## From the Qur'an to the Islamic Humanities: Popular and Written Contexts

Those who write about Islamic "mysticism" for all but specialized scholarly audiences are usually referring to a small selection of classical Arabic and Persian writings translated into Western languages, or to the handful of traditions of spiritual practice from the Muslim world that have become known even more recently in the West.  In that situation the risks of serious misunderstanding, for an uninformed audience, are almost unavoidable, especially where some sort of comparative perspective is assumed.  In the hope of helping non-Islamicists to avoid some of those common pitfalls, this essay is devoted to outlining some of the most basic features of the actual contexts of teaching and devotion within which those Islamic texts most often characterized as "mystical" were originally written and studied.

### I. Introduction: the Concept of *Walâya*

Perhaps the most fundamental dimension of this problem is beautifully summarized in the following hadîth qudsî, one of the most frequently cited of those extra-Qur'ânic "divine sayings":

(God said:) "For Me, the most blessed of My friends[1] is the person of faith

---

[1]awliyâ'î (singular walî): i.e., those who are "close to" God, probably alluding to the famous Qur'ânic verses 10:62-64:"...<u>the friends of God, they have no fear and they do not grieve...theirs is the Good News in this lower life and in the next</u> (life)...<u>that is the Tremendous Attainment</u>"..  The same Arabic term--which also carries significant connotations of "protector", "guardian" and even "governor"--also appears as one of the more frequent Names of God (at 2:257; 3:68; 45:19; etc.).  In most branches of Shiite thought it is one of the many Qur'anic terms taken as references to the spiritual function of the Imams, while in later Sufism--most elaborately in the thought of Ibn cArabî and his successors--the term is usually understood to refer to the

who is unburdened (by possessions), who takes pleasure in prayer, who carries out well his devotion to his Lord and eagerly serves Him in secret. He is concealed among the people; no one points him out. His sustenance is barely sufficient, and he is content with that.... His death comes quickly, there are few mourners, and his estate is small."[2]

Now the living presence of the "Friend of God" or walî (pl. awliyâ'), in one manifestation or another--whether it be Muhammad and his Family or certain Companions, any of the earlier prophets, the Shiite Imams, or the many pious Muslims who have come to be recognized posthumously as "saints"--has for centuries been a central focus of popular religious and devotional life in much of the Islamic world.[3] But the true walî, as this hadîth stresses, is most often publicly "invisible" in this life, outwardly indistinguishable from many other normally

---

particular spiritual state of proximity to God (walâya) shared by the divine Messengers, prophets (anbiyâ') and saints, besides the different spiritual functions that distinguish each of those members of the spiritual hierarchy. See the more complete discussion in M. Chodkiewicz, Le Sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn Arabî, especially chapt. 1.

In the influential poetic classics of the later Islamic humanities, this complex of Arabic terms is conveyed above all by the recurrent, intentionally ambiguous references to the "Beloved" or "Friend" (Persian Yâr or Dûst, and their equivalents in Turkish, Urdu, Malay, etc.). There this relationship of walâya/wilâya becomes the central metaphor for the divine-human relationship and the theophanic nature of all nature and experience.

The intimately related theme of the spiritual virtues of poverty and humility stressed in this same divine saying is likewise reflected in many other hadîth, which together help explain the frequency of terms like faqîr and darvîsh (Arabic and Persian for "poor person", "beggar", etc.) to refer to the saints and their followers in later Islamic mysticism.

[2]This hadîth is included, with minor variations, in the canonical collections of Tirmidhî, Ibn Mâja, and Ibn Hanbal. See the full text and notes in W.A. Graham, Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam (The Hague, 1977), pp. 120-121.

[3]Throughout this paper it should be kept in mind that the English word "saint" (and its equivalents in other Christian contexts) is quite inadequate to convey either the centrality or the fluidity of the implicit associations and spiritual connections which are typically perceived in Islamic devotional contexts--e.g., in prayers at a specific shrine, or within a given Sufi path-- between the divine al-Walî (Yâr, Dûst, etc.) and the wide spectrum of human and spiritual exemplars or "theophanies" (mazâhir) who are typically available to each individual Muslim or local community. And even within Islamic religious scholarship, the learned theological explanations of these central popular devotional practices (e.g., in terms of functions like wasîla, shifâ'a, wilâya, spiritual "hierarchies," and the like) usually depend on drawing firm distinctions

devout Muslim men and women. And even after death, for those awliyâ' whose mission of sanctity or "proximity" to God (walâya) has become more widely recognized, the mysterious reality of their ongoing influence likewise remains invisible to most people, revealing itself directly only at the appropriate moments in individual, highly personalized means of contact: through dreams, visions, intuitions and spiritual acts of Grace (karamât) or special blessings that only appear to "those with the eyes to see."

Thus this famous hadîth suggests two basic considerations that should be kept in mind whenever one encounters the written works usually associated with Islamic "mysticism". The first point is that with rare exceptions such texts were not originally meant to be studied by themselves. Usually they were understood, by their author and audience alike, to be only secondary or accessory means to their aim (and often their source): the awliyâ'--taken in the broadest sense, including the prophets and Imams--and the gradual realization of that spiritual condition of walâya, or "closeness to God", embodied in such individuals.[4] The second, closely related point is that such "mystical" writings in their original context--and especially those works written in languages other than classical Arabic--were often quite inseparable from the whole range of "popular" religion, from the faith so diversely lived and practiced by the mass of the Muslim population (in contrast to the versions represented by the Arabic traditional religious sciences and the claims of their learned urban male interpreters). In fact in many regions of the

---

and conceptual boundaries that scarcely reflect the intimate spiritual realities of actual prayer and devotional life.

[4]While the different actual roles of various types of mystical writings and their interplay with oral traditions and teaching in pre-modern contexts are discussed in more detail below, we should add that many of the same points are also relevant to the transmission of many other (non-"mystical") forms of Islamic tradition and learning, including especially the oral transmission of hadîth, which continued for centuries beyond the more limited domain of their usage within the narrower sphere of Islamic law (fiqh).Perhaps the most visible and significant illustration of this point--and one by no means unique to the Islamic context-- is the fact that many of the "founders" and eponyms of major Sufi tariqas were either relatively anonymous (at least in terms of contemporary written historical documentation), nearly illiterate, or authors of relatively few "mystical" texts if we compare them with the often prolific writers among later members of those same orders. The same relative anonymity often holds true as well for those innumerable local saints (and in Shiite settings, relatives of the Imams) whose shrines are the objects of pilgrimage and popular devotions throughout the Islamic world: the manifestations of their walâya are not sought in writing, and the "proofs" of their presence are not handed down in books.

Muslim world that faith was originally spread and inculcated almost entirely by such popular "mystical" writings and their even more widespread oral equivalents, or rather above all by the saints and other religious teachers who conveyed (and often created) both that literature and the music and other forms of spiritual practice that typically accompanied it.

If one keeps both those essential points in mind, it is easy to understand the practical and historical reasons behind the profusion of personalities and spiritual methods, symbols, practices, and beliefs that one discovers already in the lives of the classical exemplars of Islamic mysticism in Baghdad and Khorasan in the 3rd century (A.H.). But those same considerations also help us to appreciate the deep sense of disillusionment and failure, of something gone profoundly wrong, whenever the spiritual dimension of Islam has come to be identified with any particular, exclusive set of such historical forms.[5] That recurrent realization was summed up in the frequently echoed response of the Khurasani mystic al-Qûshanjî (d. 348/959) to a disciple's naive question "What is Sufism (*tasawwuf*)?":

"(Today it's) a name without reality; but it used to be a reality without a name."[6]

Whether name or reality, the unavoidable problem for students of religion is that there is still so little accessible literature that one can rely on to provide either of these essential contexts for understanding the wider religious functions and meaning of the many written--and the far more extensive unwritten--forms and expressions of Islamic mysticism.

----

[5]A typical sign of this phenomenon recurring in different contexts throughout Islamic history is the characteristic progressive socio-linguistic devaluation of technical terms once used to refer to "mystics" as soon as the practices or institutions connected with those forms of spirituality have become popularly routinized and "corrupted" (from the perspective of different elites). To take only a few illustrations from the Persianate cultural sphere at very different periods, there is the early succession from ᶜâbid to zâhid to ᶜârif; the eventually even more widespread pejorative connotations of words like darvîsh, faqîr and sûfî (often coexisting with other positive meanings); and the post-Safavid Shiite scholarly opposition of terms like tasawwuf (or mutasawwifa)--in either case associated with Sunni or "folk", rural religious movements--to ᶜirfân (true "gnosis).

[6]The dictum is repeated in two of the most famous Persian works on Sufism, Hujwîrî's (d. ca. 465/1071) Kashf al-Mahjûb (tr. R.A. Nicholson, London, 1911, p. 44, where the name is given as Fûshanjî), and Jâmî's (d. 1492) biographical dictionary, Nafahât al-'Uns (ed. M. Tawhîdîpûr, Tehran, 1336 h.s./1957, pp. 255-56), apparently based on a more direct account in the earlier Arabic Tabaqât of Sulamî (d. 412/1021).

## II. The Qur'an and the Islamic Humanities

Interestingly enough, there is a fairly simple experiment that quickly reveals both the origins of the many genres of Islamic "mystical" literature and the key to the contexts within which they originally functioned.  If one simply makes a serious effort to communicate in English (or in any other non-Islamic language) something of the inner meanings and deeper message of the Arabic Qur'ân[7] to a cross-section of a given community--from children to adults, both women and men, with all their practical occupations, personal concerns, educational backgrounds, and spiritual and intellectual aptitudes--one quickly finds oneself obliged to recreate, in today's idiom, virtually the full spectrum of what is usually called Islamic "mystical" literature, both theoretical and practical.  Hence the typologies of form and audience outlined in the following sections are clearly determined by the necessary interplay between (a) particular topics or teachings drawn (directly or indirectly) from the Qur'ân; (b) the attitudes, expectations and capabilities of each particular audience; and (c) the individual teacher's own perceptiveness and creative ability--using words, music, drama, and all the other instruments of human communication--to evoke in each member of their audience the indispensable immediate awareness of those ever-renewed theophanies "in the world and in their souls"[8] which will actually bring that spiritual message alive.

---

[7]To date, even the best English "translations" of the Qur'ân bear roughly the same relation to the recited Arabic original as program notes to the actual performance of a classical symphony.  The inadequacies of those efforts--which reflect the difficulties of the challenge, more than the talents of the translators--only highlight the extraordinary creativity and originality (and the frequently Qur'ânic inspiration) of the great masters of the poetic and musical traditions of the Islamic humanities discussed below.

Similarly, anyone performing this experiment in a Western language relatively untouched by Islamic culture will quickly discover the profound ways in which traditionally Islamic languages from the most diverse linguistic families (e.g., Persian, Turkish, Swahili, or Malay) have in fact become thoroughly permeated in their vocabulary and wider conceptual and symbolic universes by language and symbols drawn from the Qur'ân and hadîth most often mediated through the lasting creative influences of the oral and written "Islamic humanities" in each of those areas.

[8]A reference to the famous verses at 41:53, "We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in their souls" (or "within themselves"), perhaps the most frequently cited Qur'ânic proof-text for the perennial human manifestations of the divine walâya.

Now if we may borrow the term "Islamic humanities" to describe the whole socially embedded and historically changing matrix of cultural forms--institutions, epics, myths and folktales, rituals, poetry, music, codes of right behavior (*adab*) and implicit values and expectations--through which that transmission of spiritual teaching actually takes place within each Muslim family or local social group,[9] Unfortunately, surveys or accounts of Islamic religion for non-specialist audiences rarely begin to convey the fundamental sociological importance and historical preponderance of families (and at higher social levels, of small, rapidly shifting and largely informal associations of individuals, rarely organized as lasting "sects" or "congregations") or of very small-scale, informal local groupings (urban quarter, village, local tribe) as the primary locations for the practice and transmission of "Islamic" teachings throughout history, at least until the radically new intervention of (to us) more familiar forms of nation-state and media-propagated mass religious ideologies, based on Western models, in the latter part of this century. As a result the actual social and cultural realities and extraordinary diversity of the religious lives of Muslims, in virtually any period or locality, are rarely discernible behind the textbook fictions of "Islamic" clergies, sects, theologies, laws, rituals, beliefs, orders, orthodoxies and orthopraxies, laities, and so on fabricated to fit their audiences' expectations and paradigms of "religion" and "religious" institutions. (One measure of Max Weber's intelligence and awareness of the historically grounded roots of his own "ideal-types" was his prudent reluctance to extend them inappropriately into the alien fields of Islamic religion and society.) then it is clear that the religious literatures traditionally associated with Islamic "mysticism" have indeed played a central (although by no means exclusive) role in that process of spiritual education for the majority of Muslims living in any period.[9] And it is equally clear

---

[9]As discussed in more detail below, it is essential to keep in mind that the religiously relevant "literatures", in almost any Islamic context--and particularly for the women, villagers, peasants and tribespeople who have constituted the vast majority of Muslims in the world until this century--have been predominantly oral and vernacular, in creative, locally meaningful cultural forms that can seldom be understood simply as "diluted" versions of any of the learned Arabic sciences. The fundamental, ongoing religious importance of the awliyâ'--whether physically present or through the spiritual archetypes communicated those local "literatures"--can only be grasped in light of their role in those specific, concrete contexts of individual spiritual teaching and practice.

The contemporary situation of thousands of African-American Muslims in the process of discovering and elaborating their own authentic forms of Islam--typically with only a quite

that the immense corpus of hadîth (in both their Sunni and Shiite forms) constitute the paradigmatic example, the "prototype" as it were, for the subsequent creative development of all the Islamic humanities.[10]  Whatever their historical authenticity, the complex corpus of hadîth marvelously illustrates both the central Islamic assumption of the true "embodiment" of the spiritual teaching in the archetypal example of the walî (in this case the Prophet or Imams) and the fruitful, but problematic refractions of that living teaching through the particular perspectives and understandings of the many generations of individuals receiving and transmitting it.  All the forms and dilemmas of later "mystical literature", and of the Islamic humanities more generally, are already reflected and often beautifully dramatized in that vast literature of hadîth.

---

limited contact with external traditions of Islamic literature and learning--is actually remarkably representative of the local situations historians discover, wherever sufficient evidence exists, as they move beyond the learned, urban and courtly circles that were until recently the primary subjects of Islamic history.

[10]In addition, from the point of view of the Islamic humanities, particularly at the level of popular, oral culture, the early religious forms of "tales of the prophets" (qisas al-anbiyâ'), along with similar stories about the life of Muhammad (the sîra) and the Shiite Imams, are at least equally as important in forming Muslims' images and understandings of the awliyâ' and their teachings as the accounts preserved in the form of hadîth, despite the fact that such forms of "popular" literature were later accorded much lower religious status in the opinion of religious scholars attempting to form a normative learned consensus around a limited "canon" of hadîth precedents used in constructing the various systems of Islamic law (fiqh).  Unfortunately, there are still no serious scientific translations (i.e., with the indispensable explanatory and contextual matter) even of the major books of Sunni hadîth, while the fascinating collections of hadîth attributed to the early Shiite Imams--a remarkable window into the incredibly diverse religious world of the earliest Islamic centuries--remain terra incognita even to most specialized Islamic scholars; recent specialized inquiries have focused on narrow questions of "authenticity" and related isnâd analysis, in detailed polemic contexts.  So it is all the more remarkable that, apart from the pioneering work cited at n. 2 above, there are still virtually no works devoted to hadîth (whether Sunni or Shiite) that would enable outsiders to perceive them in their fundamental religious role, in the wider Muslim community, as ongoing models of spiritual pedagogy and the insightful adaptation of Qur'anic teachings to different individual temperaments, interests and circumstances--precisely the function mirrored in the creation of the Islamic humanities and the activity of living awliyâ' in later local settings.  (In the latter context, the hundreds of more specialized, often local handbooks and collections [arbacîn, etc.] are often more revealing, from the point of view of a student of religion, than the early canonical collections.)  In this regard, it should be stressed that the oral transmission of individual hadîth continued to be widespread for centuries throughout the Islamic world, among muhaddithûn of all sorts (including many famous Sufis), long after the written collection and subsequent diffusion of the "authentic" (sahih) texts underlying the narrower needs of certain groups of jurists beginning in the 3rd/9th century.

At this point non-Islamicist readers might well object that all of this must be so obvious as scarcely to require mentioning.  The problem, however, is that this "self-evident" observation happens to run counter to some of the most fundamental paradigms, both normative and historical, underlying the classical Arabic "religious sciences" as they were written down and elaborated by small influential groups of learned religious scholars (the ᶜulamâ') in the scattered cities of the Muslim world from the 3rd/9th century onward.  (More recently, the same scripturalist and historicist paradigms have been perpetuated--for a wide range of reasons, and in many cases quite unconsciously--both by some Western students of Islamic traditions and by Muslim ideologists interested in manipulating them in novel ways within the context of new nation-states.)From the perspective of those scholarly paradigms, the revelation of the Qur'ân was considered as inseparable, both temporally and normatively, from the equally "revealed" teachings recorded and conveyed by the authentic hadîth and--in practice--from the related auxiliary Arabic linguistic and interpretive sciences.  Together these Arabic textual studies came to be viewed by this small group of learned interpreters as constituting religious "Knowledge" (ᶜilm) par excellence, the joint and unique foundations or "sources" (usûl) from which they could then derive, in a variety of ways, their own authoritative standards of properly Islamic practice and belief.[11]

---

[11]Or more precisely, the limited acceptance, for practical legal purposes within certain schools of fiqh, of one or more of the ostensibly "canonical" hadîth collections.  (The criteria of isnâd criticism, within the science of hadîth, are at best a loose limit on the diffusion of the most obviously invented hadîth, and do not seriously enter into questions of the authenticity and significance of the actual text of most reports.)  As indicated in the preceding note, the religious importance of that hadîth "canon" and the conflicting claims of its legal interpreters, were often disputed or simply ignored by a wide range of subsequent "traditionists" and mystics alike--not to mention the irrelevance of such criteria at the (religiously crucial) popular level of storytelling and preaching.For understandable reasons, subsequent learned Muslim scholars, whatever their school, have rarely cared to point out to what an extent even the earliest, most widely respected Arabic works of legal interpretation, Qur'ânic commentary, and biographies of Muhammad are inextricably grounded in an immensely complex body of oral traditions (by no means limited to the hadîth) written down many decades or even centuries after the events they recount.  More inexcusably, the naive repetition of this particular paradigm of Islamic religious scholarship in most non-specialized modern Western accounts of the religion of Islam has of course tended to obscure the multitude of competing, at least equally influential visions of religious authority, "knowledge", tradition and practice which have in fact informed the historical landscape of so many Islamic societies from the death of Muhammad down to the present day.

Thus the learned elite purveyors of those Arabic religious disciplines, while constituting themselves as the (self-appointed) authoritative interpreters of that wider Prophetic legacy, at the same time at least theoretically conceived of the immense majority of their fellow Muslims--especially such groups as women and illiterate rural and tribal peoples--as condemned to a doubly degenerate state of belief and practice. For according to their twofold "trickle-down" model of Islam,[12] even the most learned and zealously pious students of these Arabic sources would necessarily come to be increasingly removed from the pure ideal represented by the short-lived Medinan community (or the earliest Imams), while the vast majority of Muslims could only imitate, at an even further remove, the various models of belief and behavior developed and expounded by this handful of learned interpreters.

From the standpoint of those later learned men, the Islamic humanities (both oral and written) and their representatives and creators could represent at best only an approximation to (or inevitable "compromise" with) their own authoritative standards of properly religious knowledge and behavior. 13-It should be stressed that the points of view of the culamâ' in this very broad sense, except for the rare cases where a particular group was given a monopoly on political power, were never monolithic: typically one finds in any locality and period a profusion of legal, theological and other schools (madhhabs) or "ways of going about" interpreting the wider body of Sunni or Shiite learned traditions. Likewise one typically finds a wide range of alternative attitudes at the "interface" between those learned Arabic traditions and the actual local practice of Islam: e.g., in the constant legal interaction between abstract fiqh and local "custom" (câda), or in the differing fatwâs concerning the supposed religious status of music, saints, shrines, tombs, vernacular languages and forms of prayer and ritual, and so on. At worst, of course, the popular Islamic humanities, especially in their oral and non-learned forms, tended to appear from that viewpoint as "deviant" and ignorant "survivals" of pre-Islamic "customs," as the unmentionable--if sometimes practically unavoidable--"superstitions" and "popular" or even

---

[12]A particularly extreme (and historically influential) case of this religio-historical paradigm is beautifully illustrated in the polemic work translated by M. U. Memon as Ibn Taymîya's Struggle against Popular Religion (Mouton/The Hague, 1976).(It should be kept in mind that Ibn Taymîya was widely considered a fanatical "crackpot" in his own day and a marginal figure, at best, for centuries to come. His modern popular appeal reflects radically different world-historical and cultural circumstances.)

"nominal" religion of women and children, illiterate peasants and the masses of uncultured, only partly "Islamicized" tribal peoples.[13]

But that immense majority of less learned Muslims in the past, in all the regions of the Islamic world, certainly did not have to wait for the insights of modern students of religion, or the discoveries of modern ethnologists and social historians, to expose the many theological and historical fallacies and the ill-concealed political and cultural pretensions of that scripturalist paradigm of the ᶜulamâ'. Thus most of the types of "theoretical" mystical writings discussed below, for example, were in fact created precisely to defend the practices and presuppositions of the wider Islamic humanities--whether in their high-cultural and learned, or their oral and popular forms--by transforming or even replacing influential versions of that religious paradigm, either by exposing its theological and metaphysical inadequacies or by articulating the alternative spiritual claims of particular representatives of the awliyâ'. And of course in many parts of the Islamic world people went on creating and living out the more practical local forms of the Islamic humanities, as they do today, without overly worrying about the disputes and alternative visions of those often far-off urban male learned elites.[14]

---

[13]We have intentionally highlighted these key code-words of modern Islamicist political ideologies--too often naively repeated in uninformed scholarly as well as journalistic discourse--to help suggest the curious process of hybridization through which historically alien religious conceptions, most often reflecting Western Protestant or Marxist cultural paradigms, have been grafted with traditional paradigms of Islamic scholarship to give rise to such peculiar categories and typifications of various Muslim peoples. as, for example, "peripheral", "nominal" or merely "traditional" (vs. "believing" or "practicing" or "authentic"), first under colonial regimes and even more pervasively under the pressing ideological demands of recently created nation-states. The essential point to bear in mind is that such ideologically motivated accounts--each claiming paradoxically to represent an (as yet imperfectly realized) "traditional" Islam-- clearly have very little to do with how Muslims in general (and more particularly those groups thus typified) have actually viewed their faith and relations to God.

[14]See the particularly insightful illustration of this much wider phenomenon, in the case of one mountain village during the recent "Islamic Revolution," in R. Loeffler's Islam in Practice: Religious Beliefs in a Persian Village (Albany, 1988) and E. Friedl's Women of Deh Koh: Lives in an Iranian Village (Washington, 1989). For similar phenomena in a wide variety of more urban, Arab contexts, see the revealing anecdotes throughout M. Gilsenan's Recognizing Islam (London, 1983). Closer to home, the pioneering research of Beverly McCloud (n. 24 below) provides fascinating firsthand descriptions of the same creative elaboration of meaningfully Islamic forms--often in conscious opposition to alien cultural models of custom

Here again, the great obstacle for students of religion approaching the texts of Islamic "mysticism" is that any adequate phenomenological description of their social and historical contexts--assumed by the original authors and audiences alike--is still often inaccessible to non-specialists. The invaluable contributions of recent studies of the social history of all periods and regions of the Islamic world in revealing those local contexts, and especially in highlighting the immense lacunae in our knowledge of earlier Islam societies and the actual religious lives and practice (most notably of women and tribal peoples) outside a handful of urban cultural centers, have not even begun to be assimilated in surveys of Islam intended for non-specialists.[15] And the

---

and behavior--among small communities of African-American Muslim women with only the most tenuous contacts to learned Arabic traditions of religious scholarship.

[15]The amazing coexistence of scholarly handbooks on Islamic religion conveying, if anything, increasingly ideological and ahistorical portrayals of "Islam" (in terms of supposedly normative doctrines, practices, etc.) at precisely the same time as hundreds of detailed historical studies, in both Western and Islamic languages, have come to highlight the grave limits and constantly shifting motives and meanings of such idealized paradigms in any particular period and locale, is a curious paradox deserving its own study in the sociology of knowledge.

For students of religion interested in delving into that already immense recent historical literature--and for the time being, given the absence of reliable historical syntheses (especially with regard to popular culture and non-urban populations), no serious understanding of Islam, including Islamic "mysticism," is really possible without immersing oneself in many such detailed local studies--two important cautions are in order. First, many of those recent historical inquiries are linked to the development of new nation-states and a naturally renewed interest by local scholars in their national "roots" and in "popular" movements conceived in modern national terms. The common danger in all such cases is an inadequate awareness of the wider relevance and interconnections of many areas of Islamic culture in pre-modern times, both of learned religious literature and of the written and oral Islamic humanities, in ways that usually transcend contemporary national, regional and linguistic boundaries. In the West this problem is aggravated by even more artificial recent "area studies" divisions in scholarly treatments of the Islamic cultures in question.

The second, less obvious, major barrier for students of Islamic religion, is that historical studies with rare exceptions focus on what is viewed as politically or historically "significant" and unusual "behavior"--i.e., on what stands out, often in terms of violence, rebellion, etc.--and not on the "longue durée" and the more universal, by definition almost "invisible," spiritual dimensions of religious life. In the present context, for example, the pitfalls of this outlook are especially obvious in the focus of many studies of "Islamic mysticism" on the charismatic leaders of Sufi orders functioning as political leaders of anti-colonial resistance in the 19th century (e.g., the Mahdi in the Sudan, the Sanusiya in Libya, ᶜAbd al-Qâdir in Algeria, Shâmil in the Caucasus, etc.), or on the equally striking case of Shah Ismail and the Safavid movement. For a student of Islamic religion, such studies often do not even pose the key questions: the

equally important detailed descriptions of individual local Muslim communities (usually rural or tribal) by anthropologists and ethnographers in this century likewise have typically been carried out, in all but a handful of exceptional cases, in unfortunate ignorance of the historical depth and cultural complexities of the Islamic humanities and the widespread interplay of their localized forms with more learned traditions, especially those associated with Islamic mysticism.[16]

The fundamental relevance of the growing evidence from these disciplines for situating Islamic "mysticism" can be stated very simply: the closer one looks at the actual lives of

---

"charisma" of religio-political leaders, as we know from experience, can be demonic or divine; and the thousands of "saints" who do correspond to Muhammad's description (n. 2 above), whose teaching and example gives meaning to Islam and continues to guide other Muslims' lives throughout the world, rarely enter anyone's historical chronicles (at least until after their death).

[16]Since the very existence and multiple functions of the local Islamic humanities, much less their central role in the actual religious life of Muslims everywhere, are not even acknowledged in most non-specialist introductions to Islamic religion, anthropologists working in every area of the Muslim world have tended to assume the historicist paradigm of the ᶜulamâ' represents a descriptive as well as normative account of "Islam"--and thus have inevitably found it irrelevant (or hostile) to what they actually do observe in many local oral or written cultures somehow "remote" from the representatives of that elite learned Arabic tradition. (As noted above, that paradigm, in any of its variants, was certainly never historically descriptive, and could be construed as "normative" only in continually controversial and politically shifting sense.) The resulting difficulties in perceiving the centrally "Islamic" character of a multitude of local practices and attitudes conveyed by and centering on the awliyâ' have only been aggravated by further intellectual interference from more recent Islamicist ideologies and other, often competing, nationalist accounts of the same local cultural phenomena.

Students of Islamic religion, however, face a much more daunting obstacle in attempting to "translate" the data of anthropological and ethnographic studies into religiously meaningful terms in a way that will reveal the essential interconnections between specific local practices and the more learned, "mystical" forms of the Islamic humanities. Since the meaningfulness of those local forms (literary, poetic, musical, etc.) depends on their capacity to awaken, within each participant, the awareness and practice of the universal spiritual virtues which are the heart of the Qur'ânic focus on Dîn ("Religion" in the sense of the intimate relationship between each soul and God), they are likely to be quite opaque to observers who are not looking for them or who are unwilling actually to enter into that spiritual life. Since there is ordinarily nothing in the liberal arts background or professional training and preoccupations of anthropologists that would lead them to take that central dimension of the Islamic humanities seriously, it should not be surprising if even the best available ethnographic material on the religious life of Muslims (including "mystical" groups and practices) in any part of the world is rarely very accurate or helpful in communicating the spiritual life and experience of the individuals it attempts to describe. In fact, works of "fiction" from the same Muslim societies are typically far more effective in communicating the religious content and meaning of the local Islamic humanities.

individual Muslim women and men in any period (including the learned male scholarly elites), the harder it is to discern any indigenous literary or cultural category or social institutions (including those associated with "Sufism") that could somehow be singled out as uniquely or authoritatively representing "Islamic mysticism".  At best, as in the fitting title of A. Schimmel's classic study, one can speak broadly of the "mystical dimensions" of virtually every aspect of Islamic life and culture in the pre-modern world.  Time and again, when one looks at the actual historical contexts, it turns out that what have often been identified as "mystical" practices or writings were in fact integrally embedded in the wider Islamic humanities, or what outside observers have often so revealingly labeled as "popular"--i.e, actually lived--religion and spirituality.

To give only a few examples directly illustrating the following discussion of the types of mystical literature, the repeated invocation of divine Names (the prayer of dhikr, or "remembrance" of God) turns out to be not simply a central "Sufi" ritual, but in some areas an important part of funerals and a common stage in the religious education of young people, who learn (even before the canonical prayers) the "Most Beautiful Names" and their recitation with the aid of prayer beads--a practice carried on throughout life without presupposing any official affiliation to a particular Sufi order.  Likewise periodical visitations (ziyârât) to the shrines and tombs of saints (and prophets, Imams, and some of their descendants) and associated festivals have long been an integral part of ritual and family life in virtually every region, with more widespread participation even today than the Hajj which typically figures so prominently in textbook accounts of Islam.   And even more common and spiritually significant--if less visible--are the diverse practices of offerings, prayers, sacrifices and vows in connection with those dreams, spiritual visions, intuitions and blessings that are each individual's decisive proof of the effective (and affective) power of a given walî.  Finally, at least in traditional settings throughout much of the Eastern Islamic world, "mystical" and devotional poetry (frequently in conjunction with music) is often not just an incidental ornament or illustration of some more learned Islamic teaching, but in fact the primary vehicle for discovering and formulating the "mystical" dimension of the spiritually significant experiences and situations constantly arising

in everyday life.[17]   There those compelling vernacular poetic literatures and vast repertoire of popular stories about the prophets and saints are the equally complex equivalent in the Islamic humanities of the multitude of spiritually significant tales and legends--likewise only partially "scriptural"--whose reminders are built into the stained glass windows and elaborate stonework of Chartres and other medieval cathedrals.[18]

## III. Types of Mystical Writing: Texts and Contexts

The following basic typology should help to bring out the importance of the actual contexts of the various writings often associated with Islamic "mysticism", contexts which are rarely discussed in adequate detail in the still limited set of translations or analytical discussions of those texts available to non-Islamicists.  This schematic analysis is based on an extremely simplified consideration of the main audiences and subjects of that literature, a procedure that is subject to several important qualifications mentioned below.  A few reliable English translations are cited as illustrations in each case, as an aid to those working in related fields who might wish to use such texts in teaching or comparative studies.

---

[17]To give a few more particular illustrations from the Persianate cultural sphere (from southern Iraq to Tadjikistan and northern Pakistan), one could mention the frequent divinatory consultation (fa'l) of the mystical poetry of Hafez in any life-situation requiring spiritual guidance; the central place of the Dîvân of Hafez on the haft sîn table at the center of the monthlong New Year's celebrations (Now Rûz); or the preeminent place of Rumi's Dîvân-i Shams-i Tabrîz (alongside the Qur'ân) in mosques of Ismaili Shiite communities throughout that region.  In such situations even the most "illiterate" villager often knows thousands of verses of these mystical poets by heart, recalling the appropriate ones whenever the corresponding experience arises.

Only those who are aware of the pervasive spiritual functions of these locally rooted Islamic humanities, or of their vernacular equivalents throughout other parts of the Islamic world, can begin to appreciate the devastating religious and cultural impact (potentially deeper than many earlier invasions, or even the script "reforms" of an Ataturk or Stalin) of the recent replacement of those local Islamic humanities in so many areas by newly invented national ideologies (Islamicist or other) and compulsory public "education" in them.

[18]G. John Renard's forthcoming study of Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts (Columbia, SC, 1992), is a remarkably comprehensive synthesis of the corresponding visual and epic "iconography" of the local Islamic humanities, including relevant "mystical" dimensions, in many regions of the Islamic world, from West Africa to Indonesia.  See also the forthcoming volume by A. Schimmel, et.al., The Popular Muhammad: The Person of Muhammad in Muslim Folk Poetry (Columbia, 1992).

The most fundamental distinction one immediately encounters in considering Islamic "mystical" texts is that between works addressed to the relatively small network of scholars conversant with the learned traditions of the religious and "rational" (i.e., philosophic, scientific, medical, etc.) sciences, which were usually written in classical Arabic[19]--works that we may broadly characterize as "theoretical" in their format and audience--and a vastly more complex and diverse literature of the Islamic humanities, both written and predominantly oral, in a multitude of languages, intended for the practical spiritual instruction or edification of far wider audiences.  These latter, more practical types of writing typically share a common concern with directly communicating, in a locally meaningful form, essential spiritual teachings of the Qur'ân and hadîth.[20]

The selection of writings included in the following categories roughly corresponds to the broad set of subjects that are commonly associated with "Islamic mysticism" in modern translations and discussions by students of other religious traditions.  But in reality this standard selection is somewhat arbitrary and artificially limited in a number of crucial respects that must constantly be kept in mind if one is to appreciate the distinctive roles of these specific types of writing within the much wider complex of the Islamic humanities and their actual religious functions in particular local contexts.

---

[19]Or occasionally in Persian (or Ottoman Turkish), which often functioned as the lingua franca of intellectual and religious elites in many regions of the Eastern Islamic world down to the present century.  It should also be stressed that many of learned, "theoretical" Arabic texts in question were (and are) equally inaccessible to Arabic speakers without years of initiation and study of those learned traditions--and that Arabic-speaking regions had their own local "Islamic humanities" (both oral and sometimes written), which have only very recently begun to interest students of religion.

[20]These practical spiritual writings, it should be noted, are usually quite distinct from the a wide range of vernacular works intended for the "popularization" or vulgar assimilation of the learned Arabic religious and rational sciences.  The spiritual, aesthetic and ethical sophistication that typifies the adaptation of the traditional Islamic humanities in their local contexts, where (reflecting the Qur'ânic perspective) they are integrally adapted to the spiritual capacities and life-situation of each individual, offers a particularly radical contrast with the alien models of "religious education" and "Islamicization" (formulated in conceptual, often purely ideological terms and typically directed to the lowest common denominator) adopted by the national systems of compulsory public education in certain modern Muslim states.

To begin with, the typology of "mystical" writings outlined here does not directly include the traditional complex of Arabic "religious sciences" (fiqh, kalâm, usûl al-fiqh, tafsîr, hadîth, related linguistic and historical studies, Arabic calligraphy, and the like), even though all of those disciplines have frequently been used and construed as important, even integral aspects of mystical or spiritual paths in various Islamic contexts by some of the learned elite to whom they were directly accessible.[21]  More importantly, we have left out of consideration here the vast realm of supposedly "non-religious" local literatures[22]--e.g., forms of epic poetry, "folk-tales", proverbs and fables, traditional (family, tribal, etc.) genealogies, histories and legends, etc.--and related practices, even though those forms of the Islamic humanities are frequently central to the actual understanding and symbolic articulation of religious and spiritual experience in each local context.  Hence the following typology of audiences and subjects, it should be stressed, is not directly based on any traditional literary genres: one could give both prose and poetic illustrations, in both written and oral expression, for each category of "mystical" writing outlined below.  And certainly many of the classic, most lastingly and widely influential vehicles of the Islamic humanities (such as the hadîth themselves, the Ihyâ' ᶜUlûm al-Dîn of Ghazâlî, or the epic accomplishments of poets like Rumi, Attar and Hafez) include virtually all of the following categories.

Even more fundamentally, the actual spiritual functions of the limited types of writing discussed below in practice overlap and intersect with an far more extensive and diverse network of other forms of local practices, rituals, iconographies, social patterns and cultural assumptions

---

[21]Those possibilities are well illustrated in some of the well-known later writings of al-Ghazâlî, and even more voluminously throughout the works of Ibn ᶜArabî; in the Twelver Shiite context, see the philosophic commentaries on the Qur'an and a popular Shiite hadîth collection by Mulla Sadra (summarized in the Introduction to our translation of The Wisdom of the Throne, Princeton, 1981).

[22]I.e., all the literatures and other ethically and aesthetically significant local activities and customs which don't happen to fit within the historicist and scripturalist paradigms of the ᶜulamâ' discussed above.  This artificial separation from the whole local complex of the Islamic humanities is especially devastating for anyone attempting to discover the actual spiritual dimensions of Muslim women's religious lives (since, not surprisingly, they do not necessarily mirror learned urban male accounts of what is "Islamic") or looking at anthropological work on religion in Muslim peasant or tribal communities outside the "Middle East".

which can differ radically from one family, quarter, village or tribe even to its nearest neighbors. Whether any aspect of a particular Islamic socio-cultural context (including its written and oral literatures) actually operates as--or is perceived as--"mystical" (or "religious", "Islamic", etc.) raises thorny questions of individual realization and broader cultural definition that are at least as complex and controversial in those local contexts as are their more familiar metaphysical and scholarly counterparts. Within the major urban centers of Iran, for example, such widespread rituals and practices as the ceremonies surrounding the solar New Year (Now Rûz)--or the recitation of Ferdowsi's epic Shâhnâmeh (and its popular retellings); the extraordinary intertwinings of polite language (ta'ârrof) and social etiquette and norms; the zûr-khâneh (men's "gym"); the craft guilds and bazaar associations; mastery of shekasteh or other scripts; diverse items of dress; or the host of special foods and offerings whose preparation is prescribed for even relatively minor passages in life--have all taken on "mystical" meanings for individual Muslims and even for wider communities at different times.[23] And if one looks more closely, it turns out that the same dynamic, creative processes go on today--likewise with virtually no traditionally learned or formally "Islamic" literary input, and often without public documentary manifestations--within the families and communities of African American (and other American) Muslims today.[24]

---

For two major forthcoming works that break down these barriers and begin to explore the unexamined religious dimensions of these Islamic humanities, see n. 18 above.

[23]For an impressive portrait of those religious realities in an urban, educated setting, see such memoirs as S. M. A. Jamâlzâdeh's Isfahan is Half the World (Princeton, 1983), or--for a woman's perspective--S. Guppy's more recent The Blindfold Horse: Memories of a Persian Childhood (Boston, 1988). For the very different religious world of villagers not far away, see the work by R. Loeffler cited at n. 14 above.

[24]See the Ph.D. dissertation of Beverly McCloud (Temple University, Dept. of Religion, 1991) on the religious lives of three generations of Muslim women from five local African-American Islamic communities in Philadelphia. The total absence of published documentation on the actual religious life of those thriving, decades-old and quite indigenously American contemporary Muslim communities should serve as a sufficient caution to those who might assume that the fundamental problems of perception and presentation of Islamic religion and mysticism highlighted in this paper are simply the result of distance (in time or space) and relative unfamiliarity of foreign Muslim communities and religious practices. On the other hand, if the religious lives of these thousands of Muslim neighbors and colleagues have remained quite literally "invisible" to American religious scholarship for decades, hopefully that should suggest

Finally it should be obvious that the actual "mystical" or spiritual functioning of any of these forms of the Islamic humanities--at least in any deeper and consistently meaningful sense--still depends above all on the very different ways in which individual Muslims actively appropriate and experience them. At least for each of the "practical" categories of mystical writing, one could easily cite a long continuum of illustrations stretching from undeniably spiritual expressions to relatively banal, traditionally "folkloric" or even more grossly "superstitious" and mundane uses.[25] (Perhaps that essential contrast is most obvious in the remarkable range of cultural and individual uses of the "occult sciences", like alchemy, astrology or numerology, and of their psychic and cosmological symbolism.) In fact, just as with the full corpus of hadîth, one often tends to find the ostensible "extremes" of that spectrum of spiritual realization contained within the same literary work, or expressed at times in the life and activities of a single individual.

## IV. Practical Types

-- "Music" in the broadest possible sense[26]--including the various forms and ritual circumstances of Qur'ân recitation; all the expressions of group prayer ceremonies (dhikr), whether chanted or accompanied by instruments; as a common setting for the classics of mystical lyric poetry; at saints' shrines and festivals; and within a host of other religious rituals and life-cycle ceremonies--remains fundamental to any serious phenomenology of religious and mystical

something of the reliability of portraits (and prejudices) drawn from far more distant worlds and vastly more limited and problematic sources.

[25]This continuum of radically different spiritual perspectives, within the essentially common oral religious culture and background of a single Iranian village, is beautifully illustrated by the various individual world-views portrayed in the major work by R. Loeffler cited at n. 14 above.

[26]We must stress the phenomenological inclusiveness of this dimension of Islamic "mysticism" because so many textbook accounts of this subject in Islamic contexts have unfortunately portrayed as either (unquestionably) normative or descriptive a multitude of highly problematic legal/theological categories and opinions: e.g., between "permitted" chanting or recitation of divine Names and "illicit" forms of singing or instrumental music; or between "religious" or "Islamic" ceremonies and "folk" customs or "local" rituals. Such widespread misconceptions of the Islamic humanities do beautifully illustrate the presuppositions and dangerous limitations of the historicist and scripturalist paradigms of certain ᶜulamâ' discussed above.

life in most Muslim societies, and to even the most elementary understanding of the Islamic humanities. Fortunately, students of religion now have at their disposal, even without travelling, a rapidly growing range of recordings and descriptive studies sufficient to give some idea of the centrality of music in a wide variety of Islamic spiritual paths and disciplines, especially in those rural, tribal and "popular" contexts so often neglected in general works on Islam.[27]

As a revealing contrast, studies of architecture and other visual arts as manifestations of the Islamic humanities--and more particularly in their relations to mystical and spiritual dimensions of Islam--have apparently been greatly limited by the art-historical disciplines' classical focus on a canon of "great" works or monuments associated with a select group of urban centers of patronage, trade and power, as well as by highly inappropriate, culturally limited definitions of what constitutes "fine" and minor or "decorative" (or "civilized" and "primitive") arts.[28] Certainly scholars are now paying increased attention to such relatively

---

[27]The pioneering work that comes closest to conveying the religious and spiritual dimensions of such music--truly a model in this field of Islamic studies--is E.H. Waugh's superb The Munshidin of Egypt: Their World and Their Song (Columbia, SC, 1989). Two other excellent recent studies of even more explicitly "mystical" Islamic music and associated rituals, in related, yet very different religious worlds, are R. Burckhardt Qureshi's Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali (Cambridge, 1986, with cassette tapes); and The Art of Persian Music, by J. During, et. al. (Washington, 1991, with compact disc).

For Qur'ân recitation, which is an indispensable key to the understanding and genesis of so many of the visual and musical forms of the Islamic humanities, see K. Nelson, The Art of Reciting the Qur'ân (Austin, 1985), and chapters 7-9 of W. Graham's Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion (Cambridge, 1987).

Despite the publicly visible importance of dance in the local Islamic humanities throughout great parts of the Islamic world, whether in sessions of Sufi dhikr and other undeniably "religious" ceremonies involving spiritual states and trances, or in celebrations of weddings and other major feasts, useful ethnographic films and documentaries (not to mention articles or books) in this area are still extremely rare. Again the virtual nonexistence of serious studies of this subject perfectly illustrates the insidious role of the above-mentioned learned paradigms of Islamic religion in concealing key elements in even the most elementary phenomenology of Muslim spiritual life in those many regions where such dance forms are religiously important, as well as in blocking any appreciation of the typical interpenetration of "mystical," Sufi practices and wider customary forms of popular religiosity in such Islamic settings (including the lives of contemporary American Muslims).

[28]Of course even those visual arts which are clearly "major" in the more familiar Islamic contexts (calligraphy, ceramics, textile design, metalwork, carpets, books and their illumination, etc.) are typically not at the center of aesthetic reflection and esteem in the West. But even more

obvious phenomena as the interactions between mystical thought and literature and miniature paintings often produced in the same court settings, or to the social and political dimensions of Islamic "mystical" movements from the 13th through the 19th centuries, as their deeply rooted popular influences were mirrored in the fortunes of dynasties and the widespread official construction and endowment of saints' shrines, tombs, khanegahs, and the like. But the more widespread popular reflections and subtle influences of mystical teachings and practice in such culturally diverse forms as calligraphy (in all Islamic languages) and the aesthetics and iconography of textiles, clothing, jewelry, utensils, ceramics, and carpets; in tombs; and in the plethora of more "rustic" mosques, zâwiyas, Imâmzâdehs or jamkhânehs--especially as those physical creations interacted with particular local customs and social patterns--has yet to attract the same level of scholarly attention, above all with regard to those aspects that would most interest the student of religions.[29] Thus, apart from important studies of a few pre-modern cities and famous monuments, something as primordial as the concrete expression of the sacred and

---

striking in these art-historical disciplines is the unquestioned persistence of distinctions mirroring the earlier paradigmatic opposition of learned Arabic literatures and understandings of Islam to "popular", "local", "customary", or even "folkloric" forms of religious experience. Thus the artistic and aesthetic visual expressions of the Islamic humanities among supposedly "peripheral" Muslims in (not coincidentally) largely peasant or tribal areas like Indonesia and Malaysia, Central Asia, the Balkans and Caucasus, Kurdistan, West Africa, or the Swahili coast are typically ignored or at best mentioned in passing in virtually all textbook treatments of "Islamic art". Two remarkable recent exceptions which highlight many of those unwarranted assumptions and their blinding effects are L. Prussin's Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa (Berkeley, 1985), and the forthcoming study by J. Renard, Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts (Columbia, SC, 1992).

[29]This area is especially relevant to our understanding and appreciation of the deeper spiritual roots and socio-cultural influences of Islamic "mysticism". Most obviously, in the actual practice of all these arts and music (in Islam as elsewhere) subtle "aesthetic" and "spiritual" values and disciplines are often inseparable. And in the everyday life of most Muslims, the deeper interpenetrations of spiritual life and the Islamic humanities were typically far more widely and profoundly mediated by these particular aesthetic forms--e.g., a few beautiful lines of calligraphy ("religious" or not); the properly moving recitation of the Qur'ân; the satisfying shape, color and decoration of a vessel for ablutions, a bookstand, or a set of prayer beads; the ornamentation of a mosque or saint's shrine; the inner layout of one's own house; or the complex religious associations of a simple reed pen--than by nominally or self-consciously "religious" concepts and teachings. The widespread neglect of this fundamental religiously mediating function of the popular Islamic humanities has led to a remarkable unconsciousness of the full extent of the profound religious and spiritual consequences simply of the most physical

physical space of Islamic spirituality and mystical practice in non-urban settings, from West Africa to China and Indonesia, necessarily continues to be another mystery to all those (including many Islamic scholars) who have not been privileged to travel and live in those unique local contexts and communities.

-- Reflecting the central focus in popular Islamic spirituality on sacred-human mediating figures (the awliyâ', Imams, prophets and especially Muhammad and his Family and Companions) already discussed above, by far the largest category of mystical literature (including corresponding oral forms) consists of what could very broadly be called "devotional" literature: prayers, invocations, blessings and praises, and (at least in Shiite contexts) rites of mourning and elegies typically directed toward, or else produced by, those central theophanic figures.[30]   In fact the importance of those human spiritual exemplars is so overwhelming in virtually every sphere of Islamic spirituality[31] that in practice it is extremely difficult to separate

---

dimensions of "modernization," which may be even deeper than the transforming effects of national "religious education" discussed above.

[30]One of the essential spiritual consequences of the continuum of walâya (the inner "proximity" connecting God, the awliyâ', and each soul) is that in "repeating" any of the prayers and invocations of the prophets, Imams and saints--as preeminently in the universal daily ritual recitations of the Qur'ân itself--the Muslim worshipper is not simply reproducing or imitating someone else's prayers and devotions.  Instead, what is ultimately aimed at and presupposed, in each of these endlessly diverse devotional forms, is a profound state of co-participation, if not spiritual union, with that divine Source.

In the Shiite ᶜAshûrâ commemorations, of course, that inner spiritual connection is often sought (or manifested) in more physically palpable forms.  In particular, the dramatic annual re-enactments of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in Twelver Shiite communities, which so remarkably illustrate the complex role of the Islamic humanities at the interface between learned Arabic and local religious traditions, have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years.  See, e.g., the pioneering work of M. Ayoub, Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the devotional aspects of 'Ashura' in Twelver Shiism (The Hague, 1978); and P. Chelkowski, ed., Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran (N.Y., 1979).

[31]Certainly this is no less true in most parts of the Islamic world, at the level of actual, observable religious and spiritual life, than with the roles of the corresponding sacred-human theophanies in Christian, Buddhist or Hindu spiritual practice.  Again there is little or nothing in books about Islam intended for non-specialist readers that would even begin to suggest the importance and complexity of that dimension of Muslim spiritual life--although the widespread reactions underlying the "Rushdie Affair" may at least have suggested the popular centrality and sensitivity of this spiritual reality in certain Islamic contexts.

this category of spiritual writing and practice from almost all of the other "mystical" forms of the Islamic humanities discussed below: those other types of writing can all be understood (and often were consciously intended) as extended commentaries on one or another of these exemplary spiritual archetypes. The remarkable lack of translations[32] of this kind of literature (not to mention in-depth studies of its actual religious functions in specific local contexts) may in part reflect the relative predominance of its oral or "popular", vernacular forms and more particularly its associations with that (supposedly) "silent majority"--i.e., Muslim women--whose actual

---

Along similar lines, one may note the even more egregious lack of focus on female spiritual archetypes (e.g., Fatima, Zaynab, Aisha, Khadija, and especially Mary--whose Qur'ânic description sounds disconcertingly "Catholic" to many Protestant readers) in the religious lives of Muslim women from the most diverse cultural settings. (In this regard, see the recent pioneering article by E.B. Findly, "Religious Resources for Secular Power: The Case of Nûr Jahân", pp. 129-148 in Colby Library Quarterly XXV/1989.)

Above all, the peculiar domination of accounts of "Islam" by the theological categories and conceptions of small groups of learned religious scholars--or by the even more unrepresentative slogans of modern ideologists--apparently explains the refusal of most handbooks to recognize even the most obvious phenomena of Muslim spiritual life: namely, that depending on the particular devotional context, Muhammad, Ali, Husayn, Abbâs, Abd al-Qâdir, Muᶜîn al-Dîn Chishtî, and a host of other awliyâ' are appealed to directly and intimately, on the same terms and in the same diverse life-contexts, as with the devotional roles of Jesus, various bodhisattvas, and similar theophanies in other religious traditions. (For those who have not been able to witness this directly, the best approach is simply to observe the "lyrics" of virtually any of the available recordings of Islamic mystical and spiritual music, especially from ceremonies taking place in "traditional", less modernized rural or tribal contexts.)

[32]The most comprehensive popular introduction remains C. E. Padwick, Muslim Devotions (London, 1960), while A. Schimmel's And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety (Chapel Hill, 1985) provides profuse illustrations of these central religious expressions from many regions of the Islamic world, to be supplemented by the two major forthcoming studies cited in n. 18 above. See also W. Thackston's translations of Abdullâh Ansârî's classic Persian Munâjât (Intimate Conversations: N.Y., 1978 [Classics of Western Spirituality]).

Probably the most useful and sensitive introduction to this subject for the student of religions is to be found in W.C. Chittick's recent translation of Zayn al-ᶜAbidîn's al-Sahîfa al-Sajjâdiya: The Psalms of Islam (London, 1988), especially the introductory explanations on "Prayer in Islam". However, what has so far been translated or studied is in no way indicative of the volume and importance of such works in actual Islamic humanities, "mystical" or otherwise. The most fundamental gaps remain the lack of reliable and readable, adequately annotated English translations of the major collections of hadîth (both Sunni and Shiite) and of Ali's Nahj al-Balâgha.

experience and practice of the spiritual life is still so strikingly absent from most of the available scholarly literature on Islamic religion.

-- It would certainly be tempting, especially for students of comparative mysticism and spirituality, to try to separate out from the above category texts concerned more specifically with the actual practice of methods of contemplation, meditation, visualization and related disciplines pursued in the Sufi orders and other "mystical" forms of Islamic religion.[33]  The fact that such an effort would be doomed to failure even in the original languages reflects two fundamental and quite distinctive features of Islamic spirituality--both deeply rooted in the central mystery of the unique language and rhetoric of the Qur'ân--whose significance will be discussed in more detail at the end of this essay.  First, from the time of Muhammad down to the present day, "mystical" or spiritual practices in Islam, despite all their diversity and changing forms, have typically not been viewed or portrayed as clearly distinct from the archetypal Prophetic model of constant prayer, devotion, awareness, vigil, fasting, and retreat--i.e., from the actualization of those more universal spiritual virtues which are the constant subject and aim of the Qur'ân itself.  Secondly, for reasons also discussed below, detailed attempts to record or prescribe those spiritual practices in written form seem to have been virtually nonexistent.  Even if translations were more widely available, the relatively few written works on such central mystical practices that do exist--such as summary accounts of the particular prayers and litanies associated with certain Sufi orders, catalogues of divine Names used for dhikr, or brief instructions on breathing or visualization--typically give no inkling of the complex, highly individualized application and adaptations of such procedures under the guidance of an accomplished master, nor of the critical process of their integration within the less "esoteric" (but no less indispensable) ethical and ritual forms shared with surrounding communities.

-- Perhaps the next most common form of Islamic mystical literature, and one equally inextricable from the wider complex of Islamic humanities, is that of lives of the saints (and

---

[33]As for more "theoretical" accounts of those spiritual practices, combining metaphysical explanation and elaborate scriptural justifications, by far most complete and elaborate (and historically influential) versions in Islam are the detailed treatments of those subjects by al-Ghazâlî (in his famous "Revival of the Religious Sciences" (Ihyâ' 'Ulûm al-Dîn), now being systematically translated by the Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge) and by the famous

Imams and prophets).    The formal grounding and inspiration of that immense and constantly

accumulating mystical literature in the earlier Arabic prototypes of hadîth, the Sîra (Prophetic

biography and legend) and the parallel popular genre of "stories of the prophets" should need no

explanation.[34]   But whether in the epic masterworks of Rumi and Attar or in the endlessly

transformed oral versions of those often universal stories,[35] it is remarkable how consistently the

---

Andalusian mystic Ibn ᶜArabî in his "Meccan Illuminations" (K. al-Futûhât al-Makkîya), discussed in sections V and VI below.

[34]For Muhammad and his Companions, see Ibn Ishaq (trans. A. Guillaume), The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's `Sîrat Rasûl Allâh' (Oxford, 1955), and the adaptation of Ibn Ishaq by M. Lings,  Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources, which is more readable and especially sensitive to those dimensions which are central to Islamic spirituality and mysticism.  For the early Shiite Imams, see Shaykh al-Mufid (trans. I. K. A. Howard), Kitâb al-Irshâd: The Book of Guidance (London, 1981).  And for the "tales of the prophets" genre, see al-Kisâ'î (trans. W. Thackston), The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisâ'î (Boston, 1978); and J. Knappert,  Islamic Legends: Histories of the Heroes, Saints and Prophets of Islam, (2 vols., Leiden, 1985)--the second volume largely devoted to stories of Islamic saints and famous Sufis, especially ᶜAbd al-Qâdir Jîlânî, from many parts of the Muslim world.

It is important to bear in mind that even in Arabic-speaking countries the Qur'an and hadîth have not been the primary vehicle for this communication of Islamic tradition for most Muslims throughout history.  The learned understanding of Qur'anic language and contexts, requiring years of advanced study of many disciplines, is a very different matter from the far more common processes (in pre-modern contexts) of childhood memorization of certain verses for purposes of prayer, recitation, or even calligraphy.It is important to note that Muslims in the most disparate cultural settings (apart from the religiously learned elite) rarely distinguish in their awareness of spiritually significant stories between those conveyed by the local Islamic humanities, and those having their sources directly in the Quran or hadîth.  Indeed the same spiritually significant stories are often told of or attributed to Muhammad, Ali, other saints and prophets, and heroes drawn from local vernacular epics and legends: see the many illustrations in J. Renard's forthcoming study cited at n. 18 above.

[35]A widely accessible hagiographical work introducing the most famous spiritual exemplars of the early Sufi tradition is F. Attar (abridged trans. by A.J. Arberry), Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliyâ' (London, 1966).  M. Sells is preparing a forthcoming volume of translated selections from many of the classical figures and texts of early Islamic mystical hagiography for the "Classics of Western Spirituality" series (Paulist Press).  In English, two extensive illustrations of the integration of such stories in contexts of Islamic mystical teaching are Attar's The Conference of the Birds (trans. M. Darbandi and D. Davis, London, 1984), and R.A. Nicholson's 3-volume translation of The Mathnawî of Jalâlu'ddîn Rûmî (London, repr. 1977).

Unfortunately, there are still no widely accessible studies of particular local Islamic communities that adequately communicate the essential process of "spiritual contextualization" provided by the Islamic humanities in their local (usually oral) contexts, the way "illiterate"

focus remains--as already in the hadîth--on the archetypal, on spiritually significant incidents or anecdotes intended to "illustrate" a more general, recurrent teaching.   The absence of any tradition of self-consciously individualized spiritual "autobiography" providing a detailed and psychologically realistic account of the actual processes of spiritual teaching and initiation[36] is another of those distinctive characteristics of Islamic mystical writing whose origins and deeper significance will be explored in the concluding sections of this study.

-- The broad category of ecstatic sayings and metaphysical paradoxes (shatahât or Sufi "koans"), parables, aphorisms, and mystical tales[37]--drawn both from exemplars in the Qur'ân,

---

individuals are often extraordinarily sophisticated in making the essential connections between each particular mystical story or saying (whatever its source) and the specific type of life-event or inner experience to which it is spiritually or ethically applicable.

[36]Even such remarkable Shiite texts as the early Ismaili initiatic dialogue of The Master and Disciple (cf. our forthcoming Arabic edition and translation) do not really provide such an illustration: while the dramatic setting in that dialogue is clearly drawn, it is quite typically directed to bringing out the archetypal character of essential Qur'ânic passages, such as the encounter of Moses and Khezr.

The handful of invaluable translations that do provide a more realistic picture of the actual processes of spiritual teaching and direction in very different Islamic cultural settings are not really exceptions to the above "rule" concerning the distinctive nature and limits of mystical writing throughout the Muslim world, since each of those books in fact reflects the extraordinary recording, by a contemporary observer, of typical cases of oral transmission and recounting of teachings and experiences which ordinarily would have remained an "invisible" and unrecorded part of the process of spiritual guidance between a master and disciple.  See the relevant sections of M. Lings, A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century, Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawî (London/Berkeley, 1971); L. Brenner, West African Sufi: The Religious Heritage & Spiritual Search of Cerno Bokar Saalif Taal (London/Berkeley, 1984), especially the translated "spiritual discourses", pp. 157-192; and our translation (in preparation) of Nur Ali Elahi, Athâr al-Haqq (Tehran, 1366 h.s., 708 pp.).

[37]See, for example, Ibn 'Atâ'allâh (trans. V. Danner),  The Book of Wisdom (New York, 1978); al-Junayd (trans. A. H. Abdel-Kader), The Life, Personality and Writings of Al-Junayd (London, repr. 1976), pp. 120-183; as well as the forthcoming volume of translations by M. Sells cited at n. 35; and S. Suhrawardi (trans. W. Thackston), The Mystical and Visionary Treatises of Suhrawardi (London, 1982).  At the more popular, oral level such spiritual sayings and riddles are woven throughout all the previously mentioned hagiographic tales of the saints and prophets, and even into the multitude of popular "jokes" and comic stories concerning such figures as Jûhâ or "Mullâ/Khojâ Nasruddîn".

The most glaring gap for this major genre of Islamic mystical writing is surely the lack of a complete English translation of any of the major collections of (and commentaries on) the Shatahât, the "metaphysical paradoxes" of the early Sufis discussed by C. Ernst in Words of

hadîth and prophetic tales, and from the accumulated wisdom of every preceding religious tradition--represents a familiar, abundant type of Islamic mystical literature in which it is often extremely difficult to draw any rigid boundaries between written and oral teaching, between commonplace proverbs and profound spiritual intuitions.  To be sure, many such riddles, stories and poems are clearly protreptic, designed simply to awaken their readers' awareness of and interest in pursuing the deeper meaning behind the outward forms of religion and everyday experience.  But again we have almost no scholarly literature that would adequately convey the complex higher religious functions of those short, easily memorable tales and sayings either as they are skilfully used by an accomplished master or as they resonate inwardly when their meaning is awakened in conjunction with the appropriate meditation or critical moment of spiritual insight.

-- Another important category of Islamic mystical writing, which has only begun to be explored, consists of more practical guides to spiritual life, whether focused on the "rules" of proper behavior (adab) to be followed by Sufi novices, outlines of the "stages of the path" and spiritual psychology, or in actual letters of direction or students' "transcriptions" (malfûzât) of a master's oral teaching to certain disciples.[38]  Once again, students of comparative religion who gain some familiarity with the Islamic works of this type are likely to be somewhat disappointed; for in most cases, including the translations just cited, such writings tend to be repetitive and relatively elementary, or too sketchy and fragmentary to be fully meaningful.  Rarely will one

---

Ecstasy in Sufism (Albany, 1985).  Already in the Islamic world the profound linguistic difficulties involved with translating (as opposed to paraphrasing and explicating) such works in any language is reflected in the vast commentary literature, in several Islamic languages, relating to each of the above-mentioned types of mystical writing.

[38]See, for example, Ibn ᶜAbbâd (trans. J. Renard), Ibn Abbad of Ronda: Letters of Spiritual Direction (N.Y., 1986); S. Maneri (tr. Paul Jackson), The Hundred Letters (NY, 1980); N. Râzî (tr. H. Algar).  The Path of God's Bondsmen from Origin to Return (Mirsâd al-ᶜIbâd) (N.Y., 1982); and U. Suhrawardî (transl. W. Clarke, from the Persian tr. by M. Kâshânî),  A Dervish Textbook from the 'Awârifu-l-Ma'ârif.... (London, repr. 1980).  All of Ibn ᶜArabî's writings, including the recent English translations of selections from his immense al-Futûhât al-Makkîya, contain extensive illustrations of all three of these types of practical mystical writing.  However, a great deal of this more practical spiritual literature remains to be explored even in its original manuscript form, especially for later periods in such vast areas as Muslim India, Ottoman Turkey, sub-Saharan Africa, etc.; one can thus expect some of the most interesting new studies in the areas of Islamic spirituality and mysticism to emerge from investigations of this broad range of practical Sufi literature.

find, for example, any detailed, phenomenologically adequate account of the particular Islamic uses of fasting, prayers, vigil and spiritual retreat, or of the awareness and appropriate interpretation of dreams, intuitions, and other spiritually significant events which in reality are so central to actual situations of instruction and spiritual guidance.

-- Certainly the most problematic, but nonetheless extremely widespread and influential, category of Islamic mystical literature is the diverse group of so-called "occult sciences," including such complex fields as the multi-dimensional sciences of letters and numerology (jafr and ᶜilm al-hurûf); alchemy; astrology; talismans; chiromancy; and so forth.[39]  This sort of writing and associated practice--in many cases reflecting a common symbolic and cosmological heritage shared with late Antiquity and the medieval West--spans an enormous range of manifestations in most Islamic societies, from highly theoretical treatments and profound mystical elaborations (detailing cosmological or subtle psychological processes) to popular "superstitions" and their own pragmatic uses.  For a variety of reasons, neither of those extremes has yet been subject to much sustained scholarly attention in the Islamic context, while recent religious modernists and reformers have typically considered both learned and popular manifestations of these disciplines to be embarrassing relics of a backward, "pre-scientific" superstitious mentality.  Thus accounts of Islamic mysticism and related arts and poetry for modern audiences have naturally tended to neglect the decisive importance of their communication of a "sacred canopy" of common cosmological symbols (including the omnipresent letters of the sacred alphabet) in accounting for the wider efficacy and persuasiveness of many expressions of the traditional Islamic humanities across the whole

---

[39]The virtual absence of English-language studies and translations of such materials in no way reflects their relative importance in earlier forms of Islamic spirituality and mysticism.  See our forthcoming review article of a number of recent French studies and Arabic editions in this field in the Journal of the American Oriental Society, and the vast amount of manuscript material (including only texts exclusively devoted to these subjects) in the bio-bibliographic survey volumes on early Arabic alchemy and astrology in F. Sezgin's Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums.

The most revealing introduction to the widespread uses of this genre in Islamic mysticism is the chapter by D. Gril (in French) on Ibn cArabî's understanding of the "science of letters", pp. 385-487 in the recent bilingual anthology from Ibn ᶜArabî, The Meccan Illuminations/Les Illuminations de la Mecque, (Paris, 1989).

cultural spectrum from court poetry and learned sciences to the most remote local oral traditions.[40]

-- Finally, there is the broad category of more direct expression, often in lyrical or even ecstatic poetic form, of actual mystical or spiritual experiences--a category which, because of its relative familiarity of subject and expression, has been a consistent favorite of modern Western translators.[41]    The popularity and immediacy of such classic texts, however, should not automatically be taken as an index of either their representative qualities or their adequacy for

---

[40]See the representative illustration of these types of symbolism throughout our translation of "Ibn ᶜArabî's Spiritual Ascension" (ch. 367 of the Futûhât), pp. 351-438 and 574-607 in The Meccan Illuminations/Les Illuminations de la Mecque, (Paris, 1989).  Materials of this type pose recurrent dilemmas for translators of Islamic religious writings into any modern language, since the related frameworks of cosmology, astrology, physics, physiology and numerology were often universally assumed in both learned and popular Islamic understandings even of the Qur'ân (and of the many hadîth on related cosmological matters) until modern times. Hence an adequate translation of such texts requires complex footnotes and detailed explanations, for the modern reader, of matters which were often implicitly assumed by pre-modern writers and audiences alike (very often in the Latin West as well): the situation is somewhat like attempting to explain a baseball sportscast (where the most complex rules and statistical categories are "obvious" to a numerically illiterate first-grader) to someone unfamiliar with that sport.

[41]Some of the more poetically approachable English translations, among a number of recent efforts, are the recent collaborative translations of Rûmî by J. Moyne and C. Barks, including Open Secret (versions from the Rubâ'îyât) and Unseen Rain (translations from the Dîvân-i Shams-i Tabrîz), (Putney, VT, 1984 and 1986).  The immense bibliography of translations and studies of Rumi is also summarized in two complementary introductory and background volumes, W. C. Chittick's The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi (Albany, 1983) and A. Schimmel's The Triumphal Sun: A study of the Works of Jalaluddin Rumi (London, 1980).

The familiarity for Western audiences of Rumi's mystical symbolism (especially its frequently direct appeals to our experience of nature, or concrete images drawn from everyday life) and the relative lack of symbolic (though not musical) complexity of his poetic language helps to explain his great appeal to Western translators.  (Similar points could be made about the popular Turkish mystical poetry of Yunus Emre: cf. The Drop That Became The Sea: Lyric Poems of Yunus Emre, tr. K. Helminski and R. Algan, Putney, VT, 1989.)  However, it should be stressed that the mystical symbolism and poetic structures in the classical poetic expressions of the later Islamic humanities, at least in the Eastern Islamic world, are usually far more complex and indeed impossible to translate (at least as effective English poetry).  Cf. the many attempts at translating the incomparable Persian lyrics of Hafez, or the works of S. N. al-Attas on early Malay Islamic mystical poetry, including The Mysticism of Hamza al-Fansûrî (Kuala Lumpur, 1970).

depicting the broader spectrum of Islamic "mystical" practices and presuppositions. To take only one striking example, the predominance in Rumi's lyric poetry of universal images drawn directly from nature--even if those symbols are almost always intended as revelatory commentaries on familiar mystical themes from the Qur'ân and hadîth--surely helps explain the widespread appeal of his writing, especially to contemporary literary tastes. But the relative directness and simplicity of some of Rumi's poetry is far from typical of the highly stylized, formalistic rhetorical conventions of much later Islamic mystical poetry, with its complex, entirely untranslatable play of musical associations on a multidimensional repertoire of symbolic and metaphysical archetypes (again often scriptural in origin) shared by writer and audience (whether learned or "illiterate") alike. In those later, highly influential traditions, as exemplified in the incomparable Persian lyrics of Hafez, poetry comes to be seen less as a vehicle of communication of some particular "original" individual insight than as a subtle mirror reflecting and revealing the deeper, archetypal dimensions of each reader's/listener's own momentary spiritual state. So again it turns out that the more genuinely religious and "mystical" (i.e., not merely conventional) dimensions of that central type of Islamic literature--whether in its learned or vernacular expressions--can only be discerned in light of highly complex practical and cultural contexts that are typically assumed, rather than openly stated.

## V. The Islamic Context of "Theoretical" Mystical Writings

It is important to note that the four broad types of "mystical" writing distinguished under this heading are relatively later phenomena in Islamic thought, since in both their Sunni and Shiite forms they presuppose the early foundational teachings of Muhammad and the Imams; then the broader development and spread of the earliest Arabic exemplars of the Islamic humanities (hadîth, Sîra, stories of the prophets, etc.);[42] and finally the gradual intellectual

---

[42]The actual processes of formation of "Islam" as a separate, self-consciously universal world religion during these first three centuries are still largely unexplored, or at best at the stage of working hypotheses in each of the relevant fields. (There is as yet nothing even remotely approaching the efforts that have been expended, for example, on exploring the comparable historical origins of early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism.) However, more detailed historical investigations can only show in much greater detail how what eventually came to be seen as "classical" learned Arabic religious disciplines actually represent only the earliest written stages of the Islamic humanities, reflecting the same processes of creative (and originally oral)

"crystallization" or increasingly sophisticated theoretical articulation in classical Arabic--throughout the 3rd and 4th centuries of the Islamic era, in a few urban centers of the Abbasid empire--of alternative learned understandings of the proper implications and interpretations (social, political, spiritual and intellectual) of that accrued body of diverse religious traditions. During that period several schools of what have been loosely (and somewhat misleadingly) called Islamic "theology" gradually developed a shared vocabulary for articulating different visions of the Arabic religious sciences, 43 I.e., kalâm, usûl al-dîn, etc. In later periods these Arabic scholarly disciplines came to serve as a sort of "meta-theory" of scripturally based justifications for the epistemological, rhetorical and other axiological premises of the various systems of fiqh ("Islamic law"); and recent research is indicating that the supposed founders of these disciplines in earlier periods were actually often involved in a wide variety of more active socio-political movements. In either case, however, neither the meaning nor the functions of any of those particular Arabic disciplines, at any period, ever remotely corresponds in importance to what is suggested by "theology" in Christian contexts--above all because the historically and politically crucial complex of councils, creeds, clerics and episcopal and ecclesiastical structures (and all the related religious and philosophic assumptions) taken for granted in the evolution of Christianity never came to exist in Islamic contexts. while Farabi and others (including many translators) were likewise developing an Arabic philosophic language capable of expressing the universal insights and pretensions of the inherited Hellenistic scientific and philosophic traditions. The remarkably successful creative melding of those two conceptual universes by the philosopher Avicenna (d. 429/1037) eventually resulted in a complex shared philosophico-theological language which was used by most later Muslim intellectuals, until the present century, to articulate and defend their alternative visions of the proper theoretical and practical understandings of Islamic tradition. The most famous and lastingly influential "theoretical" expositions of Islamic mysticism--including especially those by Ibn ᶜArabî (d. 1240) and Ghazâlî (d. 1111), whose works are still widely read throughout the Islamic world today--both drew upon and further transformed that distinctive philosophic and theological

---

individual expressions of Qur'ânic teachings in the context of the remarkable variety of pre-existing local cultural and religious traditions within the vast area of the initial Arab conquests. Again the existing hadîth collections--especially the still virtually unexplored materials on the early Shiite Imams--clearly represent many stages and facets of that long creative process.

vocabulary, which was freely adapted by most subsequent mystical writers in each of the four categories below.

Thus the place of these "theoretical" forms of Islamic mystical writing within this larger intellectual development--and more significantly, their relation to the more widespread popular and practical manifestations of mystical and spiritual teaching--was radically different from the role of outwardly similar intellectual forms developed in other religious or civilizational contexts. First, unlike the case of Hindu or Buddhist traditions, "mystical philosophy" (or theosophy) in a thoroughly speculative or primarily intellectual form hardly exists in the Islamic context. And those theoretical mystical writings that were produced in later periods were themselves rarely the inspiration of the far more extensive practical and devotional forms of mysticism spread by the Islamic humanities. On the contrary, even the types of theoretical writings discussed below appear relatively late and among a small intellectual elite, presupposing the complex of highly elaborated and deeply rooted practical mystical traditions they propose to justify or explain. Likewise these distinctively Islamic forms of theoretical mystical writing did not historically grow out of earlier "non-mystical" forms of religious tradition, nor are they typically conceived or presented as special "interpretations" or further spiritual dimensions of such non-mystical religious forms,[43] as in at least some historical presentations of kabbalah, for example.

---

[43]The only even remote approximation to such an approach, at any point in Islamic history, is possibly to be found in certain rare forms of later (Nizari) Ismaili Shiism, in an extreme reaction by a threatened religious minority that at times came to present its Sunni Seljuk opponents as exclusively "exotericist". However, even in that case, as everywhere else in Islam, any such attempts to separate an "exoteric" zâhir from a spiritual or mystical bâtin ran up against the basic fact that in the Qur'ân itself explicitly "mystical", insistently universal teachings about the spiritual reality and destiny of human beings provide the primary context even for the (relatively few) specific "mundane" religious prescriptions.

Hence the more recurrently typical Islamic phenomenon--which continues to puzzle outsiders arriving with different expectations of "mysticism"--of a combination of exclusivist, even fanatical adherence to particular socially or scripturally "exoteric" versions of Islam combined with a curious insistence on highly original "mystical" forms of exegesis and spiritual practice. See, for example, in completely different Muslim traditions, such representative cases as the famous Hanbali Sufis Ansârî of Herat and ᶜAbd al-Qâdir Jîlânî; the Shiite hadîth-based spirituality of the Shaykhî movement in Qajar Iran and Iraq; and the more recent Naqshbandî Sufi tariqa.

Instead, when one examines these texts more closely, it turns out that the majority of more theoretical writings about Islamic mysticism are in fact primarily self-consciously "political" works directed toward influential elites of urban religious intellectuals.  Through the presumed authority and wider educational influences of those intellectual elites, these writings were typically intended to affect, transform or protect the relative positions and wider social implementation of what their authors considered more properly or effectively spiritual understandings of the local forms of Islamic tradition and practice.  As such, they usually involved intellectual debate against justifications of alternative socio-political interpretations (or "abuses") of the same body of learned religious tradition.  Hence in each case the actual practical implications of those seminal texts, both in their original historical contexts and in the controversies which have often swirled around them down through the centuries, only become clear when we can isolate in sufficient detail both the particular intended audience and the specific issues of interpretation and practice in question.[44]  Whether they are viewed historically, practically or intellectually, the classic works of theoretical mystical writing in Islam thus appear as the proverbial "tip of the iceberg" in relation to the profuse forms of mystical and spiritual

---

[44]The most prominent and enduring example of this process is the ongoing role of the works of the great 13th-century Andalusian mystic Ibn ᶜArabî at the political and cultural interface between the learned Arabic sciences and various local expressions of the Islamic humanities down to the present day.  Ibn ᶜArabî's lasting impact on the Islamic humanities throughout the Eastern Islamic world is outlined in our 3-part monograph on "Ibn ᶜArabî and His Interpreters", in the Journal of the American Oriental Society 107-108 (1986-87), while "Ibn ᶜArabî's 'Esotericism': The Problem of Spiritual Authority", in Studia Islamica LXXI (1990), outlines the philosophic and religious principles underlying the ongoing controversies surrounding those mystical texts. Th. E. Homerin, "Ibn Arabi in the People's Assembly: Religion, Press, and Politics in Sadat's Egypt", pp. 462-77 in The Middle East Journal 40 (1986) discusses recent efforts to suppress--and to support--the new, more widely readable) edition of Ibn cArabî's Meccan Illuminations.E.L. Ormsby, Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazâlî's "Best of All Possible Worlds" (Princeton, 1985), pp. 92ff., traces the disputes between local Sufi movements and their clerical opponents in many parts of the Muslim world, over several centuries, as expressed in criticisms or defenses of Ghazâlî and Ibn cArabî.   And the polemic philosophic reaction of Ibn Khaldûn, foreshadowing modern "reformist" ideologies, is outlined in "Ibn Khaldûn's Critique of Sufism", forthcoming in Arabic Sciences and Philosophy III (1992).

practice developed and spread independently by the much larger body of the Islamic humanities in each local context.[45]

Now the disproportionate emphasis of earlier Western translations and secondary studies on such theoretical expositions of Islamic mysticism is quite understandable in terms of the pioneering European scholars' natural interests in Islamic materials apparently comparable to their own "mystical" traditions, as well as the inherited expectations of their own audiences: the philosophic and theological vocabulary of those selected "mystical" texts is (or at least once was) more familiar to learned Western readers than the unfamiliar symbolic universes and complex socio-cultural presuppositions of the more widespread practical forms of the Islamic humanities. But the legacy of that problematic initial definition of "Islamic mysticism" has been to reinforce a potent combination of theological presuppositions and questionable historical paradigms that together have largely blocked a more adequate scholarly perception of Islamic "mysticism" (including the Islamic humanities)--and which by the same token have tended to obscure presentations of Islamic religious life more generally. Some of the resulting misunderstandings are still so deeply rooted that it is necessary to point out how they differ from the actual perspectives of the authors of both practical and more theoretical mystical writings in Islam.

To begin with, neither those Muslim authors nor their opponents tend to single out some separate realm of mystical or spiritual activities or experiences within the wider social and ontological domains of religion: typically there is no essential separation claimed or assumed between "letter" and "spirit", "law" and "grace", ritual and realization, etc. (The highly distinctive social and literary forms and assumptions peculiar to the various forms of Islamic "esotericism" discussed in section VII below are of a very different order.) Secondly, the fundamental focus shared by these theoretical writings--i.e., the realization of the spiritual virtues and their relation to the metaphysical ground and destiny of human souls--is itself at the very center of the explicit, "exoteric" Qur'ânic text. Thus any sort of text or practice one might associate with Islamic "mysticism" almost inevitably turns out to be nothing more than a reminder or actualization (within a particular socio-cultural setting) of unduly neglected

---

[45]Of course the most widely read of the learned Arabic, "theoretical" works on Islamic mysticism--above all the writings of Ibn ᶜArabî and Ghazâlî--were at the same time extremely

fundamental aspects of those explicit scriptural teachings. The intimate, often inseparable relation between the outward forms and sacred-human exemplars of Islamic mysticism and those of popular religion, as well as the creative, ongoing development of the Islamic humanities in the most diverse cultural and social contexts, are rooted in the way those manifold cultural expressions return directly to the Qur'ânic archetype and its explicitly metaphysical, trans-historical perspectives. More often than not the "theoretical" writers of Sufism or esoteric Shiism were simply articulating the theological and philosophic explanations (and scriptural justifications) for what ordinary Muslims (not just "mystics") were actually doing.

Thirdly, the fundamental issue at stake between virtually all the "theoretical" proponents of Islamic mysticism, both in Sunni and Shiite settings, and their opponents usually turns out to be the extremely practical--and indeed religiously unavoidable--question of the nature of the human spiritual exemplars[46] through which the full meaning of the revelation can be known and realized: i.e., who are those special persons (whether in this world or the "unseen"), and how can one best either locate and contact them (so as to follow their guidance and seek their aid and intercession) or else develop the spiritual qualities necessary to move toward that same state of perfection? Again, one may note (a) the fundamental continuities between Islamic "mysticism" and popular religious expressions on this point; and (b) the fact that this issue is likewise central to the Qur'ânic teaching concerning the ongoing, universal realities and perennial spiritual functions of all the divine Messengers, prophets and angels.[47] So it should not be entirely

---

influential, both directly and indirectly, within all the more practical categories of spiritual writing already discussed above.

[46]This basic distinguishing factor is operative whether those spiritual intermediaries are understood to be directly accessible in this material world, or in the spiritual world through dreams, visions, karamât and barakât (particular evidentiary "acts of grace" and "blessings") received through one or another of the awliyâ' (including the prophets). The range of possibilities and combinations of these intermediary figures (in either world) in the spiritual life and experience of any given Muslim is typically extremely broad and often only loosely connected with visible sociological or historical considerations. See the vivid contemporary illustrations of these phenomena in the visions recorded in M. Lings' A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century (Berkeley, 1971) and in K. Ewing, "The dream of spiritual initiation...among Pakistani sufis," in American Ethnologist, vol. 17 (1990), as well as the profuse illustrations of such dreams and visions of the awliyâ' throughout the classical Sufi works already cited.

[47]As Ibn ᶜArabî and other Muslim mystics have repeatedly stressed, that broader Qur'ânic teaching concerning the spiritual intermediaries also underlies the assumptions of the ᶜulamâ'

surprising if in reality the differences of perception (and corresponding practice) between any two Muslim "mystics" concerning this fundamental religious question were (and still are) often at least as conspicuous as the differences separating either of them from many other groups of less avowedly mystical Muslims.

Finally, one can hardly exaggerate the determinative influence for the subsequent development of Islamic mysticism (including Shiite esotericism)--and for the evolution of the Islamic humanities more generally--of the unique historical circumstances (political, cultural and even geographical) which at critical moments prevented any single model or claimant from achieving anything approaching exclusive legitimacy for their claims to religio-political authority.[48] Far more than the few (and in fact not totally hostile) Qur'ânic allusions to earlier clerical, kingly and monastic religious institutions,[49] it was the historically effective stalemate between the many competing paradigms of religious legitimacy during the first four formative centuries of Islam that kept the exemplary Muslim mystics of those periods from being either suppressed or routinely institutionalized (e.g., in monastic foundations, etc.) by any of those contending claims to religious authority. And it was the extreme fragmentation and instability of

about the inseparability of the Qur'ânic message from the life and example of (at least) Muhammad--conceptions which are axiomatic for all the Arabic "religious sciences" claiming a religious authority for their interpretations of the corpus of hadîth(and a similar premise for Shiite scholars taking a comparable stance with regard to the actions and teachings of their Imams, as well as Muhammad). Within the context of the Sunni religious sciences see the detailed explanations of this point, translated from Ibn ᶜArabî's magnum opus, in The Meccan Illuminations/Les Illuminations de la Mecque (Paris, 1989), and W. C. Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn 'Arabi's Metaphysics of the Imagination (Albany, 1989).

[48]This is certainly not intended to deny the recurrent attempts (amply illustrated in virtually every generation down to the present day) to institutionalize virtually every conceivable human form of religious authority: e.g., Umayyad divine kingship; Shiite sacred priestship; clerical legalism; tribal factionalism (often combined with various forms of charismatic religious leadership); radically egalitarian antinomianism; Messianic personalism; the enlightened philosopher-king; sectarian "ethnic" minorities; etc. Here again, what is remarkable is how the manifold historical and contemporary illustrations of this decisive fact--and the remarkable ways those alternative forms of authority actually combine and co-exist in specific Muslim settings--are strangely absent from the many handbooks claiming to describe "Islamic religion."

[49]At most, those Qur'ânic passages have offered ammunition to critics of one or another of the religious models of authority in question. They certainly have never stopped the contending claimants of religious authority--even in cases grossly illustrating the Qur'ânic

all but the most local political authorities for much of the next five centuries that allowed the awliyâ' (of very different sorts) and eventually the related Islamic humanities to take on their increasingly preeminent role in popular religious life and imagination from Africa to Central and South Asia.[50] Thus while non-Muslim observers from many backgrounds have continued to read their own models of "religion" and religious authority--including equally inappropriate notions of "orthodoxy" and "orthopraxy"--into the most diverse Islamic settings, modern historical research increasingly reminds us of the remarkable extent to which those decisive religious questions have actually remained creatively unsettled in past Islamic contexts, just as they so often still are today. Almost without exception, the masterpieces of Islamic mystical writing have been created in just such highly unsettled historical situations.

## VI. "Theoretical" Types of Mystical Writing

-- The first common type of "theoretical" mystical writings to appear (in Sunni circles, at least) were relatively "defensive" or apologetic Arabic treatises, directed toward other elite religious scholars, proposing to demonstrate the consistency of already widespread popular Sufi practices and teachings with the particular religious standards and conceptions of that learned elite,[51] while often attempting at the same time to establish religiously appropriate standards for

---

criticisms--from attempting to institutionalize their conceptions wherever political circumstances have permitted.

[50]In Islamic history, as with humanity generally, there are ample illustrations of the principle that strong central governments prefer honoring dead saints to putting up with living ones. During this period, the frequent lack of inherent religious legitimacy of even the most powerful (often Turkic) local military regimes, throughout the central Islamic lands, typically led them to play off popular charismatic ("mystical") leaders and institutions against influential ᶜulamâ' and other contending religious authorities. Detailed social-historical studies over the past three decades have added immensely to our understanding of these socio-religious processes in particular urban, rural and tribal Muslim contexts, although the largely intuitive summary of M.G.S. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam (Chicago, 1973), vol. 2, remains perhaps the best available survey for non-specialists. The contrasting attitudes and actions of modern Islamic nation-states of all ideological colors toward both Sufism and other traditional forms of popular Islamic religion likewise vividly illustrate the profound influence of changing local political frameworks on the visible social expressions of Islamic "mysticism".

[51]Certainly the most widely translated illustration of this category is Ghazâlî's al-Munqidh min al-Dalâl ("The Deliverer from Error...") and other related works--e.g., in the version by R.J. McCarthy, Freedom and Fulfillment: An Annotated Translation of Al-Ghazâlî's al-Munqidh min

judging (and controlling) the various manifestations and perceived social or spiritual "dangers" of those popular spiritual movements.[52] The religious problems and paradigms isolated at this early stage--e.g., the alternative attitudes toward the exemplary case of al-Hallâj's teaching and martyrdom, or the tragic events of Kerbala--tended to be repeated in such scholarly writings for centuries.

-- A second, far more complex category would include more ambitiously "offensive" writings aimed at explaining and revealing the centrality of the spiritual life and practices of the various mystical groups and the decisive importance of the awliyâ' (however understood) for properly interpreting and living out other learned forms of Islam--such as various Arabic religious sciences, or even the rational and philosophic sciences--ordinarily conceived of as being relatively separate from those spiritual matters. In a way, one could say that this type of Arabic mystical writings were essentially a more scholarly equivalent of what the spiritually oriented practical Islamic humanities were actually intended to do for Muslims in other walks of life. By far the most elaborate and historically influential illustration of this type of Islamic

al-Dalâl and Other Relevant Works... (Boston, 1980), with an extensive bibliography of other translations and studies of his works.

[52]In Sunni circles, those more worldly and spiritual concerns alike were often expressed in discussions centering on the symbolic role of the early Sufi martyr al-Hallâj: see the monumental study by L. Massignon, (tr. H. Mason), The Passion of al-Hallâj, Mystic and Martyr of Islam (Princeton, 1982, 4 volumes), and the more accessible summary in C. Ernst, Words of Ecstasy in Sufism (Albany, 1985). In approaching the recurrent critiques by ᶜulamâ' (whether Shiite or Sunni) of "Sufism" and related movements and features of "popular" Islam, it is essential to keep in mind that one key dimension of the widespread popular respect for awliyâ' (of all sorts) in Muslim rural and tribal settings, from the earliest Islamic periods (various Kharijite leaders and Shiite claimants) down to the present day, was the ever-present potential for protests, revolts, coalitions and invasions coalescing around such charismatic figures and their religio-political claims. Such immediate socio-political concerns are often more important than any deeper religious or theological issues in the long line of "theoretical" critiques of Sufi and related movements by Muslim scholars working in those contexts (including contemporary Islamic states). The constant reminders in such polemic theoretical works (whether for or against "mystical" tenets) of the public dangers of antinomianism and millenarianism are typically more concerned with the potential socio-political consequences of such popular movements--and their potential impact on the urban elite of scholars and merchants--than with the more profound individual spiritual dangers that are highlighted in practical spiritual works intended for mystics and Sufis themselves.

mystical writing is the immense summa of Ibn 'Arabi's "Meccan Illuminations",[53] which discusses in endless detail the deeper spiritual meanings contained within all the scriptural sources and later religious (or even secular) elaborations of Islamic tradition. That work's persuasiveness and comprehensiveness eventually won its author the honorific title of "the Greatest Teacher" (al-shaykh al-akbar), and made it a primary source for most later Islamic writings of this sort--as well as for some of the more openly universalist philosophic expositions in the fourth category below.

-- A third, very broad category would include actual intellectual or symbolic explanations of various dimensions of spiritual experience and their epistemological and ontological underpinnings, growing directly out of the need to understand and communicate the recurrent realities of the spiritual Path. An immensely complex creative effort of reflection in this direction already underlies the elaboration of the profuse technical vocabularies of even the earliest generations of Sufi teachers and comparable Shiite figures.[54] But it is typical of the wider social expression and essentially practical orientation of Islamic mysticism that the pursuit of any purely theoretical inquiry in these fields seems to have been reined in early on by a strong sense of the spiritual and social pitfalls of such intellectual activity pursued as an end in itself. Instead, one more typically finds such topics dealt with indirectly in the more "practical" types of

---

[53]The growing number of translated sources available in English include the two anthologies from the Meccan Illuminations already cited at n. 47 above (including extensive bibliographies) and The Bezels of Wisdom (tr. R.W.J. Austin; New York, 1980). Ghazâlî's still widely read Ihyâ' cUlûm al-Din falls somewhere near the boundary between this type of writing and the preceding category, although it is even more directed more toward the spiritual dimensions of popular religious practice (in all of the above-mentioned categories) than to theoretical proof or persuasion. (The growing body of partial translations of that influential work are mentioned in R.J. McCarthy's annotated bibliography in the volume cited in n. 58.)

[54]In English, see Massignon's work on al-Hallâj cited at n. 52, and G. Bowering's The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur'ânic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl At-Tustarî (d. 283/896) (Berlin/New York, 1980). The most important other works in this category are in German, French and Arabic. The fundamental historical contributions of early Shiite esotericism (especially Jacfar al-Sâdiq) in this area have been much less explored--partly because the earliest Shiite hadîth sources pose a variety of problems for modern Shiite Usûlî clergy. For illustrations of this category of mystical writing in a Shiite setting, see H. Corbin, Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran (Princeton, 1977), pp. 109-170, for extended translations from much later Shiite sources (often influenced by Sufism), within a fairly limited domain.

mystical writing discussed above55 Any boundary between these two aims and audiences would be very difficult to draw, especially where the works in question are not in learned Arabic: many famous works touching on these subjects are in Persian or other Eastern Islamic languages and clearly intended for practical use by Sufis and other spiritually-inclined Muslim readers. in terms of refined allusions to classical scriptural symbols or spiritually revealing anecdotes: in such works the pure theoretical impulse is constantly turned back toward what is instead portrayed as its proper, comprehensive human context of spiritual realization.

-- Finally, there are those theoretical works whose authors have attempted more comprehensive, openly universal philosophic accounts, in both ontological and epistemological terms, of the central insights and related practices of one or more forms of Islamic "mysticism".[55] Those monumental philosophic achievements--associated with such celebrated and diverse thinkers as Avicenna, Suhrâwardî, Ibn Sabᶜîn, Mullâ Sadrâ and the many commentators of Ibn ᶜArabî--became widely studied by intellectuals during later periods of Islamic history, especially within the complex multi-cultural, multi-confessional socio-religious worlds of the Mogul and Ottoman empires, with their significant resemblances (at least at the elite level) to our own world-cultural situation today.[56] But one cannot too strongly emphasize that even those more

---

[55]In earlier periods works of this category were apparently attempted in an assortment of gnostic, hermetic and Neoplatonic vocabularies drawn from earlier traditions. After Avicenna, Muslim authors--including such key mystical writers as Suhrawardî, Ghazâlî and Ibn ᶜArabî-- almost always used versions of his creative combination of Aristotelean terminology, Ptolemaic cosmology, and kalâm theological vocabulary to express their own insights. For Avicenna's own role and motivations in this wider historical development, see our discussion of "The Philosopher-Prophet in Avicenna's Political Philosophy," in The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy (Cambridge, 1991). J. Michot's study of La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne: Le retour à Dieu (maᶜâd) et l'imagination, (Louvain, 1987) provides extensive translations from the later Islamic mystical philosophers inspired by Avicenna.

[56]For Suhrawardî, see the forthcoming translation of his The Philosophy of Illumination (Hikmat al-Ishrâq) by J. Walbridge and H. Ziai. For the Shiite mystical philosopher Mullâ Sadrâ, see our study of The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mullâ Sadrâ (Princeton, 1981). For Ibn ᶜArabî and his interpreters and their far-reaching influences on the Islamic humanities throughout the Muslim world, see the translations and historical surveys cited at notes 40, 44 and 47 above. An illuminating (if somewhat diffuse) portrait of the diverse social and intellectual movements related to all of these figures within the religious world of Mogul India can be found in S.A.A. Rizvi's Shâh Walî-Allâh and His Times (Canberra, 1983); for their influence in Malaysia and Indonesia, see the numerous works of S.N. al-Attas on Hamza al-Fansûrî and the Malay Islamic humanities, including the books cited at n. 46 above.

original theoretical explorations were ordinarily not conceived of as opening a privileged form of intellectual access to mystical or spiritual realization, nor indeed even as being necessary for such realization by themselves. For in most cases such writings presuppose the same wider practical contexts and methods of realization shared with the more popular expressions of Islamic spirituality. And indeed the most striking evidence of the ongoing cultural significance of the Islamic humanities, in both Arab and later Eastern contexts, is the fact that each of the authors of this theoretical type of Islamic mystical writing was obliged to turn to the alternative of more accessible popular forms of expression--whether Persian-language mystical tales and religious commentaries in the cases of Avicenna, Suhrâwardî, and Mulla Sadra; or Arabic mystical poetry in the cases of Ibn ʿArabî and of Ibn Sabʿîn's disciples--in order to reach out and influence wider, more popular circles beyond the learned religious elites.

## VII. Spiritual Teaching and the Limits of Writing

By now our outline of the various types of Islamic mystical writing should have highlighted several distinctive characteristics that carry across many of the above categories and are in fact peculiar to virtually all the written expressions of Islamic mysticism. First, the great majority of those writings, when viewed in their original cultural setting, turn out to have been consciously directed either toward specific religio-intellectual elites not necessarily involved in any special spiritual disciplines (in the case of many "theoretical" writings) or toward other Muslims who were only potential mystical "beginners"--i.e., not readers who were already actively engaged in spiritual disciplines under the guidance of a master. Secondly, a further distinctive sign of this situation is the widespread reluctance in Islamic mystical writings to speak in concrete detail about such fundamental practical dimensions of the spiritual Path as meditation, retreat, fasting, prayers, vigil, dream visions, and so forth. Finally, an even more striking characteristic (at least for modern Western readers) is the peculiar reluctance of these Islamic mystics to write in an openly personal manner about their concrete individual experiences and insights.[57] Instead Muslim mystical writers of virtually all times, places and

---

[57]The rare partial exceptions to this rule, like Suhrâwardî or Ibn ʿArabî, are all the more striking--and their exceptional personal openness is often related (as in these two instances) to such writers' unusual assertion of a particular divine "mission" differentiating their case from that of other Muslims. However, there is certainly no lack of "individuality" in this mystical

literary genres typically prefer to allude to those more personal dimensions of their experience through archetypal symbols drawn from scriptural and other traditional sources. An unfortunate consequence of these recurrent features of reticence and discretion, for students of religion unfamiliar with their deeper social and practical contexts, is that initial acquaintance with the literature of Islamic mysticism may give a quite misleading impression of repetitiveness, relative (intellectual) superficiality or simplification, and even conventionality.[58]

In fact, each of these particular literary characteristics (like their close parallels in the other artistic expressions of the Islamic humanities) can only be understood in terms of the ways such writings were intended to operate in their original social and cultural contexts. These mystical texts are only the most visible aspects of a wider assumption of "esotericism" rooted in three foundational features of Islamic religious culture (both popular and elite) already cited at the beginning of this essay. The first of these is the remarkable centrality of "mystical" aims and practices in the Qur'ân, where the spiritual life is portrayed as the primordial essence of Religion (Dîn, the universal God-soul relationship), combined with the (apparently utopian) insistence that those spiritual realities be explicitly expressed and realized in the everyday lives of all

---

literature: instead the aesthetic ideal here, as in many other fields of Islamic art, was to express one's individual experiences through highly nuanced allusions to a vast repertoire of scriptural and legendary archetypes and symbols conveyed by the local Islamic humanities. See the illustrations of this convention of the high-cultural Islamic humanities in our discussions of Mulla Sadra's "spiritual autobiography", in the study cited in the preceding note, and in S. F. Dale's "Steppe Humanism: The Autobiographical Writings of Zâhir al-Dîn Muhammad Bâbur, 1483-1530", pp. 37-58 in International Journal of Middle East Studies 22 (1990). This particular way of expressing individuality, which finds its most subtle expressions in the later, highly stylized traditions of Islamic mystical poetry in India, Turkey and Iran, assuming an extraordinarily sophisticated and aesthetically alert audience, is gravely misrepresented in the influential discussions by G. von Grunebaum in Medieval Islam (Chicago, 1953). See the recent discussion of a "counter-example" that helps highlight these distinctive conventions of the high-cultural Islamic humanities,

[58]It is likewise no coincidence if initial encounters with the central Islamic arts and humanities more generally--e.g., calligraphy, poetry, both learned and popular religious music, carpets, architecture, etc.--sometimes lead to similar reactions. In addition to the obvious unfamiliarity of much of their symbolism and religious references, those creations typically presuppose a common aesthetic and metaphysical outlook in their audiences--centering on the theophanic re-creation of shared spiritual archetypes--and the practical social contexts in which their explicitly contemplative functions could actually be realized. See the remarkably sensitive illustration of these essential points in W. Andrews' Poetry's Voice, Society's Song: Ottoman Lyric Poetry (Seattle, 1985).

people of faith, following the Prophet's own example. The second key feature is the constant focus, beginning already with the archetypal cases of Muhammad and the other prophets (and of the Imams, for Shiites), on the practically decisive need for a living divine-human connection and exemplar (i.e., the walî or "Friend of God" in the broadest sense, whether in this world or accessible spiritually) who can properly guide each Muslim's specific realization of those broad Qur'ânic injunctions. And the third essential point, discussed at some length above, is the profound integration of virtually all expressions of Islamic "mysticism" within the Islamic humanities and the surrounding local forms of popular religion.

Integration, however, is not the same as identity. And the outward "invisibility" of the Friend of God described in the famous hadîth with which we began beautifully expresses the inner paradoxes and tensions--and the profound limits of any writing--inherent in the distinctively "esoteric" context of spiritual teaching assumed by most forms of Islamic mysticism. For from that perspective the ultimate purpose of mystical writing, as of all the associated spiritual methods, conditions and ways of life, was rarely conceived or presented as a particular new set of beliefs or social practices that could somehow be stated or applied "literally" and unambiguously.[59] Instead, within the Qur'ânic framework and its ongoing socio-cultural expressions (including all the related Islamic humanities), that aim could only be portrayed as a transformed insight or realization of existing, publicly accessible doctrines, norms and forms of experience--and as a transformation in principle (or degree) potentially accessible to all.[60] Hence both the tenacious (and in the long run generally successful) resistance to any

---

[59]The closest approaches to such an exclusivist attitude (both intellectually and socially), in some forms of Shiism from early centuries down to the present, inevitably led to the "sectarian" social consequences largely limited to Shiite groups in Islam--consequences which are not at all typical of the most influential forms of Islamic mysticism. And even within later Shiite sectarian communities, "mystics" or esotericists typically formulated their teachings and pursued their practical activities in ways closely paralleling the situation of mystics working within wider Sunni settings.

[60]The resulting social and institutional fluidity of "mystics" and Sufis in most periods, with their profusion of orders, paths, and competing local shaykhs, has more typically resembled the indeterminate, constantly evolving relationship of contemporary "Twelve-step" spiritual programs to their surrounding American and European communities more than it has any rigid institutional models drawn from the later periods of Christian or Buddhist monasticism. Again and again, as already discussed at n. 5 above, one can observe in Islamic history the recurrent pattern of an almost automatic religious discrediting of those spiritual movements which took on

widespread institutionalization of religiously separate, exclusivist mystical sects or distinct sub-religions within the wider Islamic community,[61] and the equally typical persistence of Muslim mystics' attempts to share their theoretical and practical spiritual insights (especially by means of the Islamic humanities) in forms ultimately accessible in some degree to all members of the wider Muslim community.

The second profound limitation on mystical writing, whose wider importance has already been discussed, was the almost universal assumption that the spiritual goal set forth by the Qur'ân could only be fully realized within the context of ongoing personal association between each disciple and an accomplished master (whether on earth or accessible spiritually, including all the prophets).[62] As suggested by the frequent recourse to images drawn from alchemy, that essential spiritual process was not seen as involving the "concealment" of anything that could be communicated unambiguously to all comers. For virtually all Islamic mystics, it is precisely the true understanding of the scriptural symbols (and not those images themselves) that is "esoteric". From their perspective, the sacred texts themselves convey the Truth quite literally—so it is the disciple who must be gradually transformed, through the guidance and teaching of a master, in

---

the accoutrements of "successful" political, social, or economic institutionalization in ways that would thereby cut them off from the rest of the local Muslim community.

[61]Even the widespread Sufi tariqas of the 13th-19th centuries and their modern survivals have rarely been constituted as separate sects or "orders" in the institutional sense familiar, for example, in Catholicism. Instead they are typically voluntary associations (whose members remain immersed in the daily life of the surrounding Muslim community), local in their membership, surrounding a particular local leader, and more often than not dissolving or splitting up at the death of each locally accepted guide. Frequently they are in active competition with a range of similar local groups, with considerable movement from one guide to another; meetings may be held in homes or neighborhood mosques, with no special institutional locale required. In revealing contrast, the undoubtedly sectarian organization of Shiite groups in many Islamic contexts has usually occurred under very particular situations of extreme political hostility and persecution—situations which have normally had nothing to do with any particularly "mystical" activities or tendencies.

[62]Of course this does not rule out certain extremely rare cases of individuals claiming to have reached spiritual enlightenment through direct divine intervention (the majdhûb)—e.g., as was claimed in various ways by Ibn ʿArabî and his famous 19th-century Algerian follower, ʿAbd al-Qâdir. But it is revealing that even these exceptional individuals, before undertaking to teach others, first consciously undertook to pass through the "normal" stages of the spiritual path under the guidance of other masters: see M. Chodkiewicz, Emir Abd el-Kader: Ecrits spirituels (Paris,

order eventually to grasp that literal sense,[63] to rediscover the essential connections between the sacred symbols and the corresponding realities and consequences in his or her own experience.

And finally, the fundamental principle underlying both of the above points and all their practical and literary consequences was Muslim mystics' characteristic awareness of the irreducible hierarchy of human spiritual capacities and predispositions (at least at any given moment), and their corresponding perception of the Qur'ân and hadîth as being carefully and appropriately addressed to this full, incontrovertible range of human types and possibilities. In this situation only a genuine master, it was assumed, could properly judge the readiness and aptitude of each individual student with regard to the relevant aspects of their character and spiritual development.

Now the above points, presented in this fashion, might seem abstract and even--for those without firsthand contact with the spiritual traditions in question--a sort of relic from another age.[64] But already at the purely textual level, even the most sceptical readers can begin to appreciate the importance and actual functioning of these integral relationships between "mystical" text, master, and spiritual practice in the Islamic context by focusing in on two subjects--indeed two inescapable "mysteries"--whose practical existential importance, within any religious tradition, is as self-evident as their prominent position in Qur'ânic teaching. In both of these cases, inquisitive readers can begin to appreciate more fully what is ordinarily not stated in

---

1982) and Le Sceau des saints (Paris, 1986), and the longer biography by C. Addas, Ibn ᶜArabî ou la quête du Soufre Rouge (Paris, 1989).

[63]This typical attitude of Islamic spirituality--which is sufficiently contrary to models carried over from other religious contexts that it has frequently led to serious misunderstandings--obviously reflects the overt and irreducibly symbolic and musical character of the Qur'ânic text, which so often pointedly defies any translation or "obvious" understanding. Perhaps even more important for the predominance of this particular structure of writing and oral teaching in Islam is the repeated insistence, throughout the Qur'ân and in dozens of hadîth constantly cited by Sufis and other Muslims, that the prophets (awliyâ', Imams, etc.) and angels are here now, and that most people are simply unconscious of their spiritual presence (as of the ever-present "unseen world", al-ghayb, more generally).

[64]See the timely autobiographical illustrations of these points, within a contemporary Turkish Sufi order, in Part I of L. Hixon's Heart of the Qur'ân (Wheaton, IL, 1988). For all its sketchiness, that firsthand account reveals far more about the typical functioning of the above principles than most of the translated Sufi literature cited above. For similar contemporary

Islamic mystical texts, and the possible reasons why certain matters are only discussed orally within the context of actual spiritual guidance and disciplines, simply by considering the alternative conceptions and possibilities more openly discussed in other religious traditions.

The first of those two subjects is the deeper grounds of the interplay between individual spiritual capacities and advancement (and eventually the very meaning of divine "Justice") and the ultimate consequences of each individual's actions in the "other world". In the Islamic context the meaning (and relative human importance) of this reality is conveyed by the detailed, remarkably complex eschatological symbolism which is probably the single most frequent subject of the Qur'ân. The second recurrent subject is that of the "spiritual hierarchy": of the deeper relationship between the timeless spiritual realities of the divine intermediaries discussed repeatedly in the Qur'ân and hadîth (prophets, angels, saints, etc.) and their particular earthly manifestations both in history and as those figures are encountered more directly by each individual in the course of their spiritual itinerary.

Even a passing acquaintance with the treatment of these issues history of religions, whether in Islamic or other contexts, should be sufficient to suggest some of the ethical, social and political reasons for the persistent refusal of even the greatest and most respected Islamic mystics to write more openly than the Qur'ân, or to speak more publicly than the Prophet, concerning these two central spiritual mysteries.

## VIII. The Invisibility of the Saints

Whatever one's spiritual outlook and interests, the points we have outlined concerning the inner relations between Islamic mystical writings and the wider Islamic humanities, and their particular social manifestations within each Muslim community, are neglected, yet historically decisive phenomena that should be of the utmost interest to serious students of Islamic history, culture, religion and society. Like the "invisibility" of the Friends of God described in the celebrated hadîth with which we began, the very unfamiliarity of those perspectives to our own ways of thinking and viewing the world should at least suggest the possibility of realities, or at least new angles of vision, yet to be discovered.

---

illustrations of the processes of oral teaching in more traditional Islamic settings in Senegal, Algeria and Iran, see the translations cited at n. 36 above.

A striking illustration of that possibility is provided by two short works by the great Muslim mystic Ibn ᶜArabî which have been partially translated under the title Sufis of Andalusia.[65] They give one cautionary lesson with regard to the highly problematic relations between texts (of any sort) and the available portrayals of Islamic history and religion. Among the surviving monuments and literary records of Muslim Spain in the late 12th century (apart from Ibn ᶜArabî's own voluminous writings), there is very little in the Arabic poetry, political chronicles,[66] biographies of learned legal and religious scholars, or the celebrated works of a philosopher like Averroes, to suggest any particular social significance, or indeed even much conscious awareness, of what later came to be viewed as "Sufism". Islamic "mysticism," in that later, more institutionalized and self-consciously distinctive sense, is in fact almost invisible in the writings of those learned and privileged elites. Yet Ibn ᶜArabî recounts in the most moving terms his own decisive personal encounters, over a few years of his youth, with dozens of men and women, from every region and walk of life, learned and illiterate, outwardly "religious" and less obviously so, whose extraordinary spiritual powers and influences were exercised almost

---

[65]Tr. R.W.J. Austin, Oxford, 1971. For a more detailed analysis of the spiritual and personal significance, and the social-historical background, of those encounters, see the two pioneering French studies cited at n. 62 above (both forthcoming in English translation by the Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge).

[66] Except for mention of some scattered popular rebellions connected with individuals who may also have been Sufi leaders.the recurrent problems--for the student of Islamic religion--posed by that (understandable) focus of historical texts have been mentioned at n. 18 above. Ibn al-'Arif (trans. William Elliot and A.R. Abdullah), Mahâsin al-Majâlis: The attraction of mystical sessions. (London, Avebury, 1980)

entirely within the web of "ordinary" social and religious life and practice, visible in many instances only to those few specially motivated individuals who cared to seek them out.

The broader historical lessons that can be drawn from this telling example must surely be kept in mind when reading about any aspect of Islamic religion or culture.  As for Ibn ᶜArabî, he was making a different point.[67]

---

[67]See the remarkable contemporary illustration of that point--as of so many other central teachings of the Islamic humanities--in Wim Wenders' Der Himmel über Berlin (1987: distributed in English and French as "Wings of Desire").