

“Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism:
Problematizing the Teaching of Sufism”

In *Teaching Islam*, ed. Brannon Wheeler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 108-23

Carl W. Ernst

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Copyright © Carl W. Ernst; not to be reproduced without permission

In late twentieth-century America, teaching or writing about Islamic religion is inescapably caught up in political controversy. Everyone who has taught a class on Islam has had to deal with the powerful stereotypes of terrorist violence and gender inequality that pervade media representations of Islamic societies. In the academy, it has long appeared that a conveniently non-political alternative subject could be framed in terms of the study of Sufism, or Islamic mysticism. Many Islamicists have offered courses on Sufism at North American colleges and universities, or have discussed Sufism in their classes on Islam, and a number of academics who offer courses on mysticism have attempted to incorporate some Sufi material into their surveys on this topic. Despite lively debates over the nature of mysticism in recent years, there has been hardly any reflection on the category of Sufism, considered as Islamic mysticism. This means that courses dealing with Sufism have been unable to provide any problematization of this concept--and that sort of reflection is necessary for any course in religious studies that aspires to be critical.¹ In this essay, based on a forthcoming study of Sufism, I would like to argue that the non-political image of Sufism is illusory.²

¹Critical reflection and problematizing of categories, in my opinion, should be part of even the most elementary introductory courses in religious studies. They are all the more necessary in specialized and advanced courses.

²Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997). Further specific discussions of the problem of Sufism and modernity are to be found in Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Burnt Hearts: The Chishti* Sufi Order* (London: Curzon Press, forthcoming in 1998).

The history of the study of Sufism shows how powerfully the Orientalist discourse on religion reformulated aspects of Islamic culture into a separate category called Sufism. At the same time, growing "fundamentalist" movements in Muslim countries have isolated and rejected many aspects of what we call Sufism, as part of a struggle over the ownership of Islamic religious symbolism. The fact that these debates have taken place in the colonial and post-colonial periods indicates that modernity is crucial to the understanding of Sufism. Yet the classicist bias of Orientalism, and the strikingly similar "golden age" historiography of fundamentalism, have conspired to keep Sufism separate from modernity. Here I would like to show how it is possible to deal with Sufism critically in terms of religious studies, by introducing to the classroom some of the highly charged ideological interpretations of Sufism that have been offered by Orientalists and fundamentalists. When juxtaposed with the ways in which Sufis themselves have actively engaged with the ideologies and technologies of modernity, these "political" readings of Sufism make the subject far richer than the default hagiographic approach that limits itself to "classical" texts.

I would like to frame this discussion in terms of several outcomes that seem to me important in teaching courses relating to Islam:

- to acquaint students with religious practice, not just theological doctrine;
- to illustrate the contemporary relevance of the religious tradition, not just its "classical" past;
- to create an immediacy for students by employing multimedia resources (film, music, and internet) in addition to written texts;
- to complicate the picture of monolithic Islam by illustrating difference through categories such as ethnicity, gender, class, and nationality;
- to avoid privileging one Islamic perspective over another as being "orthodox", while clarifying the issues under debate;
- to problematize the study of Islam as an example of the modern conceptualization of religion.

It is still necessary to provide a synthetic textbook presentation and some primary texts in translation, and my syllabi and readings still contain the standard narratives on the importance of the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad, etc. But a course on Sufism or Islam can end up being an Orientalist catechism, rather than a critical course in religious studies, unless objectives like these are part of the picture. The following remarks sketch out ways in which the modern ideologies surrounding Sufism may be integrated into the subject.

Sufism as an Orientalist Category

The standard presentation of Sufism as Islamic mysticism can be easily recognized in the venerable textbooks and anthologies that have been in use for decades in North American universities. A. J. Arberry's *Aspects of Islamic Civilization as presented in the Original Texts* (1956) is one of the best examples. It presents Sufism as a classical literary phenomenon best illustrated by the great Sufi poets (Rumi, Ibn al-Farid, etc.) or by prose works on discipline and metaphysics. This portrait was an intellectual achievement made possible by the deep erudition of sympathetic Orientalists who specialized in the study of Sufism (R. A. Nicholson, Arberry, Louis Massignon). Yet this concept of "Islamic mysticism" had a genealogy worth considering.

The term and category "Sufism" was first coined for European languages by British Orientalists based in India, particularly Sir William Jones.³ Before the nineteenth century, many European travelers had remarked upon "fakirs" and "dervishes," but only as exotic curiosities. Orientalists applied the term "Sufi" primarily to the literary phase of Sufism, particularly as expressed in Persian poetry. These European scholars were uniformly persuaded that the elegant poems of Hafiz and Jalal al-Din Rumi could have nothing to do with the Islamic ("Mahometan") religion. The so-called "Sooffees" were poets, after all, and they composed odes to the joys of wine-drinking, something no pious "Mahometan" would do. Furthermore, as anyone could see from their poems, they were fond of music and dance, they were great lovers, and

³Sir William Jones, "The Sixth Discourse, On the Persians," and "On the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus," in *Works* (London, 1807).

their bold declarations were an open affront to the Qur'an. The Orientalists saw them as freethinkers who had little to do with the stern faith of the Arabian Prophet. They had much more in common, so went the argument, with true Christianity, with Greek philosophy, and with the mystical speculations of the Indian Vedanta. Until rather recently, it was unanimously believed that Sufism was derived from Indian sources.⁴ Thus the term "Sufi-ism" was invented at the end of the eighteenth century, as an appropriation of those portions of "Oriental" culture that Europeans found attractive. British colonial officials, who were the main source of European studies of Sufism in the 19th century, thus maintained a double attitude toward Sufism: its literary classics (part of the Persian curriculum required by the British East India Company until the 1830s) were admired, but its contemporary social manifestations were considered corrupt and degenerate in relation to what was perceived as orthodox Islam.⁵ Thus the essential feature of the definitions of Sufism that appeared at this time was the insistence that Sufism had no intrinsic relation with the faith of Islam.

The literary aspect of Sufism was thus considered by Orientalists to be separate from its contemporary institutional base, which was consigned to colonial administrators to worry about. In many Muslim regions, the Sufi orders, often referred to as "brotherhoods" or "confrèries" by Europeans, were the only local organizations to remain intact after the onset of colonial rule. In North Africa, French officials paid close attention to "marabouts" (from Arabic *murabit*, a resident in a Sufi lodge known as a *ribat*), fearing charismatic leaders who might organize local tribes. In places like the Indian Punjab, the descendants of Sufi saints were caretakers of what had become popular pilgrimage sites, and the British concocted a strategy of co-opting them into the system as influential landlords. In other cases, Sufi leaders who had extensive followings led resistance to European conquest. In Algeria, the Emir `Abd al-Qadir fought the French for years until his defeat in 1847; in his exile in Syria, he wrote extensively on Sufism and supervised the

⁴Lt. J. W. Graham, "A Treatise on Sufism, or Mahomedan Mysticism", in *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay* 1 (1819), 89-119. This attempt to find an extra-Islamic origin for Sufism has had defenders as recently as R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane: An Inquire into some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). A detailed discussion of this issue will be presented in my *The Pool of Nectar: Islamic Interpretations of Yoga* (SUNY Press, forthcoming).

⁵Sir R. F. Burton, *Sindh* (London, 1851), 198-231.

publication of important Arabic Sufi texts. In the Caucasus, Shaykh Shamil of the Naqshbandi Sufi order set up an independent state that frustrated Russian attacks until 1859. The messianic movement of the Sudanese Mahdi, destroyed by British forces in 1881, originated from a Sufi order; British accounts of the defeat of the "dervishes" at the battle of Omdurman formed one of the high points of colonial triumphalism.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the study of the "brotherhoods" had become a necessary subject for European colonial administrators. In these circles the study of Sufism became a cross between the assembly of police dossiers and the analysis of dangerous cults. Sufi leaders like the Pir Pagaro in Sind were described as hypnotic demagogues whose fanatic followers would kill themselves at a hint from the master. In Somalia, the British dismissed the conservative Sufi leader Shaykh Muhammad `Abd Allah Hasan as "the mad mulla," though he was neither mad nor a mulla (traditional religious scholar); he is remembered today by his countrymen as the father of the Somali nation. In any case, there is considerable proto-anthropological material on Sufi saints and shrines compiled by British and French colonial officials, often drawing upon local oral tradition.

Neither the Orientalist nor the colonial-administrative approach to Sufism was very close to the sense of the word "Sufi" in Arabic and allied languages. The literature of Sufism that began to be produced in the tenth century CE employed the term Sufi in a deliberate and self-conscious fashion to orchestrate the ethical and mystical goals of the growing movement in a prescriptive fashion. A series of writings, primarily in Arabic, expounded the ideals of the Sufis and explained their relationship to other religious groups in Muslim society. The term Sufi in this way took on a didactic rather than an informational purpose. Answers to the question "What is Sufism?" multiplied and began to take on a new importance, as they nearly always were placed prominently at the beginning of every new treatise on Sufism. All these "definitions" are elusive from the perspective of descriptive history and social science. They do not have any clear reference to a defined group of people. Instead, they accomplish a powerful rhetorical transaction; the person who listens to or reads these definitions is forced to imagine the spiritual or ethical quality that is invoked by the definition, even when it is paradoxical. Definitions of Sufism are, in effect, teaching tools. References to individuals as being Sufis

are comparatively rare. The actual terminology for different Islamic mystical vocations covers a wide range of semantic fields.

In the academy today, there is accordingly a fair degree of ambiguity attached to the concept of Sufism. As with other terms coined during the Enlightenment to describe religions, Sufism has now become a standard term, whether we like it or not. I would suggest that "Sufism" can best be used as a descriptive term of the "family resemblance" variety, to cover all the external social and historical manifestations associated with Sufi orders, saints, and the interior practice of Islam. Since this lacks the normative and prescriptive force of the ethical term "Sufi," it is important to point out to students the gap between outsider and insider perspectives, and to point out the objectives that govern any presentation of the subject.

Sufism, Fundamentalism, and Islam.

While Islamic fundamentalism is certainly the aspect of Islam most frequently discussed in the Western media, it is unfortunately not much better known than other aspects of Islamic culture. The vagueness with which these terms are thrown around makes the average reader suspect that they are synonymous; one would assume that all Muslims must be fundamentalists. While it is usually recognized that there are Christian fundamentalists as well (indeed, the term originated in Los Angeles early in this century), the press have nearly given Muslim fundamentalists a monopoly over the term. Since the term has a fairly negative air, probably dating from the time when it was associated with anti-evolutionist forces at the time of the Scopes trial, Muslims who are tarred with this brush rightly resent it. Nonetheless, if it is carefully defined, "fundamentalism" can be used as a descriptive term with a specific meaning in a variety of religious contexts. Bruce Lawrence defines it as an anti-modernist ideology based on selective interpretation of scripture, used largely by secondary male elites in an oppositional role against the state.⁶ It is important to note that anti-modernist does

⁶Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 100-1.

not mean anti-modern; fundamentalists are very much at home with modern technology and modern techniques of political struggle. Fundamentalists are instead opposed to the secularist ideology that has banished religion from public life; in this respect they are inescapably modern.

The relevance of fundamentalism for Sufism comes at the root of their belief systems. The selective interpretation of scripture that underlies the central authority of fundamentalism cannot afford to tolerate alternate interpretations. Since fundamentalists typically portray their interpretations as literal and hence unchallengeably true, any kind of psychological or mystical interpretation of the sacred text is a basic threat to the monopoly that they wish to claim over tradition. Western journalists are too often content to accept the self-interpretation of Muslim fundamentalists as the sole authentic custodians of tradition. One would never guess from most media reports that fundamentalists usually constitute no more than twenty per cent of any Muslim population, and that in this respect they are likely to have the same proportion as fundamentalists in Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist societies.

Like the spin doctors who attempt to mold public opinion through commentary, fundamentalist spokesmen attempt through their rhetoric of total confrontation to claim representation of Islam. For this effort to succeed, they must discredit and disenfranchise all other claimants to the sources of authority in the Islamic tradition. There is no stronger rival claim on these sources than in Sufism. Modern studies of Muslim fundamentalism rarely point this out, preferring instead to dwell on confrontation with European colonialism and the secular state as the proximate causes of this ideology. But the principal early fundamentalist movement, the Wahhabism that swept Arabia in the nineteenth century, had nothing to do with responses to Europe. While resistance to the Ottoman empire may have been a factor, there was a basic religious struggle going on between Wahhabis and Sufis for the control of central religious symbols. Fundamentalists articulated their goal as the domination of the symbol of Islam.

The remarkable thing is that many of the leaders of Muslim fundamentalism were raised in social contexts where Sufism was strong. Both Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and Abu al-`Ala' Maudoodi, founder of the Indo-Pakistani Jama`at-i Islami, were very familiar with the authority structures of Sufi orders from their

youth. From their writings it is quite clear that they admired the organizational strength of Sufi orders, and they acted in relation to their followers with all the charisma of a Sufi master in the company of disciples. They did not, however, adopt any of the spiritual practices of Sufism, and in particular they rejected the notion of any saintly mediation between God and ordinary humanity. In an attempt to destroy the accretions of history and return to the purity of Islam at the time of the Prophet, fundamentalists rejected the ritual and local cultural adaptations of Sufism as non-Islamic. From a political point of view, one must acknowledge that fundamentalists had sized up their opposition well. No other group held such a powerful hold on Muslim society and spirituality as the Sufi orders and saintly shrines.

Ironically, as a result of strategic successes by fundamentalist movements in certain key regions like Arabia, and the massive oil wealth that fell into the lap of the Saudi regime, many contemporary Muslims have been taught a story of the Islamic religious tradition from which Sufism has been rigorously excluded. It is ironic because as recently as the late eighteenth century, and for much of the previous millennium, most of the outstanding religious scholars of Mecca, Medina, and the great cities of the Muslim world, were intimately engaged with what we today call Sufism. It is doubly ironic because the fundamentalist story is belied by the religious practices of more than half of today's Muslim population. Veneration of the Prophet Muhammad and the Sufi saints is found as a major theme in every Muslim country from China to Morocco. On a more specialized level, millions have sought initiation in the multiple Sufi orders, which trace back a sacred teaching, generation after generation, all the way to the Prophet Muhammad. Techniques of meditation and chants of the names of God, sometimes in combination with music and dance, continue to be practiced as disciplines under the supervision of Sufi masters. Poetry, songs, and stories in dozens of local languages convey the lives and teachings of Sufi saints to a huge public. Despite the attempts of many post-colonial governments to regulate Sufi shrines and orders, because of their large followings and potential political clout, much of the activity connected with Sufism goes on regardless of attempts at interference.

The polemical attacks on Sufism by fundamentalists have had the primary goal of making Sufism into a subject that is separable from Islam, indeed hostile to it. This strategy permits fundamentalists to define Islam as they wish by

selective use of certain scriptural texts. The novelty of this project has so far escaped the notice of most journalists and diplomats, since the study of Islamic cultures has not played a significant part in most Euro-American education. The Arabic term "islam" itself was of relatively minor importance in classical theologies based on the Qur'an; it literally means "submission" to God, and it denotes the minimal external forms of compliance with religious duty. If one looks at the works of theologians such as the famous al-Ghazali (d. 1111), the key term of religious identity is not "islam" but "iman" or faith, and the one who possesses it is the "mu'min" or believer. Faith is one of the major topics of the Qur'an, mentioned hundreds of times in the sacred text. In comparison, "islam" is a relatively uncommon term of secondary importance; it only occurs seven times in the Qur'an. Since, however, the term "islam" had a derivative meaning relating to the community of those who have submitted to God, it became practically useful particularly in modern times as a political boundary term, both to outsiders and to insiders who wished to draw lines around themselves.

Historically, the term Islam was introduced into European languages in the early nineteenth century by Orientalists like Edward Lane, as an explicit analogy with the modern Christian concept of religion; in this respect, "Islam" was just as much a neologism as the terms "Hinduism" and "Buddhism" were. Before that time Europeans used the term "Muhammadan" or "Mahometan" to refer to the followers of the Prophet Muhammad. The use of the term Islam by non-Muslim scholars coincides with its increasing frequency in the religious discourse of those who now call themselves Muslims. That is, the term "Islam" became popular in reformist and proto-fundamentalist circles at approximately the same time, or shortly after, it was popularized by European Orientalists. Both the outside "scientific" observers and the internal ideologues had found an ideal tool in the term Islam. Treated simultaneously as a set of changeless religious doctrines and as a sociological unit (now usually assimilated to the Arab minority), Islam became the eternal other opposing European civilization. The fact that much of Islamic history and culture was left out of the picture was not too great a price to pay for either of these constituencies.

Despite these historicist cautions about the use of religious terms, it must be acknowledged that the Orientalist and fundamentalist concepts of Sufism have coincided with the possibility of new alignments of Sufism with respect to

Islam; once the two concepts emerge as separable, anything is possible. Contemporary Sufi groups are now called upon to make an explicit statement regarding the relation of the Sufi group with "mainstream" Islam, which may take the form of a non-relation. In premodern Sufism it was rare that any option but Islam could even be articulated. On the level of theoretical and literary mysticism, one can find some rare instances of Jewish Sufism, such as Maimonides' grandson Obadiah ben Abraham (d. 1265), or the Christian Sufism of Ramón Llull (d. 1316). In both these cases the authors in question were powerfully affected by reading Arabic Sufi literature, which inspired them to write new works in the same vein addressed to their co-religionists. As far as Sufi orders are concerned, in India there were a few instances of premodern Hindus who were initiated by Chishti masters without having to convert to Islam, but these were extremely few in number and by no means typical. On less formal levels, many non-Muslims have had contact with Sufi saints and have been impressed by them on a personal level. Such was the case, for instance, with the Christians and Jews who attended the funeral of Rumi; during the later Ottoman centuries, many Christians and Jews interacted with Sufism in this manner. Occasionally Zoroastrians did the same in Iran. The same kind of relationship still holds today for many Hindus and Sikhs who visit Sufi shrines in India. All this was made possible by the inwardness of Sufism, which tends to make external boundaries less significant. But prior to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was scarcely necessary for a Sufi, steeped in the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet Muhammad, to have to define him- or herself in terms of Islam. Once Islam had been narrowly redefined as a legal and ideological system, however, the dual critique of Sufism by Orientalists and fundamentalists forced Sufis to justify themselves in terms of scriptural sources. Certainly there had been criticism of particular Sufi practices or doctrines prior to this, but never had the entire inner dimension of religion been called into question.

Today, particularly in Western countries, Sufi groups have to position themselves in relation to Islamic identity. Some are rigorous in following Islamic law and ritual, and this insistence is often combined with adoption of the clothing and manners of the group's country of origin. Other groups are flexible for newcomers, on the theory that they can be gradually introduced to the outer dimension of religion later on after the inner aspect has been first absorbed. Yet

other groups frankly relinquish Islamic law and symbolism, defining Sufism as the universal aspect of all religions. The most striking example of this universalist tendency is Hazrat Inayat Khan, who came to the West in the early years of this century. Trained both as a musician and as a Sufi in the Chishti order, he traveled in Europe and America giving performances of classical Indian music. Faced with the need to articulate a religious position, he presented Sufism in terms of universal religion, detached from Islamic ritual and legal practice. The groundwork for this position had been partly established much earlier by European scholars who viewed Sufism as a mysticism comparable to any other. More importantly, there was a universalist dimension implicit in Sufism as there was in the Islamic tradition, which recognized that every people had been sent a prophet. In all Muslim societies, there were significant continuities with pre-Islamic cultures, which guaranteed that Islamic culture was never merely Islamic.

In any case, there are excellent pedagogical opportunities to be found in raising the issues surrounding Sufism, Islam, and the fundamentalist critique of Sufism. What is important in this series of contested issues is to awaken students to the historical contingency of religious terminology. The semi-biological model of religious essences, which does not recognize significance in historical change, is simply inadequate to explain this sort of debate.

Sufism and the Modern World.

Two major categories of modernity have already been touched upon in connection with the understanding of Sufism: Orientalism as the academic response to Europe's colonial expansion, and fundamentalism as a rejection of secular modernism. To this a number of other categories can be added, particularly the nation-state, science, and mass communication. While these have not eliminated the traditions of Sufi teaching and practice, they have added new concepts, relationships, and activities that should be acknowledged in any account of Sufism.

Most Muslim-majority countries gained independence in the years following World War II, and the new regimes in many ways continued the policies of the colonial regimes that preceded them. Colonial governments had typically eliminated or neutralized other sources of authority, and they centralized all functions of government under their own

control. Formerly colonized countries have inherited authoritarian government structures that did not welcome competing political forces. In many Muslim countries one can see special government bureaucracies devoted to controlling Sufi institutions. In Egypt, this takes the form of a bureau called the Majlis al-Sufiya or Association of Sufis, which lists and supervises some eighty "official" Sufi orders. As Valerie Hoffman has shown, however, some of the most popular Sufi orders, such as the Sudan-based Burhaniyya with a membership of several million, are not recognized by the state.⁷

The attempt to control Sufi orders and institutions by the state should be seen in the context of nationalism. In Pakistan, political leaders such as Ayyub Khan and Z. A. Bhutto attempted to redefine Sufi shrines in terms of a national ideology. Festivals at the tombs of important Sufi saints are regularly graced by provincial governors and even the prime minister, who give speeches describing how these saints were forerunners of the Islamic state of Pakistan. On the bureaucratic level, this relationship is paralleled by assertion of the authority of the Department of Charitable Trusts over the operations and finances of major Sufi shrines. This same bureau is also responsible for a series of publications of official biographies of popular saints as well as devotional manuals, in this way indicating what constitutes officially approved forms of Sufism.⁸

Probably the most remarkable example of governmental conflict with Sufism occurred in modern Turkey, which banned all dervish orders in 1925; in a case of the internalization of European political anxieties, secular nationalism apparently attempted to eliminate a potential rival with strong claims on the loyalties of Turkish citizens. But after 1954, the Mevlevi or "Whirling Dervishes" were permitted to revive their ritual dance, on condition that it be a secular artistic performance and not a religious ritual. Rumi (Mevlana) is now celebrated as a hero of Turkish culture and religious tolerance. A similar case in the twentieth century was the attempt of the Soviet regime to control Sufism. With an official

⁷Valerie J. Hoffman, *Sufism, mystics, and saints in modern Egypt* (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

⁸Katherine Ewing, "The Politics of Sufism: Redefining the Saints of Pakistan," *Journal of Asian Studies* 52 (1983), pp. 251-68.

policy of promoting atheism, the Soviet government declared Sufi gatherings and rituals to be illegal. In the post-Soviet period, however, the Sufi shrines of Uzbekistan, particularly the tomb of Baha' al-Din Naqshband in Bukhara, have taken on considerable symbolic importance in the articulation of a new cultural and national identity.

Science looms large for Sufism in terms of the modernist critique of religion as superstition. This has been devastatingly effective in secularized circles in Muslim countries, where the issue of saintly miracles has come under attack. Modernist Muslim philosophers such as Sir Muhammad Iqbal and Mohamed Lahbabi blamed the mystically befuddled Sufi for the retrograde situation of Asian countries. It is instructive to offer to students a document that shows the response to such arguments. The author of an English biography of Shaykh `Abd al-Qadir Jilani published in Lahore in 1953 addressed skeptical readers by simply inviting them to apply scientific standards to these mind-boggling events.⁹ The defenders of Sufism replied to the threats of Orientalism and science on modern terms. Some Sufi leaders have taken the step of undergoing university training in the sciences, particularly in the professional discipline of psychology.

The Pakistani Chishti leader Capt. Wahid Bakhsh Sial (d. 1995) is an example of a Sufi treating both Orientalists and Western scientists with their own medicine. In his English and Urdu writings he has systematically evaluated the theories and biases of European scholars of Sufism. On the one hand he has taken them to task for their tendency to separate Sufism from Islam. Over one third of his book *Islamic Sufism* is devoted to disproving "That Myth of Foreign Origin of Sufism."¹⁰ On the other hand, he has appropriated the rhetoric of science and uses it to undermine secularists who criticize religion. The first paragraph of his book's introduction announces this strategy:

Sufism and science are striving for the same destination. Science wants to know: How did the universe come into being and what is its nature? Is there any Creator? What is He like? Where is He? How is He related to the

⁹S. A. Salik, *The Saint of Jilan* (Lahore, 1953; reprint ed., Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1985).

¹⁰Capt. Wahid Bakhsh Sial Rabbani, *Islamic Sufism: The Science of Flight in God, with God, by God, and Union and Communion with God, Also showing the Tremendous Sufi Influence on Christian and Hindu Mystics and Mysticism* (Lahore: Sufi Foundation, 1984), chapter 5, pp. 112-249.

universe? How is He related to man? Is it possible for man to approach Him? Sufism has found the answers and invites the scientists to come and have that knowledge.

This is the rhetoric of authority, well established by the prestige of medicine, science, and engineering. In Europe since the time of Comte, this rhetoric has been used to make religion irrelevant. Like other Muslim apologists who appropriate the language of science, Capt. Wahid Bakhsh seeks to turn the tables. While it has been possible for many Sufi leaders to accommodate their teachings in this way to the contemporary age, as will be shown below, modernism (whether religious or secular) is not comfortable with the spiritual authority, institutions, or practice of Sufism.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the emergence of Sufism as a topic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been the publicizing of a previously esoteric system of teaching through modern communications media. Today, Sufi orders and shrines in Muslim countries produce a continual stream of publications aimed at a variety of followers from the ordinary devotee to the scholar. Just as the recording industry democratized the private rituals of Sufi music for a mass audience, the introduction of print and lithography technology made possible the distribution of Sufi teachings on a scale far beyond what manuscript production could attain. As has been noted in the case of Ibn `Arabi's Arabic works, when they first emerged into print in the late nineteenth century, suddenly a work that had existed in at most a hundred manuscripts around the world (and those difficult of access) was now made easily available at a corner bookstore through print runs of a thousand copies.¹¹ Evidence is still far from complete, but indications are that in the principal locations for print technology in Muslim countries in the nineteenth century (Cairo, Istanbul, Tehran, and Delhi/Lucknow), the main patrons of publication, aside from governments, were Sufi orders.¹²

¹¹Martin Notcutt, "Ibn `Arabi in Print" in *Muhyiddin Ibn `Arabi, A Commemorative Volume*, ed. Stephen Hirstenstein (Rockport, MA: Element, 1993), pp. 328-39.

¹²Muhsin Mahdi, "From the Manuscript Age to the Age of Printed Books," in *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, ed. George N. Atiyeh (Albany: State University of New York Press/Library of Congress, 1995), pp. 6-7. Mahdi suggests that the large followings of mystical orders made such publishing economically feasible.

Although little work has been done on this subject, biographical sources can furnish valuable information about the role of print media in the development of a modern form of Sufism. Here we can see, for instance, how the Chishti leader Dhawqi Shah (d. 1951) was a university graduate and a reporter for an English-language newspaper prior to becoming a Sufi. He continued to publish newspaper articles throughout his life, both in Urdu and in English. His writings deal with such modern topics as racial theory, fundamentalism, comparative religion, and the Pakistan nationalist movement. Most remarkably, his chief successor, Shaykh Shahidullah Faridi, was a British-born convert to Islam originally named Lennard, who came to Pakistan after reading English translations of works on Sufism. His Urdu discourses, dictated in Karachi in the 1970s, are still available in print. The international distribution of printed books and periodicals was a necessary element in the lives of both men. The dramatic effects of print technology on subjects such as the Protestant Reformation and the development of nationalism have been frequently discussed, but the role of printing in the development of contemporary Sufism, including such modern forms as the periodical and the novel, still needs to be investigated.

In the late twentieth century, the other forms of publicizing Sufism has been through visual and electronic media. Most professionally made films relating to Sufism have fallen into the category of ethnographic or cultural documentary, although some governments (Turkey, India, Uzbekistan) have produced films that appropriate Sufi saints and Sufi-related culture as part of the national image.¹³ The availability of movie and video cameras has made it possible to record the talks of Sufi teachers for several decades. But the recent explosion of Sufi-related home pages on the internet and in on-line discussion groups indicates that Sufism is going to be very public part of the electronic age. The World Wide Web permits anyone to set up a home page without having to seek authorization from any particular religious hierarchy. It is accordingly receptive to a cheerful anarchy and a generally anti-authoritarian attitude. The

¹³Several documentary films on Sufism are available for loan to educational institutions, from the Non-Print Section, Undergraduate Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill NC 27599. Some of these include: "For Those Who Sail to Heaven" (about an Egyptian saint's festival at Luxor), "Saints and Spirits" (about Sufi shrines and spirit possession in Morocco), and two films about the Mevlevis, "Turning" and "Whirling Dervishes."

principal divide that separates Sufi groups on the internet is whether or not they identify primarily with Islamic symbolism and religious practice; while this was not even an option in the premodern period, it is a major issue in debates about the nature of Sufism conducted in internet discussion groups. The internet is also a vehicle for advertising books and recordings relating to Sufism, so it continues to function as a marketing device.

The publicizing of Sufism through print and electronic media has brought about a remarkable shift in the tradition. Now advocates of Sufism can defend their heritage by publishing refutations of fundamentalist or modernist attacks on Sufism. In this sense the media permit Sufism to be contested and defended in the public sphere as one ideology alongside others. At the same time more personal forms such as the novel allow for an intimate expression of individual spiritual aspirations, which can be communicated to a large audience through the empathy created by the novelistic narrative. Biographies and discourses can also create an intimate relationship between readers and Sufi masters; although this was also the function of those genres in manuscript form, the wide distribution of print greatly enlarges the potential audience. Through these modern public media, Sufism is no longer just an esoteric community constructed largely through direct contact, ritual interaction, and oral instruction. Now it is publicized through mass printing, modern literary genres, and electronic technology, with all the changes in personal relationships that these media entail.

The transplantation of Sufism to Europe and America raises a number of issues, including the degree to which acculturation to a Middle Eastern or South Asian homeland is encouraged. One of the most distinctive developments of Sufism in the West is probably in the area of gender relations. Most Muslim societies where Sufism has been a living force have practiced some form of gender segregation. Female Sufi masters and saints, while known, have not been common in the past. But the social habits of the modern West are different, and it is not unusual to see men and women participating together in rituals, musical performances, and other gatherings held by Sufi orders. In some Sufi groups, women have quite naturally taken on positions of leadership. Just as American women are playing a notable and

innovative role in the development of Buddhism in this country, so it may be expected that Sufism in the West will have to pay special attention to women's perspectives in order to succeed.

Above all, it must be pointed out that there are numerous points of contact between the Sufi tradition and the popular culture in which our students are immersed. Today in any music store one can buy fine audio recordings of music that originated in Sufi circles, now transformed into "world music" performances. The Pakistani qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and the Moroccan musicians from Jahjouka have obtained the sponsorship of major recording labels and the enthusiastic support of successful European and American musicians, and their music has appeared on recent motion picture soundtracks (e.g., "Dead Man Walking"). The Persian poet Rumi in multiple English versions is now the best-selling poet in America. The Whirling Dervishes from Turkey regularly perform tours in major concert halls in the West. There are dozens of internet Web sites linked to Sufi groups based in America. High-quality literary periodicals with glossy photographs and well-written articles are being produced by groups such as the Iranian Nimatullahi Sufi order, now based in London. I strongly urge that this kind of material (much of it easily available) be integrated into courses on Sufism and Islam, not only to provide access but also to stimulate debate on the nature of religion and culture in contemporary society.¹⁴ Ignoring the contemporary dossier makes this subject a hermetically sealed vessel that is irrelevant to our students' concerns.

Problems with "Mysticism" as a Category.

I would like to conclude with a brief reflection on how the study of Sufism can help alter the generic concept of mysticism with which it is often associated. Mysticism, although critically explored in a number of recent studies, is still often reduced to a bare universalism (with minor concessions to religious traditions) and, what is more, to the private experience of an individual. Not enough has been done to historicize and problematize the category of mysticism as it

¹⁴My *Shambhala Guide to Sufism* includes a select discography.

emerged around the turn of the century in Western thinking about religion. We still take for granted that terms such as "religious experience" are self-evident, though they in fact have historical genealogies.

It is important, for instance, to keep in view the political and social aspects of Sufism. Those who consider mysticism a private affair, and who view Sufism primarily through poetry or theoretical treatises, may feel that military and economic activities do not fit the picture of inner mystical experience. From this point of view, any accommodation with political power constitutes a fall from purity. It is difficult, however, to reconcile such a purely "other-worldly" perspective with either the history or the teachings of Sufism. As one famous saying has it, "Sufism is all practical ethics (*adab*)."¹ The prescriptive ethics that are bound up in Sufi rhetoric cannot be put into effect by isolated hermits. Sufis are constantly reminded of this by the model of the Prophet Muhammad, who plays for them the role of social and political leader as well as mystical exemplar. While there is certainly a tension between Sufism and "the world," illustrated most dramatically by the repentance that is the beginning of the spiritual stations, Sufism is also very much a community affair that is hard to separate from the rest of life. Students of Christian mysticism are well aware of the political and social activities of mystics like St. John of the Cross and St. Catherine of Siena. How would the textbook definition of mysticism change if these activities were connected more fully with their mystical writings? Joining the critical dimension of the study of religion with the comparative aspect may prove to be the most useful future agenda for the teaching of Sufism.