Words of Ecstasy in Sufism

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Preface to the Second Edition

The opportunity to reissue Words of Ecstasy in Sufism, two decades after its initial publication, provides a moment for critical reflection on several key issues for Islamic studies. What is Sufism? What is its relation to the larger Muslim societies in which it arose? How are literary texts related to mystical experience? Why have some major Sufis (Hallaj, `Ayn al-Qudat) suffered persecution and death, while others who shared the same views were treated as pillars of society? How should one understand the outrageous pronouncements of these Sufis, particularly those that criticize conventional views of religion? What does the comparative dimension add to our understanding of these aspects of Sufism?

Scholarship has progressed considerably since the initial publication of this book, though many of the chief questions it addresses retain their force and resist easy answers. From the perspective of religious studies, one of the main advances has been the critique of Orientalist views of Islam as a static and unchanging essence that is both unrelated to history and foreign to Euro-American culture. In particular, the post-Orientalist approach to Sufism has made it possible to move beyond stereotyped concepts of Eastern mysticism to a broader appreciation of the ethical and social aspects of Sufism as a typical factor in the composition of most Islamicate societies. And while this book does not address the status of Sufism in the contemporary world, it is increasingly being realized how modern controversies over Sufism (whether coming from fundamentalist or secularist perspectives)
have an impact on the scholarly study of pre-modern Sufism. The understanding of the social and political locations of Sufism certainly is an important aspect of the study of the institutional aspect of Sufism, though it does not exhaust the meanings of the Sufi texts that have been so important for the transmission of spiritual discipline and for the creation of widespread literary traditions in Arabic, Persian, and other languages of Islamicate culture. The recent creation (2004) of the Islamic Mysticism Group as a constituent unit of the American Academy of Religion signals the recognition of Sufism and Islamic mysticism as a major subject in the study of religion, with a significant body of scholars in a variety of international locations pursuing its study in multiple languages. Without attempting to summarize all the work of scholarship in this field in recent years, I would nevertheless like to point out here some major recent landmarks of the study of Sufism that form significant advances in the understanding of some of the key figures and themes treated in this book, and to situate my subsequent scholarly writing in relation to the study of Sufism, with a view to suggesting future agendas for scholars.

Despite the increasing interest in the study of Sufism, it is surprising to see that the number of writings by important premodern Sufis that are available in print is still relatively small, so that a great deal remains in manuscript form. This means that original research on Sufism still has to include laborious training in the art of reading Arabic (and other languages) in the often crabbed and difficult handwriting of scribes from centuries ago. The problem of establishing what a particular Sufi actually wrote or said is made much more challenging by the variations that are inevitably found in the manuscripts. The demands of this technical scholarship are such that many of the resulting publications remain in an ultra-specialized realm of scholarly Orientalism that is relatively inaccessible to outsiders. There are two main ways that scholars can make their research more available to others. One is to
produce translations that aim at achieving independent literary authenticity and liveliness in the target language, instead of being mainly a technical aid or “crib” for scholars of the original text. We are beginning to see literary translations emerge, for instance, of the Persian poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi, as a result of collaboration between scholars and poets. Another approach to more public scholarship is to integrate one’s research into the most pressing questions and theories of particular disciplines, such as history, religious studies, anthropology, or literary criticism; comparative study with other civilizations and cultures can also accomplish much in this regard. It must be confessed that many recent academic publications on Sufism still tend to fall into the category of ultra-specialized scholarship, though there are promising developments both from the point of view of clear translation and wide-ranging theoretical and comparative treatments.

Among the most useful recent publications on early Sufism are several anthologies of texts in translation by Michael Sells, myself, and John Renard. European scholars including Alexandre Popovic have produced a series of collective volumes on the major Sufi orders (Naqshbandi, Bektashi, Qadiri) as well as important collections of articles on the institutional aspects of sainthood in Muslim countries. Current research also includes a number of mature scholarly studies on particular regions of Sufism, such as the important 3-volume set of articles on the heritage of Persian Sufism edited by Leonard Lewisohn.

Considerable work has also been done in the study of the writings of major early Sufis, including critical editions of original texts and translations (both partial and complete) into modern languages. Thus, to give one example, we now have access to original texts and translations of a great many more works of one of principal subjects of this book, the great Persian Sufi, Ruzbihan al-Baqli (d. 606/1209). In addition, several articles and studies have been devoted to the same figure, by Paul Ballanfat, Alan Godlas, and me. Another Sufi
discussed in this book, `Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadani, has been the subject of studies in Persian by Nasrollah Pourjavady, a lengthy monograph by Hamid Dabashi, and an original treatment by Omid Safi. Among the earliest Sufis, Abu Yazid al-Bistami has received his share of attention, although the more famous Sufi martyr Husayn ibn al-Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 309/922) has yet to emerge from the long shadow cast by Louis Massignon’s life-long obsession with him. Critical editions and studies of a number of the writings of a number of other early Sufis cited in this study (Khargushi, Ahmad Ghazali, Wasiti) have also appeared in print. Among the “classical” Sufis, however, it is undoubtedly Muhyi al-Din ibn `Arabi (d. 1240) who has attracted the lion’s share of consideration, with a number of leading scholars plus a specialized academic journal (The Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn `Arabi Society) devoted to the study of his teachings.

In addition, it is encouraging to see that a number of scholars have contributed studies to some of the key issues related to religion and authority in early Islamic society. Alexander Knysh has discussed the extensive polemics and controversies over the Sufi teachings of Ibn `Arabi. The contributions of the great theologian al-Ghazali (d. 1111) to the question of the nature of heresy have been analyzed in detail by Sherman Jackson, while Ebrahim Moosa has also provided new insights into Ghazali’s creative engagement with religion, law, and philosophy. Regarding the problem of ecstatic sayings (shatbiyyat) in Sufism, we now have a translation of Ibn `Arabi’s brief remarks on the subject, rendered into English by William Chittick with the telling phrase “unruly utterances.” Leonard Lewisohn has devoted an entire book to the topic of “mystical infidelity” in the Persian poetry of Mahmud Shabistari. The relation between language and mystical experience has been pursued by Michael Sells in several valuable studies. In particular, the development of
the notion of spiritual ascension in early Islamic thought has now been explored in detail by Frederick Colby.19

The question of the comparative study of mysticism is raised in the concluding section of this book, initially on the premise that any religious studies analysis is by its very nature comparative, if only through the use of a generalized vocabulary that draws from one tradition to describe examples from other religions. The examples proposed there as comparisons to the ecstatic sayings of the Sufis are interesting, though not decisive. What is the value of comparative studies? There are, as it were, two extremes in the comparative study of mysticism today. One point of view, which might be termed the univocal approach to mysticism, sees it as the constant unifying element that underlies the apparent discrepancies between religious traditions. This perspective is associated with the writings of W. T. Stace as well as advocates of the Perennial Philosophy such as S. H. Nasr.20 An opposing perspective, which could be called the equivocal approach, asserts that there is no generic mysticism, and that a “constructivist” epistemology reveals that the forms of all mystical experience are determined by cultural and linguistic factors; therefore all mystical traditions are radically different from one another. This perspective has been set forth in several anthologies of articles edited by Steven Katz.21 I do not think that it is necessary to choose between these two extremes, however. As Thomas Aquinas might have said, there is a proportional position, an analogical perspective, which avoids both the univocal and equivocal approaches to mysticism. In a series of studies, I have tried to develop a non-essentialist approach to comparison that allows us to take account of difference, by examining historical encounters between mystical traditions (such as Sufism and yoga) that include acts of appropriation, resistance, and interpretation.22 Much remains to be done to develop these new modes of comparative study.
It is strange to look again at one’s first book, to realize that it was essentially completed twenty-five years ago, and to think of the considerable distance in thought and experience that one has traversed since that time. Had one the opportunity to do it over again, one might have approached the subject differently. Nevertheless, the text in this second edition is basically unchanged except for minor stylistic editing, although diacritical marks have been dropped for the reader’s convenience. More substantially, I think that many of the points made in the book still have relevance. In particular, current ideological controversies over Sufism are put into historical perspective by the examples studied in this book. That is, the most spectacular crises in the early history of Sufism, the celebrated “heresy trials” of figures like Nuri, Hallaj, and `Ayn al-Qudat, were ultimately driven by political agendas. Before recent times, the Sufi movement itself was never rejected as such even by its most trenchant critics, for even conservative religious scholars such as Ibn al-Jawzi and Ibn Taymiyya were themselves members of Sufi lineages. Thus the historical findings of this study can relativize current denunciations of Sufism as “un-Islamic,” and they can help underpin more wide-ranging interpretations of the significance of Sufism today.

In the final analysis, though, many of the fundamental problems posed by the early Sufis remain powerful challenges to our understanding of the relation between language and spiritual experience, the relation between mysticism and society, and the relation between different religious traditions. All these fields will continue to demand serious consideration from students of religious studies.

In closing, I would like to express my thanks to G. A. Lipton for rescuing the text of this book from the ancient digital limbo in which it languished, and to Patricia Salazar for having the vision to bring this book into print once again for a new generation of readers.

See the critique of the “golden age” historiography of Sufism developed by Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, Sufi Martyrs of Love: Chishti Sufism in South Asia and Beyond (New York: Palgrave Press, 2002).


12 The number of publications on the writings of Ibn `Arabi is far too large to permit any listing here, but the works of Michel Chodkiewicz, William Chittick, and James W. Morris are particularly valuable in this area. For extensive information on this subject, see the website of the Muhyiddin Ibn `Arabi Society (http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/index.html, accessed 5 April 2005), which includes an index of the society’s journal and many other materials.


