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**THE
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*A Reference
Work on
the History,
Faith, Culture,
and Peoples
of Islam*

Azim A. Nanji,
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Early Muslim Spirituality and Mysticism

- ◆ The Origins of Islamic Spirituality ◆ The Birth of Sufism
- ◆ The Development of a Synoptic Mystical Thought in Islam

Classical Islamic spirituality can be divided into four major periods of development: (1) the pre-Sufi phase, which would include the Quran, the central ritual elements of Islam, the legends of miraj, the poetic traditions, and the thought of the Muslim-theologian and ascetic Hasan of Basra (died 728); (2) the period of the great early Sufi masters such as Rabia, Bistami, and Junayd (died 910) whose legacy has come down to us largely through collections of their sayings in the works of later writers; (3) the formative phase of Sufism as a self-conscious mode of spirituality embracing all aspects of life and society as exemplified in the monumental works of writers like Sulami, Sarraj, and Qushayri (died 1074); and (4) the full flowering of Islamic spirituality in the works of Ibn al-Farid, Ibn Arabi, Attar, and Rumi (died 1273). This chapter treats the first three stages.

◆ THE ORIGINS OF ISLAMIC SPIRITUALITY

Nineteenth-century Western scholars as well as some Islamic modernists and reformers have imposed a dualistic opposition between Sufism and spirituality on the one hand and ritual Islam, which is embodied in the Islamic way of life (*sharia*) on the other. The premise of this chapter is that spirituality and embodiment are not in opposition in Islam, but, on the contrary, are mutually related and have been from the very beginning of Islam.

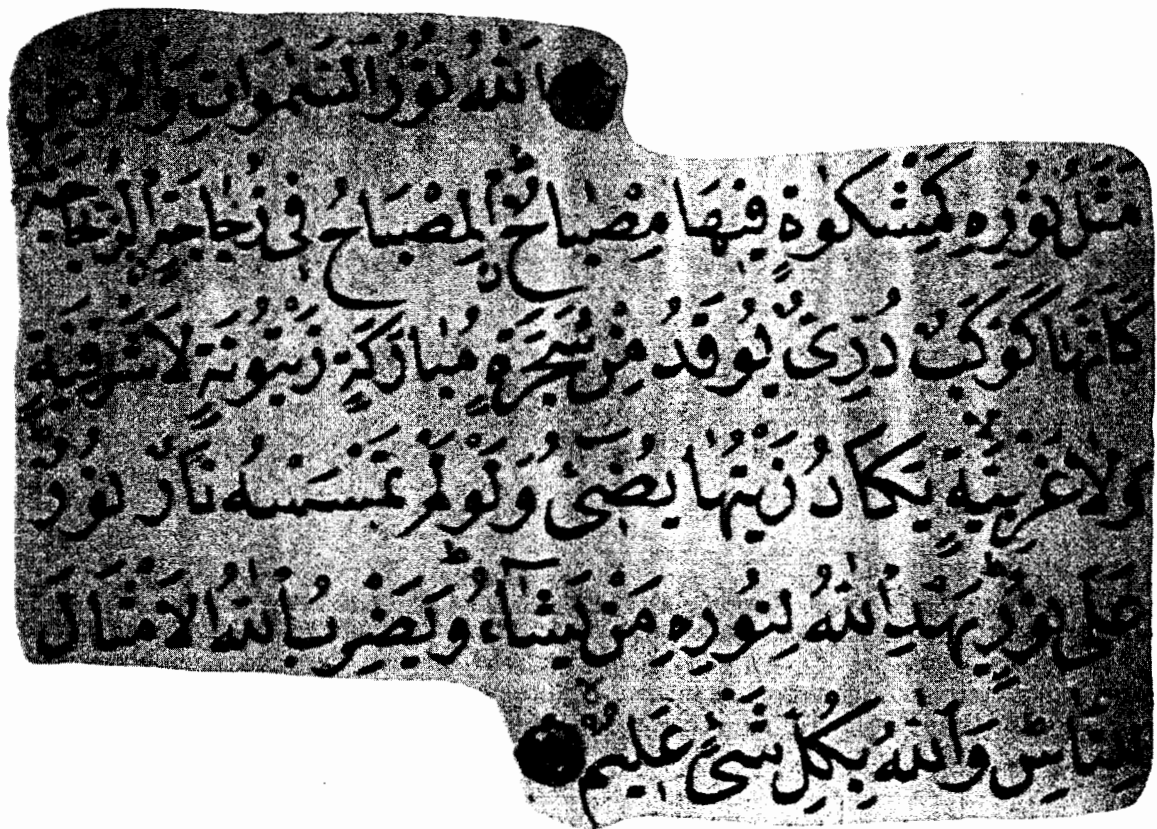
The word "spirit" (*ruh*) appears in the Quran only twenty-four times, yet it is one of the key terms in the Quranic lexicon. The spirit is associated with three primordial moments: creation (as exemplified in the "inspiring" of Adam when the Creator breathed into him

the spirit of life and in the Quranic story of Jesus' conception through the Spirit); prophecy (exemplified through the spirit as the necessary accompaniment and aid to prophecy and in the famous Quranic passage, which describes the "night of destiny" in which the spirit of prophecy descends); and the moment of truth or day of judgment in which the spirits return to the celestial equivalent of the Kaba, the Muslim sacred house of God. At this final moment of truth, there is an ontological reversal: What seems secure (the mountains, the heavens, the earth, the instinctive nursing of a calf by its mother) is torn away, and what might seem ephemeral, "an atom's weight of generosity or an atom's weight of evil" (Quran: 99:8), becomes each person's absolute reality.

When the heavens are stripped away,
the stars are strewn,
the seas boil over,
the tombs burst open,
then shall each soul know
what it has given and what it has held back
(Quran 82:1-5).

At its most subtle semantic register, the Quranic language of spirit is the moment in which these three archetypal moments (creation, prophecy, moment of truth) are united, as well as the point at which the "signs" of reality—the polarities of day and night, male and female, odd and even—are brought together.

In the famous "light verse" (Quran 24:35), the Quran describes a cosmos of signs embedded within signs, meanings, within meanings and deeper realities within other realities:



"Verse of Light" from the Quran (24:35).

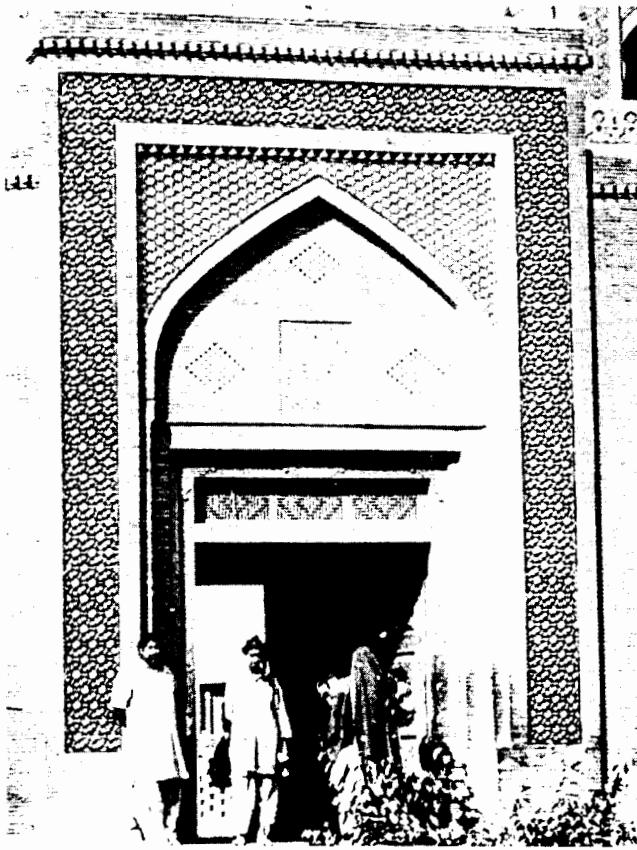
Allah is the light of the heavens and earth
 His light like the light of a lamp in a niche
 The lamp enclosed in a glass
 The glass like a pearl-white star
 Kindled from an olive tree that is blessed
 Neither from the East nor from the West
 Its oil nearly glows forth without the touch of
 fire
 Light on light God guides to his light whomever
 He wills
 Allah strikes symbols for humankind
 Allah in all things is most knowing.

A similar realm of embedded symbols of increased luminosity, transparency, blessing, and truth is presented in the account of Muhammad's prophetic vision (Quran 53:1–18; 97); the story of Joseph (Quran 12); the famous episodes in the *sura* titled "The Cave" (Al-Kahf) (Quran 18); Moses's prophetic encounters with the transcendent (Quran 7:142–43; 20:9–14); and the incomparably beautiful *Sura* of "The Compassionate" (Quran 55). The Quranic world is a world of signs (*ayas*) of the inherent existential generosity manifest in being, in the earth, in its fruits, in its life-forms, in consciousness. Each of these signs offer a clue to a

deeper reality. The integrity and destiny of each individual is bound up with his/her interpretation (*tawil*) of these signs, an interpretation that is later made clearer by the prophetic revelations and culminating with the Quran.

The Quran—the divine revelation in Islamic belief—is preeminently an embodied text as it is performed within and throughout the life of the Islamic community. Quranic calligraphy and Quranic recitation permeate Islamic life. These Quranic arts entail a cultivation of nuance and a combination of awe and intimacy so distinctive of Quranic discourse. The epitome of the performed and embodied Quran is the call to prayer that resonates over Islamic communities five times a day, calling people away from their daily preoccupations and demanding a moment of reflection and self-composure before their God. The physical movements (*Raka*) of ritual prayer (*salat*) orient all Muslims toward the Kaba in Mecca and harmonize the body and spirit within that orientation.

The fasting (*sawm*) for the month of Ramadan more radically disrupts everyday senses of space and time, as daytime becomes a time of austerity and nighttime a time of communal celebration. The last days of Ramadan, after the intense psychophysical effects of a



The Tomb of Shah Rukn-i-Alam

month of fasting, culminate in the night of destiny (*laylat al-qadr*), a vigil reenacting the night of Muhammad's reception of the divine word and marking the moment of closest intimacy between the divine and the human. The ritually obligatory tithe (*zakat*), a word based on the concept of purification), institutionalizes the Quranic virtue of generosity and is a complex embodiment of the searing Quranic denunciations of acquisitiveness ("Do you think the wealth you have acquired will make you immortal") within a functioning social framework. Through constant generosity and sharing, and through avoidance of all predatory economic practices, wealth is purified.

All of these aspects of spiritual embodiment are embodied physically and are brought together in the pilgrimage to the Kaba. As the pilgrim moves through the stations of pilgrimage, founding events of Islamic life are reenacted. In the slaughtering of a sheep, for example, Abraham—whom Muslims believe built the Kaba—is remembered for his sacrifice of the sheep in place of his son. Simultaneously, around the Islamic world, an animal sacrifice is made, linking the pilgrims to those throughout the world celebrating the great *Id*, or holiday. On the plain of Arafat, there is a simultaneous reenactment of Muhammad's final sermon and

pre-enactment of the final day of judgment or moment of truth (*Yawm*) as the Islamic community stands on the plain of Arafat and chants "*labayka*" (Here I am, Lord). The circumambulation of the Kaba is a movement around that point where, for Muslims, the world and the transcendent meet. The Kaba itself represents the three archetypal moments in the Quran where the world of time and the world of eternity come together: the creation (the stone of the Kaba is viewed by tradition as a relic of the original creation), prophecy, and the day of judgment.

In Shia Islam, the reenactment of the martyrdom of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet and the third Shia imam, becomes the occasion for a meditation on the tragic aspect of human existence and reaches a pitch of intensity when the audience in the play no longer perceives itself as watching a representation of an event that took place centuries ago, but rather as coparticipants in that event. While Sunni Muslims do not celebrate the *taziya* formally, they also venerate the figure of Husayn and remember the tragedy of his martyrdom.

In the story of the *Miraj*, Muhammad is taken up through the seven heavens to the divine throne. Based upon a brief mention in the Quran to a night journey (*isra*) (Quran 17:1), the *Miraj* account is elaborated upon in the *hadith* and *Sira* (The accounts of Muhammad), and collated with the key passages on Muhammad's reception of the divine word (Quran 53, 94, 99). Muhammad is taken on a night journey from the precinct of the *bayt al-haram* (the sacred house, i.e., the Kaba) to the *bayt al-muqaddas* (the house of sanctity). From there he is taken up through the seven heavens and is greeted by, and in effect validated by, the previous prophets who now occupy those heavens (Adam, Joseph, Aaron, Moses, Abraham, and Jesus). At the culmination he sees the lote tree of the furthest boundary, the divine throne (*arsh*), the "house of life" (*al-bayt al-mamur*—the celestial counterpart to the Kaba), and receives the divinely ordained prayers for his community.

The poetic heritage was another central mode of expression of early Islamic spirituality. The tradition of the pre-Islamic ode (*qasida*) was to supply key aspects of Sufi lexicon, sensibility, and emotive nuance, as well as key themes: the remembrance (*dhikr*) of the beloved, intoxication (*sukr*), love-madness, perpetual wandering, the secret (*sirr*) between lover and beloved, the stations (*maqamat*) of the beloved's journey away from the lover (these resonate strongly with the stations of the Arabian pilgrimages), the constantly changing states of the beloved (*ahwal*), and the meditation on the ruins of the abandoned campsite of the beloved, ruins that are signs both of her presence and her absence.

By the end of the first century of Islam, the begin-

nings of a new mode of spirituality were manifesting themselves around the figure of Hasan of Basra (died 728) who was a founder of both Islamic theology and Islamic ascetic piety. Hasan's probing of the key Quranic tensions between divine predestination and human responsibility, the all-one deity, and the plurality of its attributes led to a new movement of rational theological inquiry known as *ilm al-kalam* (scholastic theology; literally the science of discussion or debate). At the same time, Hasan's ascetic piety became a symbol of resistance to the new imperial culture. While grounding itself in the Quran and *sharia*, this ascetic piety began to develop a set of free devotions (not required by Quranic rule) forms of asceticism, fasting, meditations, and spiritual pedagogy.

◆ THE BIRTH OF SUFISM

Quranic spirituality, precisely because it is embodied in the performance of the Quran and in the signs and symbols of all aspects of the world, never stressed asceticism, and indeed, for some early thinkers, was not compatible with asceticism, particularly with the celibate model of asceticism that is important to some human interpretations of Christianity. While Hasan represented the movement toward integrating ascetic piety into Islamic spirituality, it was the next generation that succeeded in articulating the limits of ascetic piety, its relation to Quranic spirituality, and its relation to key theological issues of divine predetermination and affirmation of divine unity.

The tension between world-affirmation and world-transcendence is dramatized vividly in the life and sayings of Rabia al-Adawiyya (died 801), a freed slave from Basra. Rabia became the touchstone for a developing set of values that were to be the ethical ground of Sufism: *tawhid* (the affirmation of the divine unity, interpreted by her as a relational absolute in which only the divine beloved is a matter of concern or even consciousness); *tawakkul* (trust-in-God, interpreted as a refusal of all need for creature goods); and *rida* (acceptance; a relentlessly active acceptance of divine will to the point of refusing to ask the deity for anything other than for its will to be done). These virtues were consolidated in Rabia's radical affirmation of sincerity (*sidq*). In one story she is portrayed as running down the path with water in one hand, a lighted torch in the other. When asked why, she stated that she would be willing to douse the fires of hell and burn paradise, so that no one would ever love the beloved for any other reason than sincere love, without fear of punishment or desire for reward.

Rabia's focus on divine unity as something performed in one's life, not just verbally affirmed, clarified the limits of asceticism. When asked if she hated Satan

and loved Muhammad, Rabia said that she had room only for one concern, love of the divine beloved. Similarly, when an ascetic began showing his contempt for the world, Rabia answered dryly that anyone who spent so much time rejecting something must be very attached to it indeed; one whose only concern was love of the one beloved had no room for distractions such as rejecting the world.

Complementing Rabia's graphic affirmation of divine unity as a way of life was the rigorous and psy-



Mystical Journey, c. 1650. A Safavid painting depicting the spiritual quest.



Musicians performing at Salim Chishti's tomb.

chologically relentless critique of the human ego-self (*nafs*) offered by mystics such as Muhasibi (died 857). Muhasibi spent a lifetime examining the subtleties, seductions, and self-delusions of human pride. He divided pride into dozens of subcategories such as *riya* (the desire to make a show of oneself), and detailed the various manifestations of each category (*riya* in the world of affairs, religion, and Sufism) with an implacable moral critique.

To Jafar al-Sadiq (died 765), the sixth Shia imam is attributed an extraordinary set of writings, from philosophy to Shia jurisprudence to alchemy. The Quranic commentary attributed to Jafar is one of the earliest specifically mystical or Sufi commentaries. In it, the prophetic visions of Muhammad and Moses are viewed as archetypes for the Sufi mystical experience of *fana*, or the extinction of the ego-self in union with the divine. Within a hundred years of the death of Jafar as-Sadiq, the movement known as "Sufism" was in full blossom. Sahl al-Tustari (died 896) composed a Quranic commentary grounded in the Light Verse of the Quran, but more explicitly based on the pre-eternal covenant verse in which Allah addresses the progeny of Adam prior to creation, and they affirm their allegiance. Tustari presents the essence of the Prophet

Muhammad as a column of light emanating from a pre-eternal "position of prayer." The notion of a pre-eternal position of prayer dramatizes the correlation of spirit and body. Even in the pre-created eternal realm, there are no disembodied spirits, but only a position of prayer, a human orientation and relationship in complete acceptance of and toward the source of being.

Out of the same circles came Junayd (died 810). Junayd's sayings and writings focus upon the trial or test (*bala*) that the Sufi must undergo to encounter reality, and the overpowering, even violent, nature of the manner in which such a person is seized, overwhelmed, and obliterated by the divine presence. Junayd's articulation of the concept of *fana* (extinction of the ego-self in union with the divine) became the centerpiece of Islamic mystical thought. Junayd and other early Sufis grounded this concept of mystical union in the famous divine saying (*hadith qudsi*): "When my servant draws near to me through obligatory and free devotions . . . I become the hearing with which he hears, the seeing with which he sees, the hands with which he touches, the feet with which he walks, and the tongue with which he speaks."

As is the case with many early Sufis, we only know the sayings of the most famous mystic from the

Khurasan region of Iran, Bayezid Bistami (died circa 875), through the oral traditions of his sayings. Bistami varies radically according to the collector of the sayings. In some accounts he is a radical ascetic and *sharia* absolutist who is unable to eat any food even touched by the possibility that it may not be ritually pure, both in being free of all Quranically condemned substances and purchased with money that was properly obtained. In other portraits, he is willing to publicly break the laws of ritual purity as a way of calling blame upon himself, in order to keep himself and his followers from falling into the trap of venerating his own person rather than the one deity. The two portraits are really complementary. In neither case does Bistami reject the Quranic polarity of sacred/prohibited (*haram*) and permitted (*halal*). Rather, he pushes it to its extreme, tapping into its energy as a channel for the sacred and grounding his famous mystical utterances (*shatahat*) within that channel.

Hallaj was another master of *shatahat*, including the famous *ana al-haqq* (I am the truth). This statement was interpreted by Hallaj's defenders in the same way that Bistami's famous saying, "Glory be to me" (*subhani*) was interpreted by his defenders as the divine voice speaking through the mystic whose ego-self had become annihilated in his love of the divine beloved. Hallaj pushed Sufi paradoxes to the extreme and, more dangerously, insisted upon confronting society with them in the most dramatic way possible. He was executed in Baghdad in 922. The real reasons for his execution are complex. Ironically, many of the Sufi paradoxes practiced and believed by Hallaj were repeated by other Sufis with scant political repercussions.

One of Hallaj's surviving works, the *Tawasin*, includes an unforgettable interpretation of Iblis, the closest spirit-being next to God who refused the divine command to prostrate himself before the newly created Adam (Quran 2:30-33; 38:71-75). He thus was expelled from heaven for disobedience and became the cursed Satan. In the *Tawasin*, Iblis defends himself by saying that he was an absolute monotheist and that he could never bow before any other being than the one deity, even at the divine command. Drawing upon the poetic tradition, he presents himself as the totally loyal beloved who will not abandon his loyalty (in his case, his monotheism) even at the cost of love-madness, deformation, torment, and, worst of all, eternal separation from the beloved. Drawing upon sophisticated theological disputes over human free will and divine predetermination, he states that God had eternally known that Iblis was an absolute monotheist and would never bow before an "other-than-God" and thus eternally prewilled Iblis's self-sacrificing disobedience to the command. Iblis also suggests a dynamic configu-

ration of opposites in which farness and nearness from the beloved become the same to one totally consumed by love for the beloved.

◆ THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SYNOPTIC MYSTICAL THOUGHT IN ISLAM

Islamic spirituality entered a fundamental new phase with the emergence of the Sufi writer and thinker, Abu Nasr al-Sarraj (died 988), and his masterwork *Book of the Flashes*. By Sarraj's time, tensions were felt within Sufism (between various followers of Tustari and the followers of Bistami) and between the Sufis and other Muslim intellectuals. This was only natural given the explosive growth and power of the Sufi movement in the preceding two-hundred years. It was Sarraj who began the systematic explication of Sufism as a way of life, grounded in the Quran and in the *sharia*. He placed the paradoxes and ecstatic utterances of the Sufis into context, and harmonized the teachings of the Baghdad and Khurasan schools. Sarraj articulated the various virtues of earlier mystics like Rabia and Muhasibi (trust-in-God or *tawakkul*, active acceptance or *rida*, critical self-examination or *war*) into a rigorous and profound dialectical movement of "stages" (*maqamat*) along the Sufi path and ephemeral "states" (*ahwal*)—from bliss to awe to terror—that could come upon the Sufi without warning or will.

Abu Talib al-Makki (died 996) in his *Food for the Hearts* (*Qut al-Qulub*) combined the moral and psychological rigor of Muhasibi with the intellectual sweep of Sarraj to demonstrate the essential grounding and the mutual interrelation of Sufism and *sharia*. The more famous Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (died 1111) used Makki's *Food for the Hearts* as the basis of his own work, the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*. What original insights Ghazali may have added to Makki's work cannot be ascertained until the massive and much neglected work of Makki is given more thorough attention.

A third major Sufi writer, Sulami (died 1021), preserved the great early Sufi interpretations, including those of Tustari and Jafar mentioned above. His *Ranks of the Friends of God* portrays the early Sufi "friends of God" in a style that uses the *hadith isnad* (chain of authorities) for each saying, and which continually reinforces the grounding of Sufism in *sharia*. By using the *isnad* to support the sayings of the Sufis, and by beginning each chapter with a formal *hadith* of the Prophet, with full *isnad*, Sulami also aligns Sufism with the chain of authorities and the formal passing on of tradition whose spiritual aspect has often been neglected.

The culmination of early Sufism is found in the work of Qushayri (died 1074). In addition to a Quranic com-

mentary, Qushayri composed a *risala* (treatise in letter form) that took the earlier writings of Sarraj, Makki, and Sulami to a new level of literary and philosophical intricacy. In the first section, Qushayri presents the lives of the "friends of God," and in the final section, he presents the principles of Sufism. In a short central section, Qushayri treats twenty-seven key Sufi concepts with a supple and brilliant analysis. Each concept is shown in its range of possible meanings and in both negative and positive lights. The section is perhaps the most lucid introduction to Sufi thought ever written, moving from vivid and sometimes comic anecdotes to sudden spiritual exhortations. The section also brings to a new level the Sufi synthesis of the intricate poetic sensibility and symbolic cosmos (remembrance of the beloved, love-madness, perishing in love for the beloved, intoxication, effacement, lighting flashes of promise and absence) with the mystical experience of passing away. With Qushayri, Sufism achieved a fully

self-conscious and integrated world of thought and discourse, and was ready to burst forth in the masterworks of the golden age of Sufi writings.

Michael A. Sells

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