Sufism, Scripture and Scholarship: From Graham to Guénon and Beyond

By Atif Khalil and Shiraz Sheikh

> We do not see the world as it is.
> We see the world as we are.
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> *(Talmud)*

The origins of the academic study of Sufism in Western scholarship may be retraced to the second half of the 18th century, with the first independent work on the subject appearing in 1819 by Lt. James W. Graham (d. 1845), an officer working on the staff of Sir John Malcolm (d. 1833), a scholar-general in the British colonial army. Originally delivered as a lecture for the Bombay Literary Society, Graham's thirty-four page article[1] would be followed a few years later by the more comprehensive *Ssufismus, sive Theosophia Persarum Pantheistica* (*Sufism, or the Pantheistic Theosophy of the Persians*) by Friedrich T. Tholuck (d. 1877).[2] As the first major analysis of Sufism in a European language, with little to rely on by way of previous scholarship, it was only natural that the work would have its limitations.[3] Nevertheless, the Latin work would leave a definitive mark on later Orientalism.[4] The numerous monographs and articles that would be authored in the decades to follow would

[1] William J. Graham, "A Treatise on Sufism, Or Mahomedan Mysticism," *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay* 1 (1819): 89-119. The manuscript of Graham's lecture was used by Sir Malcolm for his own short treatment of Sufism in *The History of Persia*, published four years before Graham's own treatise saw the light of day. John Malcolm, *History of Persia: From the Early Period to the Present Time*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray & Longman and Co., 1815).

[2] Friedrich Tholuck, *Ssufismus, Sive, Theosophia Persarum Pantheistica* (Berlin: Libraria F. Duemmleri, 1821).

[3] A. J. Arberry drew attention to some of these limitations in *An Introduction to the History of Sufism: The Sir Abdullah Suhrawardy Lectures* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), 16-19.

[4] Tholuck later published influential works in the area of Christian theology and biblical exegesis. For details on his life, work, and influence, see the entry on him in the *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker House, 1954), 420-421.

all share, to a greater or lesser degree, a common theme, and one that was retraceable to the earliest treatments of the subject, namely that Sufism was at heart not an internal outgrowth or expression of Muslim scripture, but instead the product of foreign influences, whether they were Buddhist, Hindu, Neoplatonic or Christian.

Some of these arguments were inevitable in light of the racial theories that were circulating and had gained prominence in the 19th century, evidenced by the very title of Tholuck's work. In the distinction between Semites and Indo-Europeans, the proponents of these theories often ascribed to the religions of the former a sterile, legally bound, nomocentric quality, and to the religions of the latter, an imaginative, creative and highly artistic one. Since Sufism, with its rich history of poetry, dance and metaphysical speculation was associated with the latter, it was only natural to presume that it was in some form or another an Indo-European transplantation on to the barren soil of Islam. One of the most notable exponents of this view in the study of religion was Ernest Renan (d. 1892), for whom the distinct differences between the two racial types was itself proof of the superiority of the Indo-Europeans. They had evolved in a manner that the Semites, shackled by their own languages and psychological makeup, could not.[5] 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 one "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."[6] It is no surprise that many of his contemporaries, who discerned in the Sufi tradition precisely the creative "amplitude" and "abundance of life" of which he had written, would trace the origins of these expressions to Persian, Indian, and Greek — manifestly Indo-

[5] Stefan Arvidsson, "Aryan Mythology as Science and Ideology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 2 (1999): 327-354, in particular 336-338.

[6] Cited in Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 149.

European or Aryan, as opposed to Semitic — influences.[7] The Quran, a prototypical expression in their eyes of the Arab mind, could have very little to do with the full flowering of Islamic mysticism.

The argument for Indo-European roots was also proffered by the Dutch scholar Reinhart Dozy (d. 1883) in his *Essai sur l'histoire de l'Islamisme*, originally published at the end of the nineteenth century. On the question of whether Sufism could be retraced to Islam, his response was negative. The historical factors that contributed to the development of the tradition stemmed largely from Persian and Indian sources.[8] While he acknowledged that the Muslim mystics considered the origins of their own practices and doctrines to lie in the sacred revelation of their faith, he felt compelled to set the record straight. "Instead of developing the life of the soul," he wrote of the Quran, it "rather prescribes a certain number of religious practicalities and moral deeds," reiterating the common trope of Islam as an ossified, unimaginative, ritually bound religion, fundamentally at odds with the higher yearnings of the soul. "The dogma of the Koran," he categorically affirmed, "presents an obstacle to mysticism."[9] The sentiment would be echoed by Henri Lammens (d. 1937), the Belgian historian of early Islam for whom the Quran was, to quote his own words, "little adapted to stir the inward and truly spiritual emotions." The Jesuit Orientalist felt that while the holy text served its purpose well for a "religion of warriors and shepherds," it was entirely unsuited for "finer spirits."[10] Even those who objected to the reductive, caricaturized typology of the Semite that permeated early modern scholarship of religion, such as Ignaz

[7] For an overview of the contrasting conceptualizations of the Aryans and the Semites in 19th century thought, see Arvidsson, "Aryan Mythology," 336-342, and Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1992), 51-81. On Islam as a Semitic religion, see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 179-206. See also the excellent treatment by Gregory Lipton, who traces the historical background of modern, popular depictions of Sufism, "Secular Sufism," 427-431. For Said's acidic critique of Renan, see *Orientalism*, 130-151.

[8] Reinhart Dozy, *Essai sur l'histoire de l'Islamisme* (1897; Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1996), 316-317.

[9] Ibid, 315. For his thoughts on Sufism, see 314-339. Edward Said felt that the tenor of Dozy's writings reflected an "impressive antipathy" towards all things Oriental, Islamic and Arabic. *Orientalism,* 151.

[10] Henri Lammens, *Islam: Beliefs and Institutions* (1929; London: Frank Cass, 1968), 112. For his full treatment of Sufism, see 111–139.

Goldziher (d. 1921), still saw the tradition as a byproduct of external historical factors. The Sufis, for the Hungarian Jewish Islamicist, were more often than not guilty of reading their meanings into the sacred text than out of it, that is to say, their hermeneutical strategies were at heart *eisegetical* rather than *exegetical*.[11] In hindsight, it remains difficult not to discern a certain element of prejudice at play in the painstaking efforts of many of these thinkers to dissociate the apparent beauty of Sufism from a religion seemingly deprived of it, one that had stood as both the theological and political adversary of the so-called West for more than a millennium, and over and against which it had defined its own civilizational identity.

It would remain up to one of the most important intellectual figures in the modern study of Islam, Louis Massignon (d. 1962), to argue for the scriptural origins of Sufism. In his short 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*), he wrote that the Quran "through constant recitation, meditation, and practice, is the source of Islamic mysticism,"[12] and that the Sufis "made the first attempt to interiorize the Qur'ānic vocabulary and to integrate it into ritual practice."[13] The Catholic scholar (later ordained a Melkite priest) who had developed a unique affinity for the people of the Islamic world spent the opening chapter of the *Essay* demonstrating not only the scriptural foundations of Sufism, but also the numerous shortcomings behind efforts to identify foreign influences. In the absence of incontrovertible evidence, textual or otherwise, to corroborate cases of borrowing (what his scholarly peers had, in his view, failed to do) he felt it more reasonable to assume that the mysticism of Islam organically grew out of its own fertile ground. He also drew attention to key moments in the prophetic career of Muhammad, part and parcel of Muslim dogma, that would become the

[11] "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." The 1910 essay was an expanded version of an earlier draft published in 1899. See Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trans. Andras Hamori and Ruth Hamori (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 138 (collection of essays later translated into English).

[12] Louis Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism,* trans. Benjamin Clark (1922; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 73.

[13] Massignon, *Essay*, 8.

basis for the mystic life. Massignon's contributions would play such an instrumental role in reorienting the trajectory of Western scholarship that more than half a century later Annemarie Schimmel (d. 2003) could state with confidence that "the words of the Koran have formed the cornerstone of all [of Islam's] mystical doctrines."[14] This is not to suggest that Massignon had entirely settled the matter. Not long before Schimmel had penned her own words, Robert Zaehner (d. 1974) was able to observe in a leading journal that a young Westerner could only take an interest in the faith when "Islam itself is turned upside down and becomes Sūfism,"[15] in other words, when it is emptied of itself and infused with an apparently alien philosophy — a philosophy that in his particular view combined traces of Christianity with the Vedanta.[16] The sentiment, however, reflected no more than lingering residues of an outlook that was beginning to lose its sway in academic circles, especially following the appearance of Edward Said's (d. 2003) *Orientalism*, after which Western scholars of religion would begin to take more seriously how other traditions understood themselves.

Yet Massignon was not alone in reorienting the trajectory of Western scholarship with respect to its understanding of the relation between Sufism and Muslim scripture. Another figure who played an important role was the Cambridge Islamicist, Arthur J. Arberry (d. 1969), who saw in Sufism an expression of a kind of universal mysticism, but one that in its formal expression was inextricably bound to Islam. The relation between Sufism and Islam was analogous, in his eyes, to the relation between mystical movements in general and the religious systems out of which they emerged.[17] 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

[14] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (1975; Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 2011), 25.

[15] Robert Zaehner, "Why Not Islam?" *Religious Studies* 11, no. 2 (1975): 167-179. See 167.

[16] Robert Zaehner, *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* (1957; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 160-161.

[17] Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (1950; London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979), 12.

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,[18] he confessed of the effect which the life-long study of the Muslim mystics had on his inner life. Calling attention to the divine light the Quran speaks about in the well-known 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 inappropriate 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
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> 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.[19]

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."[20] 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

[18] It is not clear whether he ever intended to publish the account, which makes it all the more 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." *Mystical Poems of Rumi,* ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[19] Ibid, 26.

[20] Patrick Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam: Massignon, Corbin, Guénon and Schuon* (Albany: State University of New York, 2010), 31.

exposure to the "light of the mystics" which allowed him to see beyond those very dogmas which prevented him from taking seriously the faith of his upbringing, a faith which in his younger days, he had considered giving himself entirely to through the priesthood.

Curiously, Arberry's own outlook regarding the universality of mysticism was not far removed from that of René Guénon (d. 1951). While the Frenchman was not an academically trained scholar of Sufism, he nevertheless exerted a tremendous influence on the course of Sufi studies in Europe and North America. The metaphysician who took up residence in Egypt later in life, in a traditional house not far from the Pyramids after abandoning modern Europe, was in his day one of the most prolific proponents of the school of 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, 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 authorities. 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, 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, 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*, or expressed differently, between Sufism and the Quran. In this regard, Guénon felt that there was uncanny resemblance between 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, and 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 to genuinely understand the nature of religion, and, for our purposes, Sufism's intimate relation with the Quran. "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.'"[21]

It is worth drawing attention in this context to the fundamental difference between Guénon's critique of Western scholarship 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 that 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 that involved long-standing historical conflicts. For Guénon, on the other hand, the epistemological problems were of an entirely different order, being instead vertical in 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.[22] On the principle that only like can know like, Guénon argued that a society that could not understand the real nature of its own religions would be ill-prepared to penetrate into the deeper mysteries of

[21] René Guénon, *Insights into Islamic Esoterism and Taoism,* trans. Henry Fohr (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 70.

[22] Although the mechanism which began this process would for Guénon have emerged earlier.

the religions of others, particularly when those very religions would be analyzed through the same tools, and within the same epistemological 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. A so-called Easterner who represented his tradition through the tools of Western scholarship would, for Guénon, fare no better in his task than a full-fledged European Orientalist. Conversely, a so-called Westerner who grasped the inner meaning of religion through a higher intuition into its esoteric content, made possible 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. That Guénon's critique went far beyond that of Said through an interrogation of the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of modernity itself, within which Orientalism operated — and continues to operate, through a postmodern, post-Orientalism that is still very "Orientalist" in character — has only recently begun to become recognized in mainstream academic circles. Wael Hallaq's remark in *Restating Orientalism*, that "[a]lthough writing a good half-century before Said, Guénon begins where Said ends,"[23] may even signal a turning point for a greater appreciation of Guénon in Western institutions of higher learning.

To close, we should reiterate that from the point of view of Sufism, the Quran lies at the heart of Muslim spirituality. It provides the fount and wellspring for its doctrines and practices. And to the extent that classical Islam was animated both in form and spirit by its central text, all the way from law and ritual to theology and the arts, it would only be natural to find its reverberations running throughout its mysticism as well.[24] Indeed, some of the most influential literary expressions of Sufism, from Ghazālī's (d. 1111) *Iḥyā' 'ūlum al-dīn (Reviving the Religious Sciences)* to Rūmī's (d. 1273) *Mathnawī-i ma'nawī*, took on the form of commentaries of the holy text, albeit in a different key,

[23] Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 144.

[24] See Seyyed H. Nasr, "The Quran as the Foundation of Islamic Spirituality," in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations,* ed. S. H. Nasr (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1987), 3-10.

not entirely unlike premodern works of Judaism analogously rooted in the Torah. "Everything of which we speak in our meetings and in our writings," Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240) declared, "comes from the Qur'ān and its treasures."[25] And when Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996) asserted in his *Qūt al-qulūb (Nourishment of Hearts),* drawing on an early saying, sometimes ascribed to the Prophet, that "the people of the Quran are the people of God, and His elect,"[26] he was expressing a firmly held view in the fledging mystical tradition for which he was giving voice. The polyvocality of Muslim scripture would itself generate many of the debates that would animate the intellectual culture of Sufism, and beyond that, the various competing theologies of Islam.

[25] Cited in Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without a Shore: Ibn al-ʿArabī, the Book, and the Law*, trans. David Streight (Albany: SUNY: 1993), 20.

[26] Abī Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, ed. Saʿīd Nasīb Makārīm, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir, 1995), 1:284.