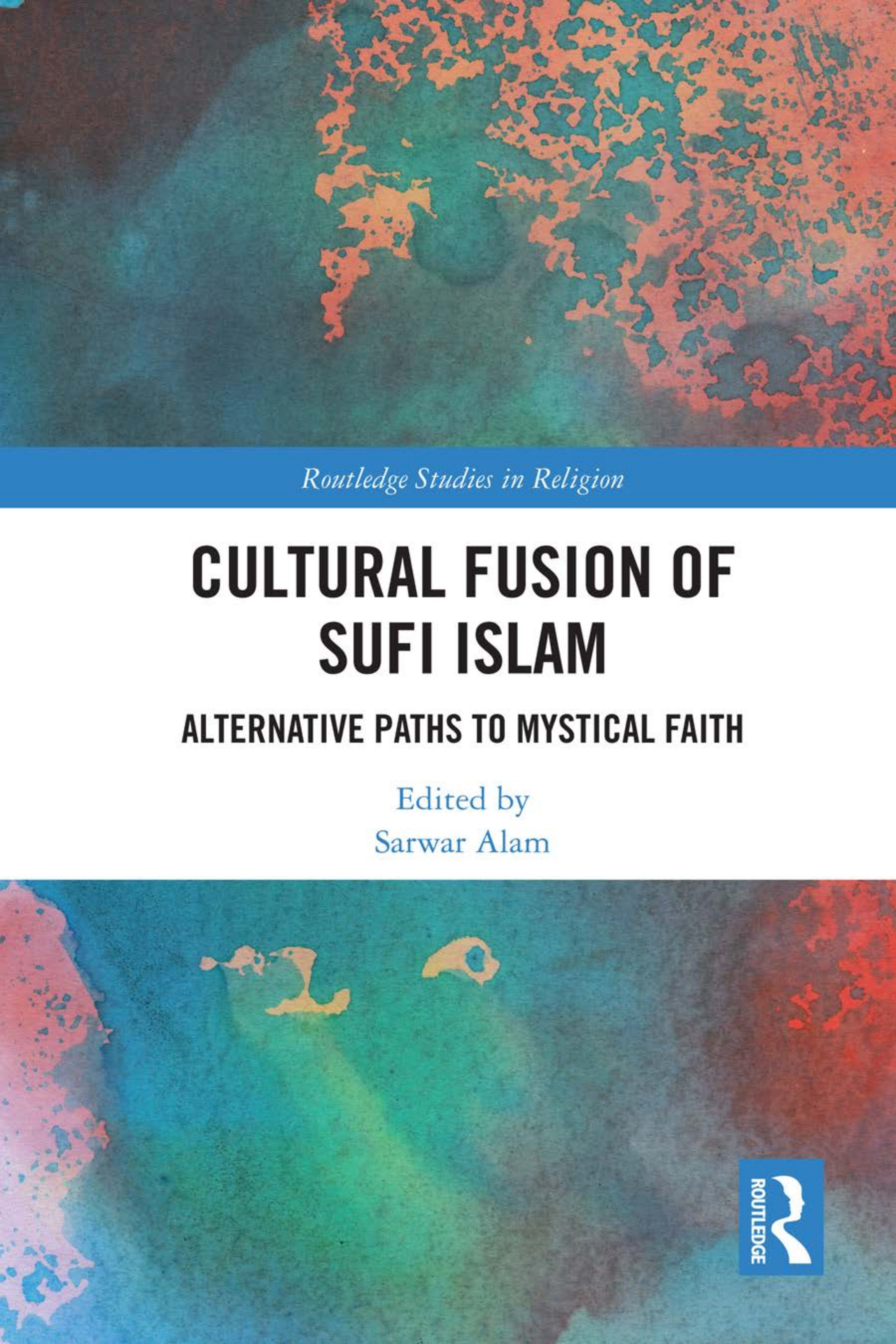

Routledge Studies in Religion

CULTURAL FUSION OF SUFI ISLAM

ALTERNATIVE PATHS TO MYSTICAL FAITH

Edited by
Sarwar Alam

ROUTLEDGE

Cultural Fusion of Sufi Islam

It has been argued that the mystical Sufi form of Islam is the most sensitive to other cultures, being accommodative to other traditions and generally tolerant to peoples of other faiths. It usually becomes integrated into local cultures, and they are similarly often infused into Sufism. Examples of this reciprocity are commonly reflected in Sufi poetry, music, hagiographic genres, memoirs and the ritualistic practices of Sufi traditions. This volume shows how this often sidelined tradition functions in the societies in which it is found and demonstrates how it relates to mainstream Islam.

The focus of this book ranges from reflecting Sufi themes in Qur'anic calligraphy to movies, from ideals to everyday practices, from legends to actual history, from gender segregation to gender transgression and from legalism to spiritualism. The International panel of contributors to this volume are trained in a range of disciplines that include religious studies, history, comparative literature, anthropology and ethnography. Covering Southeast Asia to West Africa, as well as South Asia and the West, they address both historical and contemporary issues, shedding light on Sufism's adaptability.

This book sets aside conventional methods of understanding Islam, such as theological, juridical and philosophical, in favor of analyzing its cultural impact. As such, it will be of great interest to all scholars of Islamic studies, the sociology of religion and religion and media, as well as religious studies and area studies more generally.

Sarwar Alam is Visiting Assistant Professor at the King Fahd Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Arkansas, United States. He has published widely on the subject of Islam in various journals, as well as edited volumes and two books, *Sufism, Pluralism and Democracy* (2017), coedited with Clinton Bennett, and *Perceptions of Self, Power, and Gender among Muslim Women* (2018).

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Cultural Fusion of Sufi Islam
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Cultural Fusion of Sufi Islam

Alternative Paths to Mystical Faith

Edited by Sarwar Alam

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To my parents, and
Professor Vincent J. Cornell

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Introduction

Introduction

Sarwar Alam

There are many faces of Islam; one such face is mystical or Sufi Islam, which comes with many forms and dimensions of its own. This volume attempts to introduce Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) in understanding Islam – an unconventional, often sidelined tradition. It has been argued that Sufi Islam is more sensitive to other cultures, more accommodative to other traditions and more tolerant to peoples of other faiths than the exoteric Islam. As Clinton Bennett points out, "Sufis, traditionally, are open and tolerant toward diversity, respecting other faiths and even emphasize commonalities. Some accept non-Muslim initiates."[1] It has also been argued that Sufi Islam is infused into local cultures and local cultures are infused into Sufi Islam in many ways. Examples of this reciprocity are reflected in Sufi poetry, music, hagiographic genres, memoirs and ritualistic practices. In some cultures, Sufi shrines are viewed as public places that are not only shared by Muslims but are also shared by adherents of other faiths. Some Sufi ideals, such as the idea of *fanā'*, or annihilation; yearning for the beloved; and contemplation, among others, resonate the ideals of other traditions. This volume attempts to unveil some of the Sufi ideals and perceptions that are infused in the cultural practices of various countries. In this volume, we perceive cultural fusions as an alternative path to understand Sufi Islam.

Islamic/Islamicized culture

Culture is a way of life and a worldview of a certain group of people at a certain place and at a certain point of time, which is expressed in a complex system of signs, symbols and their meanings. It is a shared and learned system of meanings through which people orient themselves in the world. In his book titled *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Clifford Geertz contends that the concept of culture is a semiotic one. He holds that the culture concept "denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."[2]

Geertz also defines religion as a cultural system or a system of symbols.[3] In his *Islam Observed* (1968), a comparative study of Islam in two Muslim-majority countries, Morocco and Indonesia, he demonstrates how Islam is grounded in local cultures. Engaging Geertz but grounded in Max Weber, Dale F. Eickelman argues that

> ideas, and systems of ideas, especially those which fundamentally shape men's attitudes toward the world and their conduct in it, cannot be analytically construed as ahistorical Platonic entities, unaffected by the ravages of time. They are in constant tension with social reality, shaping it and in turn being shaped.[4]

Unlike Geertz, his research reflects the voices of his informants. Eickelman contends that his study "serves to document Marshall Hodgson's claim that the so-called 'folk' culture of Islam shares substantially the same dynamic force that he found more visible in Islam's 'high' culture."[5]

However, going against the trend of generalization as well as essentialization of Islam, Abdul Hamid el-Zein (1977) explains the complexity in defining and using symbols with which to study religion. He holds that symbols and their meanings are fluid and indeterminate. In order to understand as well as to communicate the symbols and their meanings to others, an anthropologist stabilizes these meanings and thus makes symbols finite and well-bounded containers of thought.[6] El-Zein claims that there is no single Islam but rather there are multiple islams, and as such the idea of a single Islam must be abandoned. According to him, a comparative study of Islam is not possible with fixed meanings of symbols. In this regard Robert Launay points out that "Islam is obviously not a 'product' of any specific local community but rather a global entity in itself," and that "the problem for anthropologists is to find a framework in which to analyze the relationship between this single, global entity, Islam, and the multiple entities that are the religious beliefs and practices of Muslims in specific communities at specific moments in history."[7]

In addressing the tension between the universality and diverse local practices, Talal Asad (1986) comes up with a concept that he calls "discursive tradition." Arguing primarily against Geertz, he contends that

> if one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith. Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs, and morals. It is a tradition.[8]

According to Asad, a practice is Islamic "because it is authorized by the discursive traditions of Islam, and is so taught to Muslims – whether by an *'alim*, a *khatib*, a Sufi *shaykh*, or an untutored parent."[9]

After a close review of Asad, Shahab Ahmed argues that the preconceptualization of Islam as a discursive tradition privileges Islam constitutive of those texts and practices whose purpose is to prescribe and prejudices against nonprescriptive discourses, texts and practices.[10] He is also convinced that Asad's conceptualization of Islam as a discursive tradition effectively collapses the categories of "Islam" and "orthodoxy," meaning it functions superbly as the conceptualization of orthodoxy as discursive tradition but not as much of Islam as such.[11] He holds that orthodoxy tends to rule out the authenticity of the less powerful and nonprescriptive texts and practices and suggests that to understand the discursive tradition of Islam, one must conceive not only of prescriptive authority but also of what he calls "explorative authority," such as the Sufis and philosophers who set out into the unknown, the uncertain, the unsettled and the new.[12]

Aside from anthropologists, we may engage historians' perspectives to have a different understanding in defining Islam, Islamic culture and Islamic civilization. While defining Islam and Islamic culture, Marshall Hodgson[13] equates Islam with personal piety and other social and intellectual traditions of Muslims expressed in literature, art, philosophy or political organizations as less or less properly Islam or Islamic; rather, he labels these as Islamicate or cultural.[14] "For Hodgson, literature and art are 'Islamic' only when they clearly treat 'religious' themes,"[15] and "he sets up the pious core of Islam-proper in opposition to *adab*/culture."[16] "However unwittingly, Hodgson's distinction between Islamic and Islamicate, are less Islamic – that is, less pure and authentic – than 'faith' or religion,' " a portrayal of Islam, observes Ahmed, not very distant from that of a fundamentalist or Salafi.[17]

By further explicating Hodgson's conceptualization of the term Islamicate, Bruce B. Lawrence[18] defines *Islam* as a religion or faith system and *Islamicate* as a global force or civilization. According to him, Islamicate civilization derives from Islam but these two concepts are neither synonymous nor interchangeable. He points out that Islamicate civilization relates to Islam but also exceeds it. Islamicate civilization is about the complex of social relations that comprise the vast historical canvas of the Muslim people.[19] Lawrence's conceptualization of Islam and Islamicate civilization implies that anything other than Islam proper, such as belief, ritual, doctrine, or law, is Islamicate.[20]

Unlike Hodgson and Lawrence but with a different intent and purpose, Ahmet Karamustafa holds that Islam cannot be understood as a culture, as particularism of any kind "has always been challenged, contested, and more often than not, counterbalanced in Islamic history by universalism."[21] He also draws attention to the fact that any particular culture cannot be identified thoroughly with Islam either; Islam is simultaneously in and above cultures.[22] Like many others before him, Karamustafa observes that Islamic civilization draws from other cultural wellsprings. It is an heir to the variegated cultural heritage of the Hellenistic Near East of late antiquity (with distinct Greek, Persian, Mesopotamian, Syrian and Egyptian strands, to name only the most prominent); the new civilization proceeded to incorporate many other cultural traditions – North African, Saharan/sub-Saharan African, Iberian, South-east European, Indian, Central Asian, South-east Asian – into its multicolored fabric. He holds, "Islam is a civilizational project in progress; it is an evolving civilizational tradition constantly churning different cultures in its crucible to generate innumerable, alternative social and cultural blueprints for the conduct of human life on earth."[23]

By engaging Geertz, Asad, Hodgson, Karamustafa and others but with a different conclusion, Michael Cooperson points out that all Muslims share the belief that there is no god but God and Muhammad is His messenger. But this shared belief and some common rituals are only part of what any given Muslim may think of as his or her culture. A Muslim of a particular country may belong to both the perceived worldwide community of Muslims and to his or her national community, as well as other local groupings, at the same time.[24] Considering the degree of diversity, overlapping and locationality in terms of time and space, Cooperson concludes that Islam is not a culture but rather a cultural system that incorporates contributions of the members of other faiths as well as civilizations, such as Jews or Christians and Greeks, respectively.[25]

Though Islam may not be viewed as a culture, experience shows the plausibility of expression of Islamicized cultures. Can a culture that absorbs, subsumes and nourishes Islamic symbols and expresses them in its own production of art, music, poetry, literature and architecture be called Islamicized? Islam, as Karamustafa noted, can be in and above cultures, but the culture of a particular group of people, location, or time can be Islamicized with the multiplicity of form, expression and practice. Sufism is one of the more creative or "explorative," to coin Ahmed's (2016) phrase, branches of Islam, one that not only infuses Islamic symbolisms into cultural artifacts, practices and worldviews of a particular community or locality; but in doing so also subsumes others' cultural artifacts, practices and symbols in its fold. Most of the chapters in this volume reflect a reciprocity of cultural fusion of Sufi Islam in different communities.

Sufism defined

Sufism is an umbrella term for a special type of Islamic piety that is expressed in the forms of extensive prayer; night vigil; fasting and bodily mortification; otherworldliness; devotion and love of God and the Prophet and, by extension, all the creatures of God. It began as a form of asceticism and, in some cases, as a personal and social protest against the perceived deviation of the early Muslims from the true path of God.[26] Alexander Knysh observes:

> Acts of penitence and self-abnegation, which their practitioners justified by references to certain Qur'anic verses and the Prophet's utterances, were, in part, a reaction against the Islamic state's newly acquired wealth and complacency, as well as 'impious' pastimes and conduct of the Umayyad rulers and their officials.[27]

Some scholars view Sufism as a form of Islamic Protestantism in the sense that it deemphasizes traditional public worship in *masjids*, or mosques, in favor of individual study with a religious teacher, a *pir* or *shaykh*, who offers his disciples a deeply satisfying piety they do not experience in mosque services.[28]

The Arabic term for Sufism is *taṣawwuf*, which denotes a particular type of piety, a way of living, a set of practices and an ideal.[29] It is claimed that the very word "Sufism" derives from an Arabic root word *suf*, or wool. Thus, Sufis are sometimes also referred to as wool-wearers or wearers of undyed rough wool garments.[30] It is also claimed that the word Sufism derives from the root *safa*, or purity, or from *Suffa*, indicating the ardent followers of the Prophet who lived or occupied the first row or rank in his mosque (*ahl al-suffa*).[31] The word could also derive from the Greek word *sophos*, meaning wise.[32] It appeared in the Islamic vocabulary during the Abbasid period, when it especially referred to an organized body of mystics.[33] A Sufi was also sometimes referred to as *faqir* and *darwish*, meaning men of the spiritual life. However, the word Sufism gained its special meaning in the middle of the ninth century, as an ascetic way of life. The nickname Sufi was first applied to a certain Abu Hashim 'Uthman b. Sharik (d. 776), and by the middle of the ninth century it had become the regular designation for those who practiced austerity.[34]

Sufism is individualistic and consists of a variety of personal piety concerned more with personal problems with a subjective awareness in order to deepen and purify inward worship;[35] at least in the formative period, Sufism is meant to be a way of interiorizing Islam.[36] Sufism is also defined as an experiential and imaginal method of knowing the unknown by contemplating the signs that are beyond the textual grasp.[37] It is sometimes described as a journey toward the "Ultimate Reality," a journey of realizing nothingness and annihilation of the self before God.[38] It leads to self-knowledge as well as the knowledge of the divine, as one of the *hadith qudsi* or sacred hadith depicts: "Whosoever knows his self, knows his Lord;[39] that is, self-knowledge leads to knowledge of the Divine."[40] "Sufism seeks to lead adepts to the heart, where they find both their true self and their Beloved, and for that reason Sufis are sometimes called "the people of the heart" (*ahl-i dil* in Persian),[41] as the heart is where the Divine Reality resides. One of the sacred ahadith (sing. hadith) states, "The Heavens and the earth cannot contain Me, but the heart of My faithful servant does contain Me."[42] Sufism is also defined as the path of love;[43] one of the names of God is *al-Wadūd*, or love. "And since love is part of the Divine Nature, all of existence, which issues from Him, is permeated by love."[44] God is said to have created the world out of His mercy and love. According to the great Sufi theoretician Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240), the divine mercy that gives rise to the universe is existence itself. The very act of bringing things into existence is an act of gentleness and kindness.[45] The same point is made in terms of love in a saying constantly quoted in Sufi texts: "I was a Hidden treasure," God says, "so I loved to be known. Hence, I created the creatures that I might be known."[46] One of the early Sufis of Baghdad, al-Junayd (d. 910), notes that

> Sufism means that God makes thee to die to thyself and to become alive in Him. It is to purify the heart from the recurrence of creaturely temptations, to bid farewell to all natural inclinations, to subdue the qualities which belong to human nature, to keep far from the claims of the senses, to adhere to spiritual qualities, to ascend by means of Divine knowledge, to be occupied with that which is eternally the best, to give wise counsel to all people, to observe the Truth faithfully, and to follow the Prophet in respect of the religious law.[47]

Sufis insist on remembering God not only in a contemplative way but also by witnessing (*mushahada*) the "signs" (*ayat*) around them. As some Sufis believe, this is because God discloses Himself in every existing thing.[48] One of the signs of such disclosure (*tajalli*) is time itself; signs are also revealed in the Book and in nature.[49] Witnessing as well as embodying the signs, a cultivated virtue called *ihsan* (doing the beautiful),[50] along with sincerity (*ikhlas*) constitutes *taṣawwuf*.

Sufism is a tradition of extinction in the love of God. Sufis endeavor to discover the hidden treasure by deciphering the signs of God. Did God not say, "He is nearer to man than human's jugular vein" (Qur'an 50:16)? The Qur'an also states reciprocal love between God and humanity. However, the notion of reciprocal love between God and humans is sharply objected to by the mainstream 'ulama'. According to this view, love means loving God's commands, that is, strict obedience. Yet it remained the central issue with the Sufi-minded people, whose love was directed not only to God but also to God's beloved, the Prophet, love for whom became a highly important ingredient in Muslim life.[51] "As the first Sūra of the Koran [*sic.*] begins with words *al-ḥamdu lillāh*,'Praise be to God,' thus praise of God fills the created world, audible to those who understand the signs. Is not Muhammad's very name derived from the root ḥ-m-d, 'to praise'?," argues Annemarie Schimmel.[52] The mutuality of love expressed in the Qur'an (5:54)[53] is oftentimes sidelined in the exoteric tradition. On the contrary, Sufis long for God's love but also for the love of humanity and vice versa. To them, love is transcendent.

Scholars like Fazlur Rahman, who viewed Sufism negatively and labeled some Sufis as spiritual delinquents,[54] admit that with their love and pure devotion, Sufis challenge the legists' concept of obedience and observance of the Law.[55] So irresistible is its appeal to the masses that, notes Rahman, "the sobering voice of the "Ulamā' gradually lost its influence, and orthodox Islam finally capitulated" after the fourteenth century.[56] Sufism is perceived as the path of love. Sufism, notes Kabir Helminski, incorporates the vertical dimension of human experience, the ascent of the soul through known stages of purification. This ascent is, he holds, "accomplished by nothing less than the power of Love that is the transforming force within spiritual life, and without which Islam is incomplete."[57] The various manifestations of *ihsan* focus on the quality of love, especially in Sufism, "where love is typically presented as the key to Islamic life and practice."[58] Because of this, Sufism is described as the school of passionate love, or *madhhab-i ʿishq*. It is *ʿishq*, at once transformative and redemptive, human and divine, that has been a means of spiritual ascension for the seekers who yearn to behold God here and now, observes Omid Safi, who translated this mystical path as the path of radical love, or *Mazhab-e eshq* (Arabic: *madhhab al-ʿishq*).[59]

Chronology of development

Sufism embodies two streams, asceticism and mysticism. Ascetic practices of some early adherents of Islam paved the way for the emergence of Islamic mysticism. It was not until Rabiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (d. 801) that asceticism turned toward mysticism.[60] Some of the early ascetics were Abu'l-Darda (d. 652), his wife Umm al-Darda, Salman al-Farisi (d. 655 or 657), Hudhayfa b. al-Yaman (d. 657) and Imran b. al-Husayn al-Khuzaʿi (d. 672 or 673).[61] These pious Muslims were referred to as *nussak* (devout), *zuhhad* (world renouncer) and *ʿubbad* (worshippers), who turned their backs on worldly life and devoted themselves to a life of self-mortification, self-purification and Prophetic piety. Some of the early ascetics were constant weepers, as they were concerned about salvation and the fear of God. Some of them wore woolen garments, which resembled the Christian monks' and ascetics' woolen robes, as a symbol of pietistic withdrawal,[62] in contrast to the wealthy Muslims, who wore expensive silk and cotton.

In some cases, ascetic practices began as a personal protest against the luxuries and perceived injustices incurred by the dynastic governing elites.[63] The most prominent example of social protest of mystics is the group known as *Malāmatīs* as well as its offshoot *Qalandarīs*, who practiced an extreme form of asceticism and "sought to destroy social conventions in order to shock the good conscience of Muslim society."[64] In the course of time their reaction took various shapes and forms, with some of them utterly outstripping all religious and social norms.[65] However, acts of penitence and self-abnegation of early ascetics were, in part, a reaction against the wealth and complacency and impious conduct of the elites.[66]

It has been argued that ascetic practices of some early adherents of Islam paved the way for the emergence of Islamic mysticism. It is said that the first known socially active Muslim ascetic was Abu Dharr Ghifari (d. 652), one of the Companions (*sahaba*) of the Prophet, Muhammad. He was born in Medina and spent his later life in Damascus. Frustrated with the lavish and worldly lives of some of the Companions, Abu Dharr chose a way of living that marked the beginning of a new movement in later eras. According to him, "It is through asceticism that God makes wisdom and goodness enters men's hearts."[67] He was famous for his criticism against the hypocrisy of the political elites of his days. Another example of this kind was Hasan al-Basri (d. 728). He cited examples of Muhammad along with Moses, Jesus and David as models of the ascetic way of life.[68] He opined, "Be with this world as if you had never been in it, and with the next as if you were never to leave it."[69] In Hasan's environment and probably under his influence, men and women from Iraqi and Syrian lands appeared and practiced the art of controlling the temptations of the kernel self, or *nafs*, which according to a saying of the Prophet is the greatest jihad,[70] and about which Rumi says, "Don't make the Jesus of your being carry the donkey of your ego; let Jesus ride the donkey."[71] The practice of mortification, renunciation and the fear of God encouraged the later generation of ascetics to become more conscious about God, which gradually turned them to focus on the soul and its relationship with God.

Rabi'a al-'Adawiya, asked once whether she loved God and hated the Devil, replied: "My love of God has prevented me from the hatred of Satan."[72] It was perhaps Rabi'a, who first emphasized love in addition to mortification and renunciation, in defining the relationship between God and an ascetic. Rabi'a is said to have prayed "O God! if I worship Thee in fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine Everlasting Beauty!"[73] She was probably the first who claimed to teach the doctrine of Divine Love (*muhabba*)[74] as the "doctrine of Pure Love," the disinterested love of God for His own sake alone.[75]

Abu 'Abdullah Harith ibn Asad al-Muhasibi was one of the early Sufis who were influenced by a contemporary, Dhu'l-Nun Misri. Al-Muhasibi was born in Basra in 781, came to Baghdad as a young man and died there in 847. He gave precedence on the total surrender to God over everything else, which he called *ri'aya*. He asked for subordinating the regulation of acts or rituals and directing every individual action, continually renewed in the heart, to serve one Master – God, before anything else. He emphasized the transformation of man from within by means of a rule for living, which involves (a) distinguishing reason (*'aql*) from science (*'ilm*) and (b) distinguishing faith (*'iman*) from real wisdom (*ma'rifa*). To him, obedience was more important than observance. He argued that *'aql*, or reason, should be used to discover God's preference so that the soul could reach the loving pre-eternal providence with the divine touches. Like other ascetics before him, al-Muhasibi was haunted by the fear of death and wrath of God in the life Hereafter. To overcome unhappiness and adversity, he recommended practicing contentment (*rida*) and to express gratitude (*shukr*) and take everything as divine gift and grace.[76]

Dhu'l-Nun Misri (796–856) was another early mystic who was born in upper Egypt. He was said to have traveled widely: to Mecca, Damascus and the cells of the Christian ascetics on Mt. Lukkam, south of Antioch. He was one of the first propagators of *sama'* (music) sessions. Like Rabi'a, he used love poems in describing the relationship between the lover and the beloved and the notion of union with God. A number of his sayings exhibited erotic symbolism; he often spoke of God as the mystic's intimate Friend and Lover.[77] One of his statements was as follows: "I desired to glimpse You, and when I saw You, I was overcome by a fit of joy and could not hold back my tears." He cited the Torah and David in envisioning the sight of God. He was also the first to define and teach "the classification of the mystical states (*tartib al-ahwal*)."[78] According to him, there are four doors to wisdom: fear, hope, love and passionate longing. Like al-Muhasibi, he also argued that man could not achieve God's fellowship without His aid, "For it is God who chooses his lovers from pre-eternity."[79]

The counterpart of Rabi'a and Dhu'l-Nun in the eastern region was Ibrahim b. Adham (d. 777), who also described the notion of love in attaining God's grace. He was said to be a prince of Balkh and converted to mysticism after hearing a "call" when he was out on a hunting trip. During the trip he had heard a strange voice that said, "It was not for this thou wast created: it was not for this thou wast charged to do." Having heard this call, he gave up his princely life and wandered from land to land. He visited Iraq and Mecca and lived for a long time in Jerusalem. He went out to live in the Syrian Desert, where he met Christian anchorites who taught him the true knowledge of God. Similar to Rabi'a, he is also said to have prayed,

> O God, Thou knowest, that Paradise weighs not with me so much as the wing of a gnat. If Thou befriendest me by Thy recollection, and sustainest me with Thy love, and makest it easy for me to obey Thee, then give Thou Paradise to whomsoever Thou wilt.[80]

The mystical thoughts of the early Sufis, such as Hasan al-Basri, Rabi'a, Ibrahim Adham, al-Muhasibi and al-Junayd, maintained a balance between their practices and the practices of the mainstream 'ulama'; but two intoxicated mystics, Abu Yazid Bistami and Husayn b. Mansur al-Hallaj, provoked hostility against Sufism from the mainstream religious authorities by uttering their mystical knowledge in public. Bistami (848 or 874), argued some scholars, turned asceticism to mysticism.[81] Bistami, the Iranian mystic, first studied religious law and then learned mystical knowledge from Abu 'Ali Sindi. He was claimed to have said "I was stripped of my self, as a serpent sheds its skin; then I considered my essence, and I was He!" and "You obey me more than I obey You!"[82] Bistami is also claimed to have said "Glory to Me! How great is My Majesty!" He also used the Prophetic example of Ascension (*mi'raj*) to express his mystical experience. The following are some of his narratives of this sort (they will be discussed again in assessing the influence of Hinduism upon Islamic mysticism):

> As soon as I had come to His unicity, I became a bird whose body is oneness and whose two wings are eternity, and I flew continually for ten years in the air of similitude; and in those years I saw myself in the same skies a hundred million times. I did not stop flying until I came to the arena of Preeternity. There I perceived the tree of oneness. (He describes its earth, its trunk, its branches, leaves and fruits.) I contemplated it, and I knew that it was all a snare (*khad'a*).[83]
>
> Once He raised me up and stationed me before Him, and said to me, 'O Abu Yazid, truly My creation desire to see thee.' I said, 'Adorn me in Thy Unity, and clothe me in Thy Selfhood, and raise me up in Thy Oneness, so that when Thy creation see me they will say, We have seen Thee: and Thou wilt be That, and I shall not be there at all."[84]

Here, he cast himself and the world aside and lost himself in God. This way of annihilation or losing oneself in God is known as the doctrine of *fanā'* in Islamic mysticism. This notion of annihilation is, to some degree, similar to the Buddhist notion of *nirvāṇa* (discussed below). It has, nonetheless, been argued that al-Muhasibi's disciple al-Junayd (d. 910) of Baghdad developed the doctrine of *fanā'*, which turned out to be an integral part of a well-coordinated theosophy.[85] This doctrine, it is argued, derives from the Qur'anic verses 55:26–27 that states that everything upon the earth passeth away, save His face. Bistami is also said to have introduced the notion of '*ishq*, or passionate love between the mystic and God as well, and thus left the Qur'anic usage of *muhabba*, or love (Qur'an 5:59).[86]

Similar to Bistami, yet a step forward, was al-Hallaj (d. 922), a mystic of Baghdad who traveled extensively throughout Khurasan, Transoxania and India. He was executed because of his alleged blasphemous utterance "Ana'l-Haqq," or I am the Truth (God), although it was not confirmed whether he had ever uttered these words.[87] He might have been executed for his alleged involvement in political activities.[88] He was accused of contracts with the Qarmatians in Multan and of revolutionary conspiracy against the Abbasid government.[89] His poems reflect his passionate longing for the union with God. It has been argued that his poems are "the most tender expressions of mystical, non-sensual love that are known in Arabic," and "he used for the first time the allegory of the moth that casts itself into the candle's flame – an image that was to become a favorite with later Sufi poets in the Persianate world."[90] Al-Hallaj is viewed as the first martyr of love by numerous poets and Sufis. He represents the completion of Islamic mystical vocations that were in the air since Islam's beginning.[91]

It appears that Sufism started with pure asceticism and ended with mysticism; it moved from simple renunciation of worldly comfort to the love of

God and to the doctrine of *fanā'*, or annihilation of oneself in God. Theoretically developed by al-Junayd, the doctrine of *fanā'* was made popular by Bistami and al-Hallaj. It may be mentioned here that most of the early Sufis did not view the *Shari'a* as adequate enough in searching the soul and developing an intimate relationship between God and His human servants.[92] The tension between the legists and the mystics emerged from the intoxicated mysticism, as it is said, of Bitami and al-Hallaj. Particularly, that of al-Hallaj followed a period of persecution of the mystics, which was ameliorated by the legist-cum-mystic Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). Al-Ghazali bridged the normative Islam with those of mystics' Islam. His major work, the *Iḥyā' 'ulūm ad-dīn* (Revivification of the Sciences of Religion) "introduces the believer into a life that is agreeable to God," which, observes Schimmel (1992), "soon accepted as standard, thus tempering mainstream Islam with a moderately mystical flavor."[93] A new form of Islamic mysticism, the organized Sufi orders with various branches, which we experience today, began shortly after the death of al-Ghazali.[94]

Fusion of Sufi Islam

Sufism resembles mystical thoughts and practices of other traditions. Especially, early Sufism in many ways resembles the Eastern Christian asceticism. For example, wearing of the widely visible Sufi garb or woolen garment. Long before the appearance of Sufis in the scene, woolen garments were the symbolic mark of the Nestorian Christian ascetics. It is also apparent that the Sufi notion of "union with God" resembles the meditation practices of Neoplatonists and Hindu and Buddhist monks. These resemblances are the root of the debates about the origins of Sufism. As a way of life, Sufism is also debated within the Islamic culture. One of the oldest stereotypes in Islam is the eternal conflict between the legalist and the mystic.[95] This is partly because the core idea of Sufism, *ma'rifa* (gnosis or mystical knowledge), does not appear in the Qur'an or in any prominent prophetic report or Hadith.[96] Mainstream 'ulama' (religious scholars and functionaries) of Islam emphasized the strict observance of the outward rituals, whereas Sufis emphasized the development of inward faculties of the adherents of Islam. They especially referred to the following Qur'anic verse in establishing their legitimacy: "Verily, on the friends of God (*awliyā'* of Allah) there is no fear, nor shall they grieve" (10:62).

Islam was originated in a predominantly pagan's land surrounded by the followers of Jewish and Christian faiths.[97] The pagans did not dominate the early epicenters of Sufi practices; rather, the people of Judeo-Christian religious traditions, who had a long history of mystical practices, dominated them. In the "Arab lands between Egypt and Mesopotamia,"[98] there were as many as six ascetic centers in the mid-seventh and early-eighth centuries. These epicenters were located in the Arab peninsula (Mecca, Medina), Iraq (Kufa, Basra), Syria (Damascus) and Yemen.[99] North Africa, especially

Egypt in the west; Armenia in the north; and Central Asia in the east were the heartlands of early Muslim mystics. These early epicenters of the mystics were also crossroads of other religious traditions, such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Some of the followers of these traditions were also mystics.

In addition, political and administrative changes, especially wars and conflicts among the Greeks, Romans, Arabs and Sasanid Iran,[100] may have inspired peoples of this region to know one another. Jonathan P. Berkey observes,

> The Sasanians, even at the height of their conflict with Rome in the sixth century, relentlessly borrowed from Byzantine culture everything from bath-houses to systems of taxation, and the shah Khusrau I Anushirvan (r. 531–579) gleefully welcomed the pagan Greek philosophers whom the Roman emperor Justinian had expelled from their academy in Athens.[101]

Landbound as well as seaborne trade routes might also have influenced the interchanging of cultural traditions among different communities within and outside this region,[102] as the mercantile classes consciously or unconsciously, through their transregional trading networks, brought the diverse peoples of this region close to one another and diffused religious ideas from one place to another.[103] Muslim rulers, especially the ʻAbbasids (750–1258) also maintained the religiocultural exchanges among various communities. Especially, the House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-hikma*), established by Caliph al-Ma'mun (ruled 813–833 CE) in Baghdad as a center of learning and translation for scholars from around the world, brought the philosophical heritage of the Greeks, Persians and Indians within the realm of Islamic quest for wisdom.[104]

Because of its similarities to and parallelisms with the preexisting mystical traditions, Sufism created debates and controversies not only for its origin but also for its originality as an Islamic religious practice.[105] Some scholars argue that Sufism is not an original Islamic idea but rather a replica of the Christian practice of asceticism, the Vedāntic notion of *mokṣa* and Buddhist idea of *nirvāṇa*. Prominent among the scholars who promoted these theses are Margaret Smith, Miguel Asin Palacios, Julian Baldic and Robert C. Zaehner, to whom we now turn.

Influence of Christian mysticism

According to Margaret Smith, the conception of access to God and union with Him is of Christian origin.[106] She found a parallel between Ibrahim Adham and St. Hubert.[107] Adham, while out on a hunting trip, heard: "Verily thou wast not created for this, and not in this wilt thou die." St. Hubert heard a voice while out on a chase: "Hubert, unless thou turnest to the

Lord and leadest a holy life, thou shalt quickly go down into Hell," and St. Hubert then dismounted and gave himself up from then on to the service of God. She holds that the Sufic idea of *tawba*, or repentance, which Dhu'l-Nun and al-Junayd viewed as the first step toward God, is also of Christian origin. She notes that the emphasis on repentance (*tawba*) in early Sufism corresponds to conversion in Christian theology.[108] Al-Muhasibi's idea of contentment, which comes to pass by the divine decree and which has a tendency to quietism and otherworldliness and toward the subjugation of the carnal self, Smith believes, derives from the teachings of the New Testament – the Parable of the Sower.[109] Stages of the Sufi path, such as patience (*sabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), poverty (*faqr*), renunciation (*zuhd*), trust in God (*tawakkul*) and satisfaction (*rida*), are also familiar steps of the Christian ascetics and mystics.[110] According to Smith, Hasan al-Basri's fear of the life Hereafter, his emphasis on meditation (*fikra*), his preaching to practice abstinence (*wara'*) and his avoidance of desire (*tama'*) are similar to Christian ascetic practices.[111]

Rabiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, as legend has it, responded to a marriage proposal by saying that she ceased to exist and passed out of Self, existed in God and was altogether His. So, the marriage contract must be asked from Him, not from her. Rabiʿa's statement is similar, Smith argues, to the monk Aphraates to the Christian "Daughters of the Covenant," who in response to such a marriage proposal said, "To a royal Husband am I betrothed, and to Him do I minister; and if I leave His ministry, my Betrothed will be wroth with me and will write me a letter of divorce and will dismiss me from His house."[112] Smith also found identical similarity between Abu Yazid Bistami and Dionysius of Syria. She notes:

> Dionysius of Syria had said plainly that God gave himself for the deification of those who attained unto Him, and so also Bistami, and others of the Sufis declared that the "I" had vanished and God dwelt in the soul in its place. There was no longer any place for "I" and "Thou," for the "Thou" and "I" had become one in perfect unity, and the human was now one with the Divine.[113]

Smith also argues that, in addition to the direct influence of Christian ascetics and mystics, Islamic mystical tradition is also influenced indirectly by Christian women. It occurs through the marriages of Christian women with Muslim men. She notes, "The definitely Christian tone of some Muslim writers, and especially of the Sufis, may with great probability be traced back, in part at least, to this heritage from Christian mothers."[114] Christian employees of Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs and Christian professionals mark their presence in the development of Islam, both in its orthodox form and mystical or unorthodox form, through their dialogues, through the translations of Greek and Syriac works into Arabic and through the replacement of pagan ideas by Christian materials.[115]