

Sufism in the Light of Orientalism

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This article offers a discussion of the problems regarding different interpretations of Sufism, especially those promoted by the 19th century Orientalists and modern scholars. Contrary to the prevailing opinions of those European writers who “discovered” Sufism as a kind of the Persian poetry-based mysticism, presumably unrelated to Islam, the Sufis themselves (at least before the Western cultural expansion) regarded Sufism as the inmost kernel of Islam and the way of the Prophet himself.

The title of our paper is rather paradoxical and not without irony, especially bearing in mind the metaphysical connotations of the word “light” (*nur* in Arabic), which is used here, however, in the trivial ordinary metaphorical sense and has nothing to do with any sort of mystical illumination. It certainly does not mean that Orientalism would be regarded as a source of some supernatural light, although the “light of knowledge”, upon which the academic scholarship so prides itself, may be understood simply as one hermeneutical perspective among others, thereby establishing the entire cluster of interpretative tales, or phenomenological fictions which are nonetheless sufficiently real within their own imaginative historical, if not ontological, horizons.

The scholarly term “Sufism” (with the “-ism” ending characteristic of the prestigious tableaux of modern Western ideological constructions) was introduced in the 18th century by the European scholars, those who were more or less connected to the late 18th century policies of the East India Company. It appeared in the context of certain ideological and cultural predispositions as well as highly selective and idealized expectations. This context included the myth of the philosophical wisdom of the ancient Persians, invented or rather revived by the Neozoroastrian reformers in Moghul India. The myth itself was saturated with the Neoplatonic ideas of Ishraqi philosophers (reinterpreted in Iran under Safavids) when the famous Suhrawardian concepts (*hikmat al-ishraq*) and ambivalent claims were persistently but incorrectly attributed to the ancient Persian sages.

The discovery and publication of such semi-phantasmagoric Neozoroastrian texts as *Dabistan al-Madhahib* (The School of Religions) and *Dasatir* (rendered as The Sacred Writings of the Ancient Persian Prophets), which stemmed from the school of Adhar Kayvan and had very little to do with real Zoroastrism, supported the distorted but fascinating view that Iranians possessed a distinguished metaphysical heritage

which they had entirely forgotten. Therefore, no wonder the newly discovered “Sufism” is regarded as a fundamentally Persian spiritual phenomenon to be traced back to the estimated Indian roots.

At that time (the beginning of the 19th century) the attention and enthusiasm of the European scholars gradually shifted from the “solemn mysteries and initiations of ancient Egypt “to the holy land of India” saluted as a cradle of the human race, of all religion and mysticism. But the idea of a complete antagonism between official religion and an esoteric mystery cult concealed from the profane vulgar, at first promoted as the Post-Renaissance hermeneutical strategy more relevant to the contemporary utopian and reformative movements than to the real mysteries of the Egyptians, remained intact and even received a supposedly solid foundation in the pseudo-Zoroastrian philosophy and suddenly discovered Upanishadic wisdom.

With the rise of the Romanticism, the East in general and India in particular became a site of attraction to those who were interested in their national and cultural identity and searched beyond the heritage of the classical Greek and Judeo-Christian heritage. According to Romantic philosophers (who nonetheless affirmed a universal humanity), the primary source of all intellectual development should be traced back to the ancient Indian or Indo-Iranian monistic milieu, imagined as the starting-point of an exalted metaphysical tradition which perfectly resonated with their own fundamental assumptions and was directed against the materialistic philosophy of the Enlightenment. At least partially, they followed the paradigm established by Schlegel, namely that “the highest Romanticism” must be sought in the Orient which validates the ideas of a single monistic God and some universal esoteric essence of all great mythological and religious traditions, i.e. confirms a sort of the perennial philosophy which rests on the transcendental wholeness and spiritual essence of the natural world.

Since nothing spiritual was expected from the hated Islamic civilization, the simplified and misleading picture of which was maintained through the ages and uncritically equated with the Turkish despotism, the newly discovered Sufism (at first associated mainly with the supposed liberties of Persian poetry) was sharply separated from the Islamic religion as such. C. W. Ernst argues that precisely at the same time the Arabic term *islam*, itself originally being rather of secondary importance, was introduced by the Orientalists as the chief denotation term of the *din al-haqq*, or *din Ibrahim*. The Arabic word *din* is not simply equivalent of the Latin *religio*, but describes the essential human duty, obligation, debt, custom, judgement, and divine guidance that is accepted with submission (*islam*). C. W. Ernst says:

Historically, Europeans had used the term ‘Muhammadan’ to refer to the religion of the Prophet Muhammad, although Muslims regard that as an inappropriate label. The term ‘Islam’ was introduced into European languages in the early nineteenth century by Orientalists such as Edward Lane as an explicit analogy with the modern Christian concept of religion; in this respect, ‘Islam’ was just as much a newly invented European term as ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Buddhism’ were. [...] the term ‘Islam’ became more prominent in reformist

and pro-fundamentalist circles at approximately the same time, or shortly after, it was popularized by European Orientalists. So in a sense, the concept of Islam in opposition to the West is just as much a product of European colonialism as it is a Muslim response to the European expansion. Despite appeals to medieval history, it is really the past two centuries that set up the conditions for today's debates regarding Islam.¹

Historically, the European (both Christian and secular) attitude towards Islam was mostly negative, based on the pre-judicious stereotypes and current Islamophobia which required to exclude Muslims from Western civilization altogether. Contrary to the dry and "spiritually impotent" Arabic religion, Sufism appeared as a kind of universal mysticism dressed in the colorful Persian garbs – a sort of free-thinking, wine-drinking, erotic and pantheistic spirituality which ultimately stems from the so-called Indo-Germanic creative spirit. In short, it has nothing to do with the dry and legalistic religion of Islam.

This view was promoted by the famous scholars related to the East India Company, such as Sir William Jones (*The Sixth Discourse. On the Persians*, 1807), Colonel Sir John Malcolm (*The History of Persia*, 2 vols, 1815), and Lt. James William Graham (*A Treatise on Sufism, or Mahomedan Mysticism*, 1819). Thus the Western concepts of Sufism and Islam were consciously separated at the point of their emergence into and popularization through the current discourse of the Orientalists, though early in the 19th century the knowledge of Sufism itself was very poor, incorrect and largely limited to its marginal manifestations in the Moghul spiritual universalism or rather eclecticism. To quote C. W. Ernst once again:

Although European scholars assumed that Sufism therefore had to derive from Indian yoga or some other extra-Islamic source, Sufi spiritual circles used a religious vocabulary based almost entirely on Arabic and Islamic sources. [...] Modern Muslim reformists subsequently mirrored the Europeans in regarding Sufism as something apart from Islam; the difference lay in the reformists' negative evaluation of Sufism as an innovation and a foreign intrusion into Islam, while the Orientalists saw Sufism as something positive. Yet this negative attitude of reformist Muslims toward Sufism is relatively recent; for most of Islamic history, this form of spirituality and mystical practice has been a major feature of Muslim societies.²

Consequently, although *at-tasawwuf* (now rendered and popularized as Sufism), for the majority of Muslims before the 18th century was inextricably linked with the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad, being simply a sincere form of devotion and the religious science of divine realities and mystical knowledge which originated with the Prophet himself, the Orientalists of the 19th century re-interpreted it as the anti-dogmatic (therefore anti-Islamic) monistic or pantheistic movement. Hence this movement is characterized as negating of any constrictions of sacred laws, rites, and customs, even

¹ Carl W. Ernst, *Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, 10–11.

² *Ibid.*, 166.

of all external religion as such, and promulgating the inner freedom through the ecstatic union with the divine. This attractive picture of the extra-Islamic sect of free-thinkers and lovers was in accord to the Romantic approach to religion and, ultimately, to the universalized Protestant sensibilities.

One should not forget that from the 16th century onwards Turkey was associated with absolute despotism, and this image determined the whole perspective of Islam in the West. Therefore the Romantic poets and philosophers were inclined to search for the universal dimension of meaning free from corrupted political, social, and religious systems. Accordingly, not only the image of the Arab nomad as a noble savage was introduced by such writers as James Bruce (1730–91), who believed that Arab nomads contain in their heart “the principles of the first religion, which God had inculcated in the heart of Noah”,³ but also the image of the Sufi poet, intoxicated by the wine of Shiraz, the smell of roses and miraculous voices of nightingales.

Since the early Orientalist hermeneutical perspective turned *at-tasawwuf* into Sufism and interpreted it in the terms of romantic universalism – which itself may be viewed as an Orientalized prolongation of the pre-modern Christian theological, social, and scientific debates – a short investigation of Orientalism is required before we should turn to Sufism again.

Although Orientalism in a certain metaphysical sense may be related to the Pythagorean and Platonic tradition (as “a perennial Platonic trait”, according to John Walbridge)⁴ and to the Neoplatonic fascination with ancient wisdom of the Eastern civilizations – exotic lands of wisdom, spices, and fabulous sages – such terms as “Orient” and “Orientalism” have gone out of scholarly fashion recently. It would be too naïve to imply that all those who lived eastwards from the Mediterranean shores of Alexandria and Beirut up to Mongolia and Indonesia shared some common “Oriental” essence, as was typically conceived by the popular imagination before the modern age. As John James Clarke pointed out:

A closely related question concerns the dangers of treating the Orient itself as a single undifferentiated entity. Crucial terms such as ‘East’, ‘Orient’, and ‘West’ become devices for reducing endless complexities and diversities into manageable and falsifying unities, a semantic artifice which has encouraged us to think in terms of the contrasting of East and West in some eternal transcendent opposition.⁵

Hence, “Orientalism” is a highly problematic term, especially in the context of the contemporary political tensions and plots produced by the international Zionism as

³ Mohammed Sharafuddin, *Islam and Romantic Orientalism. Literary Encounters with the Orient*, London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1996, xxv.

⁴ John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East. Suhrawardi and Platonic Orientalism*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2001, x.

⁵ J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment. The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*, London: Routledge, 1997, 10.

well as ideological counter-attacks launched by the Westernized Orientals themselves, often equipped with the Psychoanalytic, Marxist, and Postmodernist weapons.

The term “Orientalism” itself first appeared in the third decade of the 19th century in France and usually it referred to the European attitudes towards the Middle Eastern cultures. By extension, it covers the range of attitudes to all traditional and philosophical ideas of Asian countries. While used in many different senses, the word “Orientalism” as a neutral descriptive term may simply mean the scholarly studies of the languages and texts of the Orient. However, it is also related to the East India Company’s policies aimed at the preservation of Indian culture, to the fabulous and romantic artistic style associated with the imagined Eastern luxuries and liberties (so attractive to the puritan Victorian mentality) and, more recently, to a discourse of power fashioned by the Western imperialism.

Now the fashionable current tide, supported by the silly-minded European humanists and therefore rarely perceived as self-destructive, regards “Orientalism” as a pejorative term – merely an ideologically motivated “epistemic construction”. This sheerly negative and rather politicized attitude is largely based on the bald rhetoric proclaimed by Edward Said, the Westernized Palestinian propagandist and demagogue, namely, that “the value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such.” Accordingly, by displacing any such “real thing” as the Orient, “that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation”.⁶

It follows that “the Orient” is constructed as a “system of ideological fictions” whose chief purpose consists in legitimizing Western cultural and political superiority. Such hypnotizing perspective, largely based on the Marxistly tinted post-Enlightenment ideals of scientific detachment and liberalism, itself is characteristically “Western” and paradoxically neglects the historical evidence that hermeneutical attitudes of the so-called Western imperialism, in their essence, differ little from those of any other state or empire, if not a village, be it in ancient Assyria, China, Russia, Abbasid califate or elsewhere. In addition, one can speak (really, not only metaphorically) of the social imperialism of modern democracy, the mental imperialism of Postmodernism, the totalitarian imperialism of mass-media magic and so on. As Harry Oldmeadow correctly observes:

An obvious irony, which seems to have escaped the attention of some of the more fervent and over-heated critics of Orientalism, is that assault on the Western fabrication of the Orient is itself a product of the Western intellectual heritage of which they are such strident critics. In Said’s case the irony is sharpened by the fact that the ‘defense’ of the Islamic civilization is conducted by a rootless intellectual of Protestant upbringing who is quite unable to conceal his own distaste for the religion that provides the very *raison d’être* of the civilization in

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin, 1987, 22.

question. Moreover, his argument is rooted in ideas and values (secular humanism, high culture) which are irredeemably Western and modernistic, and thus quite out of tune with those values that Muslims themselves hold most dear.⁷

If the Orient (first and foremost the traditional Eastern thought, metaphysics, symbolism, mysticism, spiritual exercises and sacred art) is thoroughly fabricated by the bad Western guys and therefore must be abolished for the sake of the so-called profane positivistic objectivity, eventually nothing remains that could be valued as an attractive spiritual paradigm. In fact, Orientalistic studies often were motivated by the quest for truth and knowledge and constituted part of the counter-culture directed against the predominated Western attitudes, be they imperialistic, positivistic, or rationalistic.

However, in spite of frequent accusations for the supposed irrationality and wanting to escape into unreality, the Orientalism of the 18th–19th centuries was associated with the affirmation of intellect and reason, in contrast to the perceived irrationalities of European ideologies and institutions, such as the aggressive and simple-minded Christian missionary activities. The East ought to be happy if it still remains spiritually attractive in spite of all disillusion which derives from an immediate encounter with the modernized East along with its countless stupidities.

Now if we come back to Sufism and those numerous Orientalistic interpretations as regards its origin and nature, we can discern several different hermeneutical trends and attitudes. However, if one is inclined to accept blindly the Foucauldian principle that knowledge can never be “innocent” and follow the Saidian prejudices based on “the Parisian oracles of Postmodernism”,⁸ one all too easily would be locked in facile mental games. Consequently, Orientalism of any kind – which cannot be simply identified with the ruling imperialistic ideologies, but covers all scholarly studies – would be demolished.

There is no any sane method of so-called “disinterested scholarship” which would enable to argue, for example, that Hamilton A. R. Gibb, W. Montgomery Watt and Louis Massignon are Orientalists, but William C. Chittick, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Michael A. Sells are not, or vice versa. And if any interpretation is an oppressive ideological construction (so that the question of truth, be it hermeneutical, logical, phenomenological, linguistic, metaphysical or imaginative, is put aside altogether) what compels one to believe the assertions of those who are marching behind the banners of anti-Europeanism, anti-elitism, anti-Orientalism and liberally motivated anti-Traditionalism which rejects metaphysics, sacred law and order?

As regards Sufism, its separation from Islam or its recognition as an integral part of the latter is a matter not so much of “Orientalism” (as if the term itself would be

⁷ Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East. 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2004, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*

transformed into an ideologically-motivated substance, polluted beyond recognition), but of the concrete historical circumstances, dominating philosophical attitudes, and spiritual constitution of the interpreter himself, i.e. his archetypal preparedness (as Ibn al-‘Arabi would say), his intellectual intuition, intention, knowledge and the scope of creative imagination. Therefore, as there are different levels of being, understanding, creativity, spiritual exegesis, and imagination, so there are different levels and kinds of Orientalism which in its entirety includes not only such early European scholars as Sir William Jones, Friedrich August Deofidus Tholuck, and E. H. Palmer, but also Henry Corbin, Frithjof Schuon, Annemarie Schimmel and, finally, Edward Said himself.

But what about real or imagined Sufism? Perhaps the problem is mainly that of a particular spiritual vision, hermeneutical perspective, and method of interpretation. According to Titus Burckhardt, the Sufi doctrines can be understood only from the inside through the intellectual penetration which transcends the limits of discursive thought. He says:

This it is which explains why almost every erudite European who has studied Sufism has mistaken its true position. Men of modern culture are no longer accustomed to think in terms of symbols and so modern investigations are unable to distinguish between what, in two analogous traditional expressions, belongs to the external form and what is the essential element, and for that very reason the erudite European is led to see borrowings by one tradition from another where in fact there is only a coincidence of spiritual vision, and fundamental divergencies where it is only a question of differences in perspective or in mode of expression. It is inevitable that such confusions should arise since a university training and bookish knowledge are in the West deemed sufficient authority for concerning oneself with things which in the East remain naturally reserved to those who are endowed with spiritual intuition and who devote themselves to the study of these things in virtue of a true affinity under the guidance of those who are the heirs of a living tradition.⁹

However, it is rather paradoxical that the classical Sufi thought (including the oral instructions transmitted by the concrete shaykhs) is very little (if at all) concerned with the so-called “transcendent unity of religions” as it is understood by the contemporary Traditionalists who (though viewing Sufism from “within”), in fact, employ the Western metaphysical techniques of esoteric interpretation.

The great majority of the Sufis themselves (except of those partially related to the Moghul eclecticism and influenced by the 19th century Orientalistic scholarship) regard *at-tasawwuf*, or Sufism, as the very kernel (*al-lubb*) of Islam and trace it back to the Quranic revelation and the Sunnah. Of course, historical developments of Sufi doctrines and practices are much more complicated than they are usually presented by the idealized Sufi tales and standard hagiographies, therefore perhaps one could speak of many Sufisms, at least, of many different branches, styles, and methods of the same spiritual stream whose unity is maintained as the principal requirement of its own “metaphysical genre” that ensures legitimacy.

⁹ Titus Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufism*, trans. D. M. Matheson, Wellingborough: Crucible, 1980, 10–11.

The Sufi path itself (in spite of its Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and Gnostic connotations) is viewed as an esoteric or inward (*batin*) aspect of Islam, to be distinguished from its exoteric or external (*zahir*) side. The popular but uncritical tendency to render the word *al-batin* as “esoteric” derives from the spiritual hermeneutics of the Western Romanticism and Occultism. In this case it simply refers that *at-tasawwuf* as direct contemplation and tasting (*dhawq*) of divine realities is distinguishable from the fulfilling of the socio-political religious laws.

In fact, there are three ascending stages of *ad-din* revealed to the Prophet: 1) *al-islam* (submission); 2) *al-iman* (faith); and 3) *al-ihsan* (perfect virtue, excellence). The realm of *al-ihsan* is equated with Sufism, understood as a way (*tariqah*) which connects an external submission and the Prophetic law (*shari'ah*) to the inner truth (*haqiqah*). Accordingly, the third stage (*al-ihsan*) implies not only an inner faith and a total disengagement from worldly concerns, but also a sort of divine knowledge (*ma'rifah*). The true *arif*, or gnostic, is no longer in possession of himself: his human attributes are annihilated in the state of *fana'* and replaced by the divine attributes in the state of *baqa'* to such extent that God Himself can speak through his mouth, saying “I am Truth” (*ana'l-haqq*).

The state of *ihsan* consists “of worshipping *Allah* as if you see Him, for if you do not see Him, He sees you”, according to the famous *hadith*. Hence, the man in a state of *islam* is the *muslim*, in a state of *iman* – the *mu'min*, and in a state of *ihsan* – the *muhsin*. The *muhsin* is regarded as the perfect *khalifah* who rediscovers “the most beautiful form” in which he was originally created. His heart becomes like a well-polished mirror in which the divine Face can be reflected. This “reflective” nearness to God is the ultimate goal of Sufi practices thereby a Muslim devotee, *faqir*, becomes a friend (*wali*) of God. The word *faqir* (like its Persian equivalent *darwish*) comes from *faqr*, meaning “poor”, and serves to designate the Muslim Sufi whose paradigm is the following Quranic verse: “O men, you are the poor (*al-fuqara'*) before God, He is the Rich” (*Qur'an XXXV.115*).

The Muslim *faqir* must realize that he is completely dependent in relation to God, thereby achieving the state of ideal poverty and inner detachment. To become a perfect receptacle of the divine Names and Attributes means restoration of the primordial proximity, sometimes described as union (*ittihad*), between the creature and the Creator. The science (*'ilm*) of *ihsan* is the key to the spiritual path of *fana'* (annihilation of human attributes) and *baqa'* (subsistence in the divine Attributes). Both the law (*shari'ah* as an indispensable foundation) and the path (*tariqah*) ultimately repose on the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet. According to Victor Danner:

Sufism bases itself on the Qur'an and the Sunnah, mystically interpreted. This leads to the conclusion that the Qur'an is really the first and foremost mystical text of Islam and that the

Prophet is the first and the greatest of the Sufi sages and saints, even through the term *sufi*, in reality, is of later origin.¹⁰

This attitude regarding the Sufi path radically differs from that professed by the Orientalists of the 19th century who, as a rule, viewed Sufism as an essentially extra-Islamic phenomenon. However, nobody could accuse V. Danner (who is an Orientalist anyway) that his understanding is nothing more than a tissue of mendacious fabrications on behalf of the Western imperialism.

As early as the beginning of the 20th century, Reynold A. Nicholson, the famous British Orientalist, described Sufism as “the religious philosophy of Islam”, aimed at “the apprehension of divine realities” and therefore translatable as “mysticism”, in spite of the earliest Sufis having been ascetics rather than mystics. Thus he says:

So far, there was no great difference between the Sufi and the orthodox Muslim zealot, except that the Sufis attached extraordinary importance to certain Koranic doctrines, and developed them at expense of others [...].¹¹

Understood as “mysticism” (although this term is also problematic), Sufism is a teaching about the divine reality (*haqiqah*) and a method to realize *tawhid*, the central Quranic doctrine of unity. This method is based on the initiatic pact (*bay'ah*) and consists in the remembrance of God (*dhikr Allah*). The pact of Divine Contentment (*bay'at al-ridwan*), mentioned in the *Qur'an* (XLVIII. 10), guarantees the transmission of the Muhammadan grace (*barakah muhammadiyah*) and constitutes the protocol of conduct (*adab*) between the Prophet and his companions as well as between the Sufi shaykh (as a representative of the Prophet) and his disciples.

The Muhammadan *barakah* enables to open the “eye of the heart” (*'ayn al-qalb*) whose knowledge is not discursive or “attained” (*husuli*), but “presential” (*huduri*), i.e. this knowledge has the immediacy and directness of sensual knowledge but concerns the intelligible or spiritual realities. Therefore *at-tasawwuf* itself is regarded as the heart of Islam (*qalb al-islam*), though it represents the outlook which is the most inward (*batin*) in relation to the external and legalistic framework of the Islamic religion, at the same time being able to absorb many pre-Islamic (Syrian, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, especially Stoic and Neoplatonic) ideas and doctrines provided that they 1) express the analogous spiritual truths, 2) may be reinterpreted in the Quranic terms and 3) integrated into the fabric of Sufi symbolism.

The term *tasawwuf* is related to the Greek word *sophia* by Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (c. 973–1048), but most likely it derives from the Arabic word *suf*, meaning “white wool” and referring to the type of clothing liked by the Prophet and his early followers,

¹⁰ Victor Danner, *The Early Development in Sufism. Islamic Spirituality. Foundations*, ed. S. H. Nasr, London: SCM Press, 1988, 243.

¹¹ Richard A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2002 (1st ed. 1914), 9.

or at least by the early Muslim ascetics in Syria and Mesopotamia. The designation of Sufism as “Islamic mysticism” is a result of the particular hermeneutical rendering and is legitimate only if “mysticism” is understood in its original Hellenic (or rather Pseudo-Dionysian) sense. Other epithets, readily adopted by the early Orientalists, such as “pantheism”, for instance, are much less convincing, because they are rather inadequate projections of the Western philosophical categories into the alien semantic universe. Regarding the so-called Sufi “pantheism”, T. Burckhardt observes as follows:

All the metaphysical doctrines of the East and some of those of the West have frequently been labeled as pantheistic, but in truth pantheism is only to be found in the case of certain European philosophers and in some Orientals who were influenced by Western thought of the XIX century. Pantheism arose from the same mental tendency which produced, first, naturalism and then materialism. Pantheism only conceives of the relationship between the Divine Principle and things from the point of view of substantial or existential continuity, and this is an error explicitly rejected by every traditional doctrine.¹²

In order to compare 1) the systematic metaphysical and philosophical pictures of Sufism (be they correct or incorrect), produced by the Orientalistic scholarship from the early Romantic and Modernist to the late Traditionalist writers (many of whom are the initiated Sufis themselves, including Jean-Louis Michon, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Frithjof Schuon, William C. Hittick, Michael Chodkiewicz, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Sachiko Murata) with 2) those rather strange, aphoristic and seemingly inconsistent descriptions abundantly found in the classical Sufi literature, we should provide certain typical examples of how *tasawwuf* was understood and presented in the time of al-Junayd of Baghdad, Abu-l-Qasim ‘Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri, or al-Hujwiri. So, what is Sufism?

“Sufism is that God makes you die to yourself and live in Him”.

“Sufism is patience before God’s commands and prohibitions, contentment and submission to destiny’s course”.

“Sufism consists of two things: looking in one direction and living in one way”.

“Sufism is the heart standing with God, with nothing in between”.

“Sufism is to adhere to and act by the *Qur’an* and the example of the Prophet, abandoning self-will and innovation, honoring and respecting the masters, regarding both the esteem and anger of others as nothing; it is the regular recitation of litanies and the avoidance of all liberal interpretations (of the *Qur’an* and tradition)”.

“Sufism is wakefulness, attentiveness, and discernment in fending off all fantasy and nonsense”.

“Sufism is to grasp the realities, speak of the subtleties, and despair of everything else in creation”.

“Sufism is one-pointed concentration and solitude (with God)”.

¹² Burckhardt, 1980, 28.

“Sufism is to watch closely one’s states and to maintain *adab*”.

“Sufism is patience in the face of fate, acceptance from God’s hand, and voyages over deserts and mountains”.

“Sufism, all of it, is various forms of *adab*. Each moment, each station, and each state has its proper action. To adhere to the behavior that is proper to the moment is to attain the measure of the great Sufis; he who fails in this *adab* can never imagine nearness to God, nor that God might accept his behavior”.

“Sufism is to eat sparingly, to be at ease with God, and to flee from creatures”.

“It has been said that Sufism is purification of the heart from conformity with the habits of creatures; separation from those moral qualities belonging to ‘nature’ (the imprints and impressions of the lower world) by transforming them, purging them of deviations, and basing them upon a ‘golden mean’ without either exaggeration or neglect; wiping out all human attributes through spiritual warfare, ascetic practice, and involvement with spiritual attributes”.

“Sufism is to abandon one’s own opinion and submit to God’s will”.

“Sufism is to walk towards God on God’s feet”.

“Sufism is to know One, desire One, see One, and become One”.¹³

The bewildering amount of different, sometimes mutually excluding statements and maxims regarding the nature of *tasawwuf*, often resulting from the legitimate spiritual rhetoric and pious exaggeration, provides an illustration of the rich tradition faced with the supernatural and its marvelous aspects. It is difficult to escape a paradoxical suspicion that the early Sufis would be entirely perplexed if they could read the works about Sufism produced by the contemporary Orientalistic scholarship, be it critically deconstructive or “metaphysically objective”. Probably they would reject this kind of research altogether as incorrect or irrelevant, even if it tries to express and confirm the “inner perspective” of Sufism itself, interpreting it in philosophical terms of transcendence and immanence, esoterism and exoterism, and constantly referring to certain “perennial wisdom” which, however, is not in every respect tantamount to the *din Ibrahim* of the ancient Arabs.

Therefore one ought to recognize not only the historical distance between the so-called classical Sufism and contemporary scholarship with its critical sense and need for logical satisfaction, but also comprehend that all scholarly discourses of Orientalism partially depend on a particular hermeneutical perspective and highly selective creative imagination. To separate Sufism from Islam altogether or to show it as the heart of Islam is one thing. Quite another thing is to realize that even those Traditionalist writers as F. Schuon and T. Burckhardt, who defend Sufism as the inner kernel of Islam and at the same time speak of the universal esoterism, tacitly stand on

¹³ All quotations are selected by Javad Nurbakhsh in his *Sufism. Meaning, Knowledge, and Unity*, New York: Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, 1981, 17–33.

the rational foundations of Western scholarship related to the idealistic German philosophy, Romantic Orientalism and the critical standards of the Enlightenment which they otherwise rashly criticize and ridicule.

This discrepancy between the traditional Sufi style of self-presentation and the systematic (be it critical or uncritical) contemporary thought is clearly understood by F. Schuon himself who, however, interprets it as a contrast of the “symbolistic nature of Eastern dialectic” (along with Semitic insistence on the subjective accidents and religious emotionalism) versus both the Platonic and Vedantic concern with an “objective intellection”, which preserves critical sense, but ultimately also depends upon inspiration. F. Schuon argues as follows:

When comparing the literatures of West and East, one often has the impression that the critical faculty of Orientals and that of Westerners are situated on different planes; Westerners cannot help feeling shocked by certain peculiarities and inconsequences in the dialectic of Orientals; for example, the fact of supporting a good thesis by weak arguments or of ignoring strong arguments or of exploiting them insufficiently, not to mention a tendency to exaggerate [...] The superlativism of Arab dialectic consists in emphasizing a quality or a defect by means of a logically unacceptable hyperbole, while keeping silent about the particular relationship which makes the superlative intelligible; now this superlativism is not unconnected with the importance which in the Arab and Islamic mentality is attached to the image of the sword and to the experience of instantaneity [...] the thought is comparable to a sword-stroke; it is an act rather than a vision.¹⁴

What kind of conclusion may be drawn from all what has already been said by the different Orientalists? The only timid conclusion would be as follows: all kinds of interpretation are based on certain metaphysical, ontological, or political premises and the particular hermeneutical lines of presentation. Therefore the constructed and reconstructed philosophical world-views (in spite of their historicity and even empirical evidence) may be partially described as “scholarly imagined traditions”, or rather one should speak of the “imaginative rhetoric about imagined traditions”. However, the crucial thing is to remember that both “objective” and “subjective” scholarly imagination, understood in such particular historical as well as metaphysical, poetical, and alchemical sense, sometimes proves to be more efficient and real than the positivistically impoverished “reality” of “naked facts”.

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¹⁴ Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, trans. Peter N. Townsend, London: Perennial Books, 1984, 114, 118.