. Hermansen, A. Knysh, A. Karamustafa, G. Bowering, M. Sells, V. Hoffman, J. Renard, E. Geoffroy, and a host of others, whom the limits of space prevent us from naming.

Within the last few decades numerous monographs have appeared on individual Sufi figures, themes within the tradition, and various aspects of its historical, cultural and institutional growth. Important texts have also been translated, not only from Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu, but other languages of the Islamic world; critical editions have also appeared. There also now exist a few journals dedicated exclusively to the study of Sufism, such as the *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society*,<sup>77</sup> the recently inaugurated *Rumi Review* (University of Exeter/Near East University [Cyprus], 2010) and the *Journal of Sufi Studies* (Brill, 2012). If these trends continue, and the discipline becomes more global in its vision, both by abandoning some of its older presumptions about the nature of the tradition's relation with Islam, as well as Islam itself, and also by taking seriously the contributions of specialists in the Islamic world, we shall move to a more comprehensive, nuanced and accurate understanding of the theoretical, poetic, literary, and cultural richness of the tradition. We shall also be in a better position to appreciate the manner in which Sufism has formed an integral part of Islam for centuries, being none other than Islam's own "science of the soul," or as Ghazali preferred to say, the "jurisprudence of the heart" (*fiqh al-qalb*), and that it has served to provide the life-blood and sap for the inner life of pious

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<sup>76</sup> The most extensive treatment of this argument is found in Schuon's *Transcendent Unity of Religions*.

<sup>77</sup> <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/journals.html>



Muslims, from court officials to peasants, from erudite scholars to popular preachers, for centuries, despite the protests of fundamentalists and Islamists, most of whom neither have any serious training in the classical sciences of Islam, nor are aware of the intellectual history of the religion which they seek to preserve.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> On fundamentalist attitudes towards Sufism, see Ernst, *Sufism*, 16-17, and von Schlegel, "Translating Sufism," 578, as well as the more confessional but probing Muslim reflections of Lombard, "The Decline of Knowledge," and Winter, "Poverty of Fanaticism."

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