

# ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

*A Short History*

BY

ALEXANDER KNYSH



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## A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND DATES

In transliterating Arabic and Persian words I follow the system of the new edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam with the modifications adopted by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, namely *q* instead of *ḳ* and *j* instead of *dj*. All dates are given according to the Muslim lunar calendar (*hijra*), which are followed by a backslash and the Common Era equivalent.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- EI*      *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, vols. 1–9, Leiden.  
*BEO*      *Bulletin d'Études Orientales de l'Institut Français de Damas*,  
            Damascus.  
*JAOS*     *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Ann Arbor, MI.  
*JRAS*     *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*,  
            London.  
*MIDEO*   *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales du Caire*,  
            Cairo.  
*SI*        *Studia Islamica*, Paris.  
*ZDMG*    *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Wiesbaden.



## INTRODUCTION

An ascetic and mystical element that was implicitly present in Islam since its very inception became explicit during the first Islamic centuries (the seventh and eighth centuries C.E.). This period witnessed the appearance of the first Muslim devotees and “moral athletes,” who formed primitive ascetic communities in the central and eastern lands of Islam, primarily in Mesopotamia, Syria and Eastern Iran. By the thirteenth century C.E. such early communities spread all over the world of Islam, forming new social institutions, the *ṭarīqas* or brotherhoods, which had their distinct devotional practices, lifestyle, moral and ethical system, educational philosophy as well as semi-independent economic basis. In the Later Middle Ages (the twelfth–sixteenth century C.E.), Sufism became a dominant feature of the Muslim social order. Its common textbooks and authorities, its networks of *ṭarīqa* institutions and its distinctive lifestyles became a spiritual and intellectual glue that held together the culturally and ethnically diverse societies huddled up under the Islamic umbrella. Unlike Christian mysticism, which was overshadowed and marginalized by the secularizing and rationalistic tendencies in Western European societies that culminated in the Enlightenment, its Muslim counterpart, Sufism, retained its pervasive influence on the spiritual and intellectual life of Muslims until the beginning of our century. At that point, Sufi rituals, values and doctrines came under the criticism of such diverse religio-political groups as Islamic reformers, modernists, liberal nationalists and, somewhat later, Muslim socialists also. These groups accused Muslim mystics of deliberately cultivating “idle superstitions,” such as the cult of departed saints and their shrines, of stubbornly resisting the imposition of “progressive” and “activist” social and intellectual attitudes, of indulging in outdated customs and ritual excesses and of exploiting the uneducated and superstitious masses to their advantage. Parallel to these critical attacks, in many countries of the Middle East, the economic foundations of Sufi fraternities were undermined by the agrarian reforms, secularization of education and new forms of taxation, which were instituted by Westernized nationalist governments. The extent of Sufism’s decline in the first half of our century varied from one country to another. However, on the whole, by the 1950s the vigorous anti-Sufi campaigns

launched by various groups and parties within Muslim societies and the profound changes in the traditional economies and social make-up of Middle Eastern, Central Asian and North African societies, and to a lesser extent those of sub-Saharan Africa, resulted in Sufism's dramatic loss of appeal in the eyes of many Muslims. Its erstwhile institutional grandeur was reduced to a few low-key lodges that were staffed by Sufi masters with little influence outside their immediate coterie of followers. At one time, it seemed that the very survival of the centuries-old Sufi tradition and mode of piety was jeopardized by the sweeping social and economic changes which came on the heels of modernization. And yet, against all odds, not only did Sufism survive, but also, in recent decades, has been making a steady comeback. Sufi lodges sprang back to existence in many countries of the Middle East, South East Asia and North Africa as well as in Europe, in the United States and in the republics of the former Soviet Union. Basing themselves on the spiritual genealogies, doctrines, moral precepts and training techniques of the traditional Sufi orders they are working towards what may soon turn into a full-blown Sufi revival. Alongside traditional *ṭarīqas*, we witness the emergence of the so-called Neo-Sufi movement seeking to bring Sufi values in tune with the spiritual and intellectual tastes of modern men and women. Some Westernized Sufi groups go as far as to divest Sufism of its Islamic garb, presenting it as an expression of a supraconfessional, universal truth that animates mystical quest in all religious traditions.

The aim of this book is to provide an accessible historical overview of Sufism's evolution from a simple world-renouncing piety to a series of highly sophisticated doctrines that circulated within a formal and highly hierarchical institutional framework known as the *ṭarīqa*. The *ṭarīqa* institution emerged in the sixth/twelfth century, flourished in the seventh/fourteenth-thirteenth/nineteenth centuries, suffered a profound spiritual and institutional decline at the beginning of the fourteenth/twentieth century, and, more recently, is experiencing an incipient revival. This study seeks to supplement and update the general surveys of Islamic mysticism by Fritz Meier,<sup>1</sup> Louis Massignon,<sup>2</sup> Margaret Smith,<sup>3</sup> Tor Andrae,<sup>4</sup> Georges Anawati and

<sup>1</sup> *Vom Wesen der islamischen Mystik*, Basel, 1943.

<sup>2</sup> L. Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*. Trans. by Benjamin Clark, Indiana, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> *Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East*, Oxford, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> T. Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles: Studies in early Islamic mysticism*, Albany, NY, 1987.

Louis Gardet,<sup>5</sup> Arthur J. Arberry,<sup>6</sup> Marjan Molé,<sup>7</sup> Annemarie Schimmel,<sup>8</sup> and Julian Baldick.<sup>9</sup> Of these, the latter two often serve as textbooks in both graduate and undergraduate courses on Islamic mysticism in English-speaking universities. Written by scholars specializing in Persian and Urdu literature and culture, these books are primarily concerned with the history of Sufism in the eastern parts of the Muslim world, while giving short shrift to developments in the central lands of Islam, the Caucasus and the Muslim West. I will attempt to rectify this bias by focusing on the geographical areas neglected by my predecessors. While earlier historians of Sufism have tended to concentrate on the evolution of Sufi doctrines and practices, my concern here is to furnish a picture of Islamic mysticism that is firmly rooted in the historical and socio-political contexts within which it developed. In my survey of Sufism I will avoid, so far as possible, delving into numerous controversial issues of Sufi studies. To spring them upon the reader with no prior knowledge of the subject would result in nothing but confusion. In the footnotes I will, however, occasionally alert readers to the various possible approaches to one and the same phenomenon or personality of Sufism's history, inviting them to undertake a further inquiry if they so wish. I will also be very sparing in providing readers with broad theoretical generalizations that quickly become outdated as scholarship on Sufism advances. Nor shall I try to force this variegated material into any ready-made conceptual framework, although I cannot deny that, like any scholar, I have my own methodological preferences and incipient intellectual biases. They will of necessity determine how I present the facts and interpret the sources at my disposal. The only apology I can offer for my approach is the prescriptive nature and underlying polemical agendas inherent in these sources, which I will try to minimize through a critical examination.

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<sup>5</sup> *Mystique musulmane: Aspects et tendances, expériences et techniques*, 3d edition, Paris, 1976.

<sup>6</sup> *Sufism: An account of the mystics of Islam*, 5th ed., London, 1969.

<sup>7</sup> *Les mystiques musulmans*, Paris, 1965.

<sup>8</sup> *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1975.

<sup>9</sup> *Mystical Islam: An introduction to Sufism*, London, 1989.