

Ibn 'Ata' Allah,
Muslim Sufi Saint
and Gift of Heaven

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By

Abu Bakr Sirajuddin Cook

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PREFACE

A contemporary Sufi Shaykh of the Burhaniyya Dasuqiyya Shashiliyya Sufi Order, Murshid F. A. Ali ElSenossi, stated “You should think, and what you think you should say, and what you say you should do, and what you do should bring benefit to you and all of creation.”

In this statement there are two keys for any engagement with Sufism. The first key, a point on which the practitioners of Sufism agree, is that it is a path of practice (*amal*), that which we do. Allah states that “every day He manifests Himself in yet another [wondrous] way” (55: 29) and, as all of creations are from Allah, we too are constantly manifested in yet another way, preventing us from becoming stale, stagnant, and rigid. As a result of this, each individual has the responsibility to maintain an awareness of their actions. What should we do with our actions? The answer given is “bring benefit.” It can be seen that there are benefits that relate to the individual and there are benefits that relate to the creation. The benefits that relate to the individual, in accordance with the foundational tenet of Islam, involve the degree to which each individual affirms God’s Oneness (*tawhid*). The benefits that relate to all of creation, involve the degree to which each individual acts in accordance with the rights due to everything within creation. The second key, which is intimately connected to the first, is the ability to think, for “you should think.” This knowledge, if it is to “bring benefit,” can be related to God’s Oneness, on the one hand, and the rights of creation, on the other.

In creating a distinction between God’s Oneness and all multiplicity in creation it might seem that there is some sort of implied separation. While creation cannot be equated with its Creator, avoiding all accusations of pantheism, there is a subtle awareness required for understanding that the individual’s engagement with all of creation, and the practices that involve enacting their rights, is reliant on the individual’s practical affirmation of God’s Oneness. This is apparent in the following Hadith Qudsi from *Sahih Bukhari*:

Allah will say on the Day of Judgment, “Son of Adam, I was sick but you did not visit Me.”

“My Lord, How could I visit You when You are the Lord of the Worlds?”

“Did you not know that one of My servants was sick and you didn't visit him? If you had visited him you would have found Me there.”

Then Allah will say, “Son of Adam, I needed food but you did not feed Me.”

“My Lord, How could I feed You when You are the Lord of the Worlds?”

“Did you not know that one of My servants was hungry but you did not feed him? If you had fed him you would have found its reward with Me.”

“Son of Adam, I was thirsty, but you did not give Me something to drink.”

“My Lord, How could I give a drink when You are the Lord of the Worlds?”

“Did you not know that one of My servants was thirsty but you did not give him a drink? If you had given him a drink, you would have found its reward with Me.”

In this Hadith Qudsi there is an indication to the connection between the knowledge of God's Oneness and the knowledge of the rights of creation and how these can be connected through the individual's practice. There is an indication to this in the ternary of thinking, saying, and doing within the saying of Shaykh ElSenossi, wherein there is a consistency across each with the aim of bringing about unity within the individual.

The two keys, that of beneficial practice and beneficial thinking, relate to the overall project of the work in hand as well as pointing to that which any book on Sufism cannot give its reader. Beneficial thinking requires knowledge and it is hoped that this work can bring about such knowledge within its readers for their engagement with Sufism. In doing so, the purpose of this book can be seen to be twofold. On the one hand, particularly within academic circles, there remains significant discussion around where to locate Sufism and what its context is. On the other hand, which is of relevance for all who are interested in Sufism, there is the difficulty of affirming Unity in a world of multiplicity. This twofold purpose is covered explicitly within the parts of this work and is an aspect of what a book such as this one can offer to its readers. What the reader does with their knowledge relates to their practice and, given that “every day He manifests Himself in yet another [wondrous] way” (55: 29), there is the responsibility of the individual to continuously renew and maintain their practice, something that merely reading cannot do.

The division of this work is both foreign to the context of Sufism and purposeful. It is foreign in that the chapters are divided according to Western philosophy and are not categories that are inherent to an Islamic setting. They are certainly not categories into which Ibn 'Ata' Allah divides his works. At the same time, the division of chapters is to promote receptivity for an audience for whom the worldview of Sufism is entirely foreign. By couching the unfamiliar within a familiar framework it is hoped that this will provide a stable foundation for understanding this worldview without departing from its context or content. This is an understanding that is deepened through practice.

Wa ma taufi'iq illa billah

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This work represents part of a personal journey, both inner and outer, that has been rife with trials and successes. While the trials have been my own, the successes that have come are due in no small part to those who have travelled with me. While there are too many to acknowledge individually, I am grateful for their company along this path.

Without the tireless effort of Professor Wayne Hudson and Dr Leila Toiviainen this work would not be what it is. The support, guidance, and encouragement that you have both given cannot be repaid. You both have a gift for bringing the best out in my work and I am indebted to you both for this.

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The University of Tasmania Document Delivery team must also be recognised. Without your tireless efforts to track down those works that were otherwise out of my reach, your patience in answering my questions, and your smiles when loading a pile of books and papers into my arms, this work would be scantily recognisable. May your continuing efforts be the hidden secret behind so many scholarly successes.

To all my brothers and sisters, especially Shaykh Ali ElSenossi, Muqaddam Ahmad Salih McCauley (*rahmat Allahu 'alaih*), and Muqaddam Dawud Abu Junayd Gos, for your unending support, encouragement, and guidance. Without your constant illuminations, I would be left in the dark. Thank you for allowing me to be amongst your companions, acting as lampposts along my journey.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The problem of Sufism's relation to Islam has a long history both within the works of Muslim scholars throughout the history of Islam and within the works of modern scholars who have attempted to survey the field. Sufism's relation to Islam has often evoked two diametrically opposed positions, on the one hand of those who posit Sufism as something foreign to and outside of Islam and, on the other hand, those who posit that Sufism is an integral aspect of Islam.

This book problematises generic understandings of "Sufism" and exemplifies a more contextual approach through an in depth study of a 13th century Sufi. It is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the problems of the categorisation of Sufism. The second part is a study of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's oeuvre in order to evaluate a) the interrelations between his works and b) what, if any, are the relations to and affirmations of an Islamic paradigm. This work can be situated amongst emerging studies which are acknowledging the limited and limiting approaches that have tended to impose alien frameworks on works that are deemed foreign, both linguistically and culturally.

Part two of this work has a tiered structure. Each chapter, while focusing on one aspect of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's work, acts as the basis for each successive chapter. The chapters are arranged to facilitate a highlighting of the interconnections within Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works between domains. This part, as explained later, will utilise the concept of provision (*rizq*) as an entry point to Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works. The goal is to show that the interconnections between Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works are not limited to certain topics.

Part two opens with a chapter introducing Ibn 'Ata' Allah and his works. This chapter places Ibn 'Ata' Allah within his historical context, through an overview of his life, while also showing his historical and transhistorical importance. This chapter also looks at some of the issues that arise within Sufi studies, such as Qur'anic hermeneutics and the

science of Prophethood, and determines how these could be dealt with in the study that follows.

The fourth chapter examines Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s use of the Oneness of God (*tawhid*) as a metaphysical principle. Through examining his analysis of the Islamic affirmation of Oneness (*kalimah tawhid*) “there is no god but Allah” (*la ilaha illa’llah*) it will be shown that, for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *tawhid* is the only viable and sound basis for metaphysics. It will be seen, in turn, that the problem of *rizq* is a direct result of this metaphysical scheme. Thus, the domain of metaphysics is seen to be the source of the problem of *rizq*. It will be shown that the metaphysical consistency throughout his works is applied in varying ways when developing, analysing, and solving the problem of *rizq*.

The fifth chapter examines the ontological implications of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s metaphysics and how, within this domain, the problem of *rizq* takes prominence. As provision occurs within the ontological domain, this domain is seen to be the site of the problem of *rizq*. One of the themes explored, which arises as a consequence of his metaphysics, is ontological poverty (*faqr*). If Allah is the principle of existence then everything other than Allah, being contingently existent, has ontological dependence. This raises the issue of an evident relation between ontological poverty (*faqr*) and selfish calculation (*tadbir*). It will be shown that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s direction against acting according to one’s selfish desires is, in some ways, directing against acting contrary to *tawhid*.

The sixth chapter examines the epistemological impact of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s metaphysics and ontology. The move towards the realisation of creation’s ontological poverty will be shown to be achieved through an ever increasing awareness of Divine Unity within/underpinning multiplicity. The epistemological domain is the location of the solution to the problem of *rizq*. Here it will be seen that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s epistemology is an extension of his metaphysics and ontology.

The seventh chapter delves into the eschatological issues that, within Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works, can be seen to result from the problem of *rizq*. From an eschatological perspective, the problem of *rizq* is both widened and problematised. It is widened in that the problem of *rizq* is seen to be an aspect of the overarching soteriological concern for both this world and the next. The problem of *rizq* is, however, problematised in that, being a concern of gaining provision for the next world, the provision of this world is forgone in preference for the next. This is problematic in as far as

it is seen to be antithetical to the issues detailed in the preceding chapters. Irrespective of the domain that one is concerned with, the problem of *rizq* can be seen to have a pedagogical function, providing impetus for the individual in pursuing both this world and the next.

The eighth chapter examines the moral implications of embodying the metaphysics of *tawhid* and the implications this has for the problem of *rizq*. It will be shown that through the perfection of ethical behaviour (*adab*), as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah encourages, the metaphysics of *tawhid* becomes embodied. Here it will be seen that it is within the ethical domain that the solution to the problem of *rizq* is enacted.

The ninth chapter focuses on the individual’s soteriological development through overcoming the problem of *rizq* and embodying the metaphysics of *tawhid*. While his soteriological semiotics is alluded to throughout this work, due to its centrality, its analysis is held over until this chapter. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, an understanding of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s worldview is indispensable for understanding his views on soteriology. Secondly, it is here that the importance of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s soteriological semiotics for resolving the problem of *rizq* becomes apparent.

The tenth chapter takes a differing approach to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s dependence on an Islamic paradigm. This chapter examines the well known, though little commented on, relationship between Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah and Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn Taymiyya is renowned for, amongst other things, his criticisms of what he saw as heterodox practices of many Sufis. The degree to which Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah adhered to an Islamic paradigm can be examined through his responses to these criticisms.

Throughout this analysis of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s oeuvre his use of the Qur’an and the Hadith, as the foundational texts of Islam, is foregrounded. There are instances, however, where verses of the Qur’an and Hadith have been included because they are a) alluded to in a manner familiar to those familiar with these sources or b) illustrate his consistency with these sources when they are not mentioned. This has been done in order to show the degree to which Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, and those thinkers like him, depends on an inherently Islamic context for understanding their works.

The Transmission of Sufism

The transmission of Sufism into Europe has a long history. It began in earnest in the Middle Ages with the translation of Islamic texts into Latin

and has continued since then with varying degrees of intensity. The colonialisation of Muslim countries that occurred from the 17th century onward saw a renewed interest in attempts to understand a doctrine that appears both foreign and familiar. Orientalists attempted to chart the major thinkers and foregrounded what they saw as the major texts. Subsequently, an extensive scholarly literature emerged in several European languages.

Nonetheless, this literature is not without its biases, which has shifted over time. The medieval translations were almost exclusively works of science or philosophy. Aside from issues of translation, which were often very problematic with a marked tendency to Latinise Semitic expressions, these works were often divorced from their Islamic context. The problem was arguably exacerbated by European colonialism with its sense of superiority. In the case of Sufism, Orientalists identified bodies of material they valorised as important but then often highlighted the similarities in content and sophistication of certain aspects of Islamic thought with the European intellectual heritage. This was often done at the expense of the inherently Islamic nature and context of the works concerned. Attention to sources sometimes made Sufism a patchwork of Greek, Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian philosophy, only loosely connected with the Qur'an. While this, to some degree, resulted from some Islamic scholars of Sufism Islamicising non-Islamic materials and developing readings of Sufism based on their own specific interpretations of what is and is not Islam, it does not account for the degree to which some Sufi works have been divorced from an Islamic context. Clearly "Sufism" needs to be conceptualised in clearer and more critical terms and without reference to essentialist conceptions of either Greek philosophy (which was also very diverse and historically variable) or narrow reductionist views of Islam.

Limitations

A prominent issue that frequently arises within works on Sufism is an insufficient contextualisation of the materials. This can result in studies that deny the possibility of Sufism being indigenous to Islamic paradigms as well as studies that deny the possibility of influences external to Islam on particular Sufi literature or practices. As a result, there is some confusion about what the terms "Sufi" and "Sufism" cover. In following the twofold aim, this work uses a strategy that consists of two movements. Firstly, in order to determine whether or not Sufism is indigenous to Islam, it assumes that there is an integral relation between Sufism and an Islamic paradigm. Secondly, in order to test this assumption, an analysis of the

works of one individual who is regarded as an important Sufi thinker is undertaken to determine if there are correlations or disjunctions between their work and an Islamic paradigm. For this study, the works of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah have been chosen. In breaking down Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s worldview into various domains, the strategy has been to examine his views and then to determine how consistent they are with the foundational texts of Islam.

Focusing on the works of one thinker opens this work to certain limitations. While this has the benefit of limiting the scope of the work, it also limits the any generalisations that may be made within the fields of Islamic or Sufi studies. As a result, caution must be exercised when presenting evidence for Sufism’s relation to Islamic paradigms. Care is also needed in handling the issue of Islamic orthodoxy. It is important both to avoid reading in a single interpretation of what Islam is and not to negate the plurality that exists within any tradition.¹ Here views will be said to be compatible with Islamic paradigms when there is evidence that can be read to support them within the Qur’an or the Hadith. It should also be noted that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s work is presented for the Western educated reader and is organised in terms of categories drawn from the Western philosophical tradition, categories which were not, of course, deployed by Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah himself. This is a standard practice in the field, but it means that nuances are called for. In some cases the Arabic meaning is difficult to convey in Western terms.

Given the aim of this work of examining the relation of Sufism to Islam, this work is open to a criticism of the division of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s worldview in accordance with categories generally associated with what may be called the Western philosophical tradition. While it would be a stretch to state that “Arabic literature is boring unless it bears a family resemblance to European literature,”² it is acknowledged that there is some necessity for what Kilito terms “cultural translation.” It is hoped that in the current study it may be regarded as “a praiseworthy pedagogical operation” in as far as “it is based on a sense of openness and respect for the Other and [one’s] cultural frame of reference.”³ As Kilito states,⁴

¹ For a tradition that bases itself on the affirmation of the Onenes of God (*tawhid*), the idea of a plurality of interpretations is not as controversial as it might seem, as is evinced by the four schools of Sunni law.

² Abdelfattah Kilito, *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, trans. Wail S. Hassan (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 15.

³ Ibid, 10.

⁴ Ibid.

cultural translation “which is widely followed by scholars” is not necessarily innocent, for it can often obscure that which is “translated” both intentionally and unintentionally. It is for this reason that it is openly acknowledged that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah did not utilise categories such as metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, etc., and that the division of his worldview, as presented in his existent works, into these categories is, while useful for this study, somewhat arbitrary. If we take, as an example, soteriology as a category, then two comments can be made highlighting the manner in which cultural translation can be deemed a hindrance. Firstly, as will become apparent from the study below, it would be correct to state that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s oeuvre does not have a metaphysics or an ontology or an epistemology, as each of his works are focused solely on soteriological matters. If elements of these other categories are to be found, as has been suggested in each chapter, then they exist in so far as they serve Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s soteriological concerns. Secondly, it could also be stated that, strictly speaking, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah does not have a soteriology. Given the etymology and philological development of “soteriology” and its relationship to salvation, saviour, and, by extension, redemption from sin, then “soteriology” can be seen to have inherently Christian underpinnings. If this is accepted as the case, then it would be an imposition on Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s worldview to state that each of his works are focused solely on soteriological matters. With these concerns in mind, the categories upon which each chapter is based are utilised in as far as they provide a useful means for highlighting certain aspects of the works discussed with a desire to show “openness and respect for the Other and [one’s] cultural frame of reference.”⁵

Problematizing “Sufism”

Sufism as a category of academic study has a rich history. Some of the earliest studies on Sufism can be found in the works of Barthélemy d’Herbelot de Molainville (1625-1695), a French Orientalist, François Bernier (1625-1688), a French physician and traveller, and François Pétis de la Croix (1653-1713), a French Orientalist and diplomat. As early as the Seventeenth century, in the works of these individuals, there emerged two trends that continue to impact the field of Sufi studies: academic/scholarly studies, which analysed primary texts, and anthropological studies, which documented particular expressions of Sufism. In examining a range of these early studies it has been said that they are marked by:

⁵ Ibid.

*A discipline that started as a first and foremost philological, text-centred exercise gradually evolved into a subdivision of “cross-religious” studies pursued by curious amateurs (diplomats, travellers, colonial officials), Biblicists, and area studies specialists, or “Orientalists.”*⁶

The legacy of these early studies is twofold.

Firstly, there is the legacy for works that are primarily academic. Often coming from Biblicists and Orientalists, “authors of such works were reluctant to consider mystical propensities to be intrinsic to the Islamic religion.”⁷ Intentionally or not, these authors often “viewed Islam as inferior to Christianity,” the result of which was a prevailing view that Islam was “incapable of producing the vaulted spirituality and sophisticated theology they observed in Sufi texts.”⁸ Thus, despite any conclusive evidence to support it, Sufism was seen as being extrinsic to Islam. The severity of this can be seen in the fact that all major histories of Islam published in Europe between 1850 and 1890 “tended to draw a sharp distinction between Sufism and mainstream Islam.”⁹ Despite no such sharp distinction being apparent within the anthropological literature of the time, there are numerous examples that attempt to show Sufism’s alleged Hindu, neo-Platonic, Christian, or other origin, a trend that continues within modern academic literature.

Secondly, there is the legacy of works that are primarily anthropological. The “empirical” data of these early anthropological studies are often mired in the colonialist perspectives of the observers. This literature has been seen to be predominantly produced by “colonial administrators who presided over the conquest and ‘pacification’ of indigenous Muslim populations” and, as such,

*the data that its authors perceived to be ‘authentic’ and ‘objective’ is, in fact, permeated by underlying colonial and imperial assumptions and stereotypes about the Muslim societies in question.*¹⁰

⁶ Alexander D. Knysh. “Historiography of Sufi Studies in the West,” in *A Companion to the History of the Middle East*, ed. Youssef M. Choueiri (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 107.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁰ Alexander D. Knysh, “Sufism as an Explanatory Paradigm: The Issue of Motivations of Sufi Resistance Movements in Western and Russian Scholarship,” *Die Welt des Islams* 42 (2002): 140.

This inherent bias has been documented in works produced by the French and British,¹¹ the Russians,¹² and the Dutch,¹³ though without exhausting such instances.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries scholars tested the views of their predecessors. A primary concern for “all these scholars ... [was] to identify the place of Sufi teachings, literature, and practices vis-à-vis ‘orthodox’ Islam.”¹⁴ Indicative of the scholarship of this era is the work of Ignaz Goldziher (1850 - 1921) who presented the view that “Sufi exegetes embraced the allegorical method of Qur’an interpretation, which set them apart from the ‘mainstream’ Sunni commentators who focused on the historical, legal and philological aspects of the Muslim scripture.”¹⁵ While views such as this placed Sufism within an Islamic paradigm, it did so at the expense of placing it in opposition to Islamic thinkers and works that were deemed “mainstream,” “popular,” and, ultimately, “orthodox.” In accounting for a supposed “otherness” within Sufi teachings, literature, and practices, many scholars continued to assert foreign sources and influences. Despite a lack of any conclusive evidence for this view, it can be seen to be a result of a late nineteenth century shift in the academic study of religion where “the project of developing a scientific study of religion was framed in a quest of origins.”¹⁶

The early twentieth century witnessed a rapid expansion in the number of scholars and works specialising in Sufi studies. However, these often continued the biases of their predecessors, as it has been noted “by building on the foundations established by a handful of nineteenth-century pioneers, their twentieth-century successors generated a considerable body of academic literature.”¹⁷ The anthropological approach continued to frame its observations in accordance with questionable agendas as “the field data assembled by colonial administrators-cum-scholars was definitely shaped by their colonial and imperial presuppositions and anxieties.”¹⁸

¹¹ Knysh, “Sufism as an Explanatory Paradigm”; Knysh, “Historiography of Sufi Studies.”

¹² Knysh, “Sufism as an Explanatory Paradigm”.

¹³ Martin van Bruinessen, “Studies of Sufism and Sufi Orders in Indonesia,” *Die Welt des Islams* 38 (1998).

¹⁴ Knysh, “Historiography of Sufi Studies,” 112.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁶ Marcia Hermansen. “The Academic Study of Sufism in American Universities,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Studies* 24 (2007): 29.

¹⁷ Knysh, “Historiography of Sufi Studies,” 118.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

During this period, within academic approaches to Sufis studies “there emerged two major approaches to Sufism in western scholarship.”¹⁹ Without necessarily negating each other, a “historicist” approach emerged, which “emphasised the concrete circumstances of Sufism’s evolution across time and space,” as well as a “trans-historical” approach, which viewed the contents of Sufism as consistently emphasising “the eternal human aspiration to a higher reality and to a unitive/monistic vision of the world.”²⁰ As the study of the trans-historical aspect of Sufism attracted “researchers who were similarly committed to a religious vocation,” some critics of the literature of this era have noticed “a ‘Christianisation’ of some aspects of Sufi thought.”²¹ Nevertheless, the works produced during this period of scholarship “laid solid textual and factual foundations for the study of Sufism in western academia.”²²

The second half of the twentieth century saw a shift in focus within religious studies. The shift being referred to here is largely due to the critique of Orientalism and the rise of post-Orientalist and postcolonial approaches to the academic study of the world’s religions.²³ With regard to the field of Sufi studies

*one can say that Sufi studies have successfully survived the critique of western “Orientalism” launched in the 1960s and 1970s by Abdul Latif Tibawi and Edward Said, who indicted its representatives for their “complicity” with the western colonial project and the resultant “deliberate distortion” of Islam’s image in the west.*²⁴

However, unpacking a definition of having “successfully survived” this critique can be taken to mean that very little has changed, for “overall we find surprisingly little ‘soul-searching’ among the western ‘Sufiologists’

¹⁹ Ibid., 118.

²⁰ Ibid., 112.

²¹ Hermansen, “The Academic Study of Sufism,” 30.

²² Knysh, “Historiography of Sufi Studies,” 121.

²³ It should be recognised that to delve into the wealth of postcolonial literature would take this work too far afield. Varying responses abound regarding the benefits and limitations of this work. Without detailing them and without siding with either camp, it is interesting to acknowledge that “it has become commonplace within postcolonial studies to lament the colonizing propensities of postcolonial studies,” Donald R. Wehrs, “Satre’s Legacy in Postcolonial Theory; or, Who’s Afraid of Non-Western Historiography and Cultural Studies,” *New Literary History* 34 (2004): 761.

²⁴ Knysh, “Historiography of Sufi Studies,” 121.

of the last decades of the twentieth century.”²⁵ Examples of this can be seen in the two articles that specifically deal with Sufi materials within *Rethinking Islamic Studies*,²⁶ both of which deal specifically with postcolonialist approaches to the position of hagiographical materials within academic discourse without touching on the contextualisation of Sufism and the potential impact that this may have for scholarly studies.

The problem of contextualising Sufism can be seen to arise from two distinct, though interrelated, areas of scholarship. Firstly, there is a general problem of cultural translation that arises within comparative philosophy, the philosophy of religion, and any form of cross-cultural hermeneutics. It is recognised that “comparative philosophy often imports hermeneutical and philosophical methods to the study of non-Western texts that succeed in distorting or simply missing the significance of those texts ... in the context of their home cultures”²⁷ such that there is a “dramatic distortion of alien traditions through the imposition of hermeneutic and doxographic frameworks ... entirely foreign to the traditions themselves.”²⁸ This distortion becomes increasingly dramatic when it is acknowledge that “many early Western studies of religion carried with them European ideas and presuppositions of what religion was or ought to be.”²⁹ This scholarly imperialism raises concerns that “asymmetrical translations and transcreations of non-Western texts displace the indigenous understanding by reframing and reencoding the signs precisely within a Euro-centred imaging of the world whose cognitive claims are derived from the historical experiences of European (modernist) cultures.”³⁰ These are issues that are being examined in relation to several of the world’s traditions, including, though not limited to Indian Philosophies,³¹ Judaism,³² and Islam.³³ In terms of the study provided here, it is intended

²⁵ Ibid., 121.

²⁶ Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin, eds., *Rethinking Islamic Studies* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2010).

²⁷ Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 152.

²⁸ Ibid., 169.

²⁹ Purushottama Bilimoria, “What is the ‘Subaltern’ of the Philosophy of Religion?,” in *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew B. Irvine (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 10 – 11.

³⁰ Ibid., 15.

³¹ See Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew B. Irvine, eds., *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009).

³² See Peter Schafer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

³³ See Ernst and Martin, *Rethinking Islamic Studies*.

that, by attempting to explore the internal logic of the texts, insight can be made by judging the materials according to their own claims.

The second area where the problem of contextualisation arises is within Sufi studies. This can be seen as being an example of the problematic nature of a practical implication of cross-cultural translation. As is discussed in the next chapter, the study of Sufism suffers from methods of categorisation that impose upon it ill fitting constraints that are, at times, at conflict with the claims and internal logic of the materials. One example, explored further below, is that of categorising Sufism as a form of mysticism. While this type of categorisation does give it “a family resemblance to European literature,”³⁴ it does so at the expense of limiting, to the point of negating, the paradigm which “Sufi” works claim as the underpinning framework.

³⁴ Kilito, *Thou Shalt Not Speak*, 15.

CHAPTER TWO

PROBLEMATISING SUFISM

This chapter examines some of the prominent methods of defining Sufism and highlights the problems inherent within these definitions. It also considers some of the prominent biases within the literature on Sufism.

Approaches to the Term “Sufism”

It has been said that “today Sufism is a name without a reality, but formerly it was a reality without a name.”¹ It could be said, with regard to contemporary approaches to Sufism, both popular and scholarly, that “Sufism” is merely a name, an umbrella term so broad that its content, or reality, remains an unresolved dispute. Without attempting to resolve this dispute it is possible to see that some of the prominent scholarly methods for categorising Sufism do not adequately contextualise the material under examination. In order to understand how Sufic materials are misrepresented it is first necessary to examine examples of how Sufism is miscontextualised.

“Sufism” as “Islamic Mysticism”

There is a large body of literature in English that treats “Sufism” and “Islamic mysticism” as synonyms. It is apparent in works ranging from Nicholson’s (1914) *The Mystics of Islam* to Knysh’s (2000) *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*, amongst others.² Without documenting the

¹ Abu’l Hassan Fushanja, quoted in Ali Bin Uthman Hujwiri, *The Kashf al Mahjub*, trans. Reynold J Nicholson (Delhi: Taj Company, 2002), 44.

² For instance, see Oluf Schönbeck, “Sufism in the USA: Creolisation, Hybridisation Syncretisation?” in *Sufism Today: Heritage and Tradition in the Global Community*, eds. Catharina Raudvere and Leif Stenberg (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 177, who acknowledges that the classification of Sufism as Islamic mysticism is “a tradition still used today,” somewhat uncritically. Even putting the popular literature aside, many nuanced and cautious scholarly works suffer the same uncritical classification of Sufism. For instance Ian Netton, *Sufi Ritual: The*

history of this conflation, it is possible that this view of Sufism arose from the idea that it was extraneous to Islam and that it is a syncretic mixture of previous doctrines. Whilst Arberry's work is dated, his assertion that "it is proposed for the sake of brevity to accept ... that the Sufis owed much or little of what they did or said to Christian, Jewish, Gnostic, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, Zoroastrian or Buddhist example"³ can be seen to persist in both scholarly and popular literature with statements like the Qur'an "provides little explicit treatment of mystical themes"⁴ and that "Islam took much longer to develop than has usually been supposed, and that in the slow process of development Christian materials were used to build the mystical side of the religion, the side which was to become Sufism."⁵ Yet, irrespective of how the term "Islamic mysticism" arose, it abounds in both popular and scholarly literature to such an extent that it is commonly accepted to answer "what is Sufism?" with "Islamic mysticism" without taking into account the problematic nature of the term "mysticism."

Parallel Universe (Surry: Curzon Press, 2000), 6, casually states that Sufism is "the mystical dimension of Islam." A further problem arises for Netton, *Sufi Ritual*, 7, in that rather than discussing what possible form of mysticism Sufism supposedly is, it is stated that it is a "truism that ... [God is] the desired Divine Focus of mystical union," a point raised and rejected in chapter 7 below. Cyrus A. Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics* (Columbia: The University of Carolina Press, 2011), *passim*, uses the words "Sufi" and "mystic" interchangeably without hesitation or discussion.

³ Arthur J. Arberry, *Sufism* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 11.

⁴ Richard J. A. McGregor, *Sancity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 2.

⁵ Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 9. This point is a matter of dispute for it has been seen that "chronologically, Sufism precedes Christian love mysticism," Louis Dupré, "Mysticism [First Edition]," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd Edition (Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2004), vol. 9, 6348. Nevertheless, the view that Sufism is a syncretic mix of preceding mysticisms is one that persists. For instance, in the existing literature it is common that an author will assert such conflicting view as Sufism is an "expression of mysticism indigenous to Islam" while at the same time the "Islamic mystical movement ... [is] the direct heir of Hellenistic asceticism," Winston E. Waugh, *Sufism: The Mystical Side of Islam* (United States of America: Xulon Press, 2005), 8 – 10. All of that overlooks the well documented observance that "with the exception of certain antinomian ('rule-breaking') groups, Sufis have generally followed the lifeways of Islamic custom," Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 8.

An understanding of the term “Islamic mysticism” depends on what is meant by “mysticism.” A main problem here is that, despite varying conceptions of mysticism, discussions detailing which kind of mysticism Sufism supposedly represents are lacking. There is a plethora of different kinds of mysticism, such that “in 1899 Dean W. R. Inge listed twenty-five definitions,”⁶ and a detailed discussion of each would take us too far afield.⁷ If “mysticism” is understood in its etymological sense relating to the mysteries inherent within each religion, then this issue would not arise, for there are numerous “Suffi” works that discuss unveiling and perceiving the unseen.⁸ The conflation of “mysticism” and “Sufism” may be the result of early studies which focused on unique cases, such as al-Hallaj and Bayazid Bistami,⁹ where ambiguous statements have caused controversy. Within the history of Islam such statements have led to accusations of apostasy due to the view that such individuals are claiming identity with God (*ittihad*) and has been a source of controversy levelled against the Sufis at various times throughout history,¹⁰ a point rejected by most given

⁶ Dupré, “Mysticism,” 6341.

⁷ An example of how this may be seen to be problematic is the comment that Sufism is “the major mystical tradition in Islam,” Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 1. While it does acknowledge disparate mystical approaches within Islam, there is no deliniation on a) what is meant by “mystical tradition” or “mysticism” or b) how Sufism differs from other, so called, “mystical traditions” within Islam.

⁸ It could even be suggested that the Greek qualifier *mustikos*, from which “mysticism” is derived, which is itself derived from the verb *muein*, meaning “to close the mouth or eyes” has some correlation with Sufi ideals in that its goals include seeing the world as the words of God, thus closing the human mouth, and perceiving the Divine unity (*tawhid*), thus closing the eyes to multiplicity, though this would require further elaboration than can be done here. That there is a clasificatory problem with the term “Islamic mysticism” has been acknowledged by, amongst others, Eric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*, trans. Roger Gaetani (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), 2, who states that “this expression does have a certain relevance if one understands it as the knowledge of the ‘mysteries’,” though is cautious not to take it any further because “in the Christian world, the term ‘mysticism’ has been extended to apply to cases which are imbued with individual subjectivism,” which he feels does not apply here.

⁹ Massignon has been accused, in his study of al-Hallaj, of utilising one example to make generalisations which are not representative of Sufis in general.

¹⁰ Reynold A. Nichololson and Georges C. Anawati, “Ittihad,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), vol. IV, 283.

the title Sufi.¹¹ This understanding of “mysticism” as a rejection of orthodoxy may be evident in other traditions though, despite claims of identity with God by some who have been labelled “Sufis,” “a careful study of even the strongest claims for mystical identity with God across the three [Jewish, Christian, and Islamic] traditions demonstrates that few mystics have consciously adopted an antinomian stance or broken with the common religious practices and institutional claims of their tradition.”¹² Irrespective of how it arose, this view of “mysticism” often involves a general ambivalence towards the revealed law such that it is said that “the mystic does not have respect for the laws of religion since he has another and more direct route to the truth, that of experience of God.”¹³ One method for supposedly clarifying any possible confusion between Sufism and other forms of mysticism is to add that “there were mystics in the Islamic world who could be characterized in this way, but the system of mysticism is just as systematic as any other form of intellectual enquiry.”¹⁴ While at first glance there appears to be a distinction between Sufism as Islamic mysticism and other forms of mysticism, there is no contrast between mysticism as a rejection of revealed law and the rigorous adherence to the revealed law (*shari’a*) stressed by numerous Sufis. The necessity of Sufis adhering to the revealed law (*shari’a*) is evident in statements including, though not limited to, al-Junayd’s saying that, regarding the Sufi path, “our knowledge must be controlled by conformity with the Qur’an and the Sunna”¹⁵ and Abu’l Hassan al-Shadhili’s saying that “if your mystical unveiling (*kashf*) diverges from the Qur’an and Sunna, hold fast to these two and take no notice of your unveiling; tell yourself that the Qur’an and Sunna is guaranteed by God Most High, which is not the case with the unveiling inspiration and mystical

¹¹ For example, Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Universal Tree and the Four Birds*, trans. Angela Jaffray (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2006), 53, rejects this accusation because “*ittihad* is that two essences become one,” which is, as Souad al-Hakim, *Ibid.*, 35, recognizes, “impossible according to Ibn ‘Arabi” for this would be counter to the metaphysics of *tawhid*.

¹² Bernard McGinn, “Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd Edition (Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2004), vol. 9, 6336.

¹³ Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 192.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁵ Muhammad A. H. Ansari, “The Doctrine of One Actor: Junayd’s View of Tawhid,” *The Muslim World* 73 (1983): 36.

perceptions.”¹⁶ Rather, positing Sufism as a sort of “systematic” form of mysticism misses a crucial aspect of the relationship between the Sufi and the law (*shari’a*).

With the large number of possible types of mysticism, the term itself can be considered problematic. The problem is that “no definition could be both meaningful and sufficiently comprehensive to include all experiences that, at some point or other, have been described as ‘mystical’.”¹⁷ As has been suggested “the process of mysticism’s reinvention in departicularized form needs itself to be particularized and seen in its own historical complexity.”¹⁸ This issue is compounded with a separate, though equally problematic, issue of the umbrella term “Sufism.”¹⁹ It has been recognised that “Sufism is not a simple and monolithic entity but a collection of rich and diverse traditions with numerous currents that sometimes compete with each other.”²⁰ Whilst it is problematic, it would be premature to discard the term “Sufism” given that its conflation with “mysticism” can be seen to miscontextualise the material it supposedly covers. This is especially so, given the difficulty in determining which, if any, form of mysticism Sufism conforms to. In this regard it is useful to ask “to what extent ... does the use of a term created in the modern Christian West distort the meaning of key figures, movements, and texts from the traditions of Judaism and Islam,”²¹ especially when it is used indiscriminately. As “the term has no real counterpart in other traditions, it is not surprising that the suitability of mysticism as a neutral, global term

¹⁶ Al-Sha’rani quoted by Pierre Lory, “Al-Shadhili,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), vol. IX, 171.

¹⁷ Dupré, “Mysticism,” 6341. Thus, descriptions of Sufism such as it being “a devotional and mystical current within the Islamic tradition” become significantly less meaningful than they first appear, Martin van Bruinessen and Julia D. Howell, *Sufism and the ‘Modern’ in Islam* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 3.

¹⁸ Leigh E. Schmidt, “The Making of Modern Mysticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religions* 71 (2003): 275.

¹⁹ This problem is not unique to the field of Sufi studies. Other religious studies are beginning to realise that, far from denying that forms of mysticism exist, the generic term “mysticism” has a normative affect on the materials that are subsumed within its borders, undermining the richness and diversity of those materials. For an overview and example of how this arises within studies on Jewish mysticism see Schafer, *Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 1 – 30.

²⁰ Ahmed Afzaal, “Sufism,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Nature* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), 1604.

²¹ McGinn, “Mystical Union,” 6334.

has been questioned by some scholars,²² yet a gap remains in the literature which discusses “Sufism” as “Islamic mysticism.” Rather than attempting to bridge this gap, this work attempts to highlight the need for a closer reading of primary materials in order to suggest the need for revisiting these broad, and sometimes limiting, categorisations.

A consequence of the problematic nature of the terms involved is that there is the potential to de-Islamize Sufism. By equating “Sufism” with “Islamic mysticism” it can force studies of Sufism to conform to the paradigms used to analyse other forms of mysticism. Others have suggested that there has been a “disproportionate emphasis of earlier Western translations and secondary studies” that, while “quite understandable in terms of pioneering European scholars’ natural interests,” has left a “legacy of that problematic initial definition of ‘Islamic mysticism’.”²³ This initial definition has reinforced “a potent combination of theological presuppositions and questionable historical paradigms that together have largely blocked a more adequate scholarly perception of Islamic ‘mysticism’.”²⁴ This lack of adequate scholarly understanding is partly from “an unwarranted tendency on the part of many Western scholars to underemphasise in Islamic intellectual thought those Arabic and Persian ideas ... as well as those original and particularly Sufic themes which are not essentially related to Greek philosophy or to [other] monotheistic traditions,” the result of this being an approach that “tends to reduce Sufic themes to an outgrowth of Greek philosophy or a mere dimension of Islamic religion.”²⁵ As a result of this “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.”²⁶ In support of

²² Peter Moore, “Mysticism [Further Considerations],” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd Edition (Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2004), vol. 9, 6355.

²³ James W. Morris, “Situating Islamic ‘Mysticism’: Between Written Traditions and Popular Spirituality,” in *Mystics of the Book*, ed. Robert A. Herrera (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1993), 308.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 308.

²⁵ Parviz Morewedge, “Sufism, Neoplatonism, and Zaehner’s Theory of Mysticism,” in *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (New York: Caravan Books, 1981), 223.

²⁶ Morris, “Situating Islamic ‘Mysticism’,” 310. An example of this is Helena Hallenberg, *Ibrahim al-Dasuqi (1255 – 1296): A Saint Invented* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2005). Here an overtly Christian notion of sainthood is utilised to evaluate the status of a Muslim considered by many to be a saint, the result of which is a study that misrepresents both Ibrahim al-Dasuqi and