

9 Ṣūfī devotion

The question of the origins of Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), the mystical aspect within Islam, and its devotees, the Ṣūfīs, seems to have attracted its own particular type of dispute within the academic study of Islam. The reason for this dispute would appear to go back once again to a memory of medieval (and later) polemic between Christians and Muslims. Christians have often pictured Islam as a very sensually based religion: Muḥammad's multiple marriages, the Qur'ān's very physical and sensual portrayal of heaven and its rewards, and Islam's permitting of polygamy and enjoining holy war (*jihād*) have all been featured in these kinds of characterizations. At the same time, however, Christians have been very well aware of a profound ascetic-mystical trend in Islam. Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), for example, one of the most famous of all Ṣūfīs, became well known in the medieval west especially in his philosophic guise; this was true of a variety of other mystically inspired writers also. In trying to reconcile the two natures perceived within Islam, the implicit suggestion given by some early writers on the subject was that the mystical trend could not be inherent in Islam but must have come from Christianity, a far more elevated religion in their view.

It is the case, then, that raising the question of the origins of Sufism today is no less controversial than the question of the origins of the entire religion of Islam, because behind the questions lies the aura, if not the attitude, of medieval polemic. To suggest that Islamic mysticism is, in fact, a borrowing from outside raises the spectre of the denial of the intrinsically spiritual nature of Islam and thence of the spiritual nature of Muslims themselves.

The question of origins here is twofold. The basic point, much argued by Ṣūfīs themselves in their search for the legitimization of their spiritual quest, is whether Islam as a religion contained within itself a spiritual-ascetic tendency from the very beginning; that is,

does Islam inherently see that the mystical way (defined, for the time being, as the quest for some intimacy with God as induced through certain practices of a meditative, repetitive or self-denying nature) is the ideal life that should be aimed for? From the Islamic perspective, is that lifestyle inherently pleasing to God?

The second issue is one concerning the origins of Sufism itself. Regardless of where the original spiritual-ascetic impulse came from, were the practices, aspirations and the mode of expression used by the Ṣūfīs elements developed within Islam or were they the result of influences from another source (be that Christian, Indian, Iranian or whatever) and adapted to an Islamic style?

The source of Sufism in Islam

The problem with answering the first question is, of course, one of interpretation. How do we judge an issue such as “inherent asceticism”? Some would say that a basic world-denying attitude is a part of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, especially because the overall tradition has been influenced by the radical dualism of Manichaeism with its distrust of the material world. This attitude is difficult to reconcile, however, with the picture of Islam and Judaism especially as “nomocratic,” where a very practical attitude towards life in the here and now, as manifested in the law, is a prime characteristic of the religion. The other aspect of the problem is the common one found in all elements of the origins of Islam and that is the lack of contemporary sources. There simply are no ascertainably early sources which give us a glimpse of a spiritual-ascetic lifestyle from before the ninth century, in common with the lack of documentary evidence for the beginnings of Islam in general.

Muslim arguments on the subject revolve around the citation of the Qurʾān and elements of the *ḥadīth* and the *Sīra*, the life story of Muḥammad, which indicate the possibility of, if not the positive encouragement and enactment of, the ascetic ideal. This approach fully answers the question from the internal Muslim perspective. The Qurʾān and Muḥammad, as Ṣūfīs have always said, support the mystical quest. Statements concerning God are popularly cited, for example, Qurʾān 2/186, “Whenever My servants ask you about Me, I am near to answer the call of the caller,” and Qurʾān 50/16, “We [God] are closer to him [humanity] than his jugular vein!” Looking inward, therefore, becomes the goal and the quest, although Qurʾān 2/115, “wherever you may turn, there is the face of God,” adds another dimension to the quest. The wandering way of life of the early ascetic is supported

in Qurʾān 29/20, “Travel in the land and see how He began creation.” Qurʾān 9/123 asserts, “God is with the godfearing” whose way of life is echoed in the Quranic refrain to remember God always (for example, Qurʾān 33/41, “You who believe, remember God often”). The “light verse,” Qurʾān 24/35, is the most famous of all verses for Ṣūfī speculation and its very presence in the Qurʾān is often claimed to be proof of the need for the mystic way:

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The likeness of His light is as a niche in which there is a lamp; the lamp is in a glass; the glass is just as if it were a glittering star kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither Eastern nor Western, whose oil will almost glow though the fire has never touched it. Light upon light, God guides His light to anyone He wishes.

As for Muḥammad, his whole experience of revelation and his preparation towards receiving it are seen as models for the ascetic life and its product. This is also true of other Quranic figures, especially Moses and al-Khiḍr whose stories, as told in *sūra* 18, have been elaborated into accounts of the mystic quest. Many of the traditions about Muḥammad most favoured by the Ṣūfīs are not to be found in the major *ḥadīth* collections, generally having been rejected by the collectors as unsound, but the Ṣūfīs kept their traditions going among their own circles. Many aphorisms are found on Muḥammad’s lips which are applicable to the Ṣūfī quest, and Muḥammad is also portrayed as following an ascetic way of life. The latter traditions found their way into works such as the *Kitāb al-Zuhd* (“The Book of Ascetic Practices”) of Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), the eponym of the legal school, who is often seen as a supporter of the early ascetic movement. Poverty especially became an ideal espoused by Muḥammad. For example, Ibn Ḥanbal cites the tradition from ‘Ā’isha who “was asked what the Messenger of God did in his house. She replied, ‘He patched clothes, fixed sandals, and did similar things’.” ‘Ā’isha also reported that when Muḥammad died, “he did not leave a dinar or a dirham, nor any sheep or cattle, nor did he bequeath anything.”¹

Even more productive for the Ṣūfīs has been the story of the *miʿrāj*, Muḥammad’s night journey (based around Qurʾān 17/1), which is seen as a tale of the supreme mystical experience to which every mystic aspires. While the basic account is found in all orthodox sources about Muḥammad, starting in germ form in Muḥammad’s early biographer Ibn Ishāq, the Ṣūfī understanding and interpretation of the account are, of course, unique.² The emphasis frequently falls

on the role of the journey as a prophetic initiation, leading the way for all mystics after Muḥammad to journey to their own union with the divine presence, not as prophets but as saints or “friends of God.”

Interestingly, there is a marked anti-ascetic tendency within the Sunnī books of *ḥadīth*, especially focusing on the rejection of Christian monasticism. For example, these reports are often used in Islam to support the notion that even Ṣūfīs should marry. Other such elements include a rejection of forty-day food restrictions and pleas against poverty (even to the point of denying excessive charity).³ Most of this material can be seen as anti-Christian in tendency and as reflecting the tension that Muslims felt over the status of ascetic tendencies in early Islam.

However, all of this attention to the Qurʾān, *Sīra* and *ḥadīth* on the part of the Ṣūfīs simply indicates that they have, like all other Muslims, always gone back to the prime sources of Islam for inspiration as well as justification of their position; in that way they are no different from the jurists in the quest to define the law as closely as possible, for example. For modern historians to take “objective” facts from this type of material and attempt to reconstruct a picture of mystical trends in early Islam is to commit the error of anachronistic reading of the texts; one is clearly looking at the texts through the eyes of later people and we learn nothing from them of the earliest meaning given to these sources. The most that may be concluded from this part of the discussion, therefore, is simply to say that Muslims have found the life story of Muḥammad and the Qurʾān itself to be vital sources in their mystical quest. One would not want to discount the possibility that even the early versions of the biography (*Sīra*) of Muḥammad have been affected by early mystics and thus reflect some of their concerns and desires, as is reflected also in the *ḥadīth* literature with its books devoted to *zuhd*, asceticism, as practised by Muḥammad. That the Qurʾān might, in fact, contain such ascetic elements is a possibility that needs to be entertained; however, whether the pieces of the Qurʾān which suggest this background was always understood that way by Muslims, and where those pieces of the Qurʾān actually originated, are vexing questions which still must be faced by scholarship.

Sources of Ṣūfī practice

The solution to this first aspect of the problem of the origins of Sufism, then, would seem to be to put aside the questions about the inherent spiritual asceticism of Islam and perhaps simply admit that the

understanding of the nature of God as contained within the Judaeo-Christian-Muslim tradition is one which is potentially amenable to the mystical way of life. There only remains, then, the second question of the development of what we may truly call Sufism in Islam, the influences upon it and its role in the emergence of Islam. For the early period there is the major problem of definition, of how to determine for example, whether Ibn Ḥanbal should be considered a Ṣūfī or simply an ascetic Muslim, given his encouragement of that way of life. That he should have combined this role with one of the upholding of traditionalism is significant, of course; one of his works which displays ascetic tendencies is the above-mentioned *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, a collection of traditions about the life of Muḥammad. Indeed, for the earliest period, this emphasis on asceticism is the primary element that one can isolate with certainty as the forerunner of the later mystical way. The evidence suggests that it was in the early to mid-ninth century that these sorts of tendencies found their expression in written form; it was only later in that century that this became combined with speculative thought, producing as a result a true system of mysticism, which may accurately and meaningfully be called Sufism. The dating of this era for the emergence of Sufism is confirmed within juridical works, where the disdain for the ascetic way of life is displayed and a resultant attempt on the part of the jurists to restrict its scope can clearly be seen; the end of the eighth century and early in the ninth century appears to be the era for the greatest disputes on this matter.⁴

Certainly, the influence of Christianity on the foundation of asceticism in Islam is clear in some of the earliest writings. Al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857), for example, has been shown⁵ to have borrowed heavily from the New Testament for various sayings and commendations of the Ṣūfī way of life. As well, the practice of wearing woollen garments called *ṣūf*, by means of which it is popularly believed that the term “Ṣūfī” (meaning “those who wear rough woollen garments”) was coined, is said to have been done in imitation of Christian hermits; this was carried out in order to serve as an indication of poverty as well as being an ascetic practice in and by itself.

The development of a mystical litany was also a part of the early enunciation of the movement. Termed *dhikr*, the practice was connected by the Ṣūfis to the Quranic injunction to “mention God often,” as in Qur’ān 33/21. The developed form of this litany consists of the constant repetition of various phrases, often *lā ilāh^a illā ʾllāh*, “There is no god but God.” This practice serves as the focal point of devotions for virtually every Ṣūfī group.⁶ Christian modes

of worship once again may have provided some of the impetus for this particular element.

Doctrinally, the early mystics are held to have been devoted to the notion of *tawakkul*, “total trust” in God. The characteristics are complete indifference to the world and its affairs and a full dependence upon God supplying the needs of the individual; this attitude was said to demonstrate one’s total trust in the power and mercy of God who will supply those needs. A total lack of possessions and deprivation of any bodily comforts were the marks of such a person. This trend is often seen to have been influenced by Christianity also, that being a tendency of monasticism in the church.

Given the geographical contexts in which Islamic asceticism is generally seen to have emerged – Baghdad, in the environment of the Christian heritage, and Khurasan, a former Buddhist centre – it is not surprising that elements of various religions, especially Christianity as the above examples show, should be present; little would seem to be gained by denying it. However, it has frequently been pointed out that the ascetic lifestyle in Islam developed with a certain overt political motivation. Once again in Islam, a religious position appears to have been used as a rallying point for rebellion against the ruling powers. The whole early ascetic inclination is frequently pictured as a renunciation and rejection of the political strife in the formative Islamic period. The early mystics were the true Muslims who held onto the Islamic spirit in the face of the manipulation of the religion by the ruling powers for their own purposes. The emphasis on *tawakkul* would be pictured in marked contrast to the efforts of all other Muslims to secure their places on earth rather than in heaven, at least from the perspective of the mystics. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728), famous for his role in the theological debates discussed in Chapter 5, emerges in the literature as one of the central figures of this type of spirituality, going to the extent of denying the value of existence in this world and speaking of the hereafter as the realm free of the contamination of political self-interest. Revolutionary involvement in the political arena was not sanctioned by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, even if that could have meant replacing an unjust ruler with a pious one; the slow persuasion of rulers was about the best that could be hoped for in the effort to improve the lot of all Muslims in the community.

Overall, then, the argument certainly can be made for “foreign influences” on the development of Sufism but, without a doubt, modern scholarship sees the internal tensions of the Muslim community as crucial in the emergence of early ascetic tendencies.

Development of Sufism

The ninth century was marked by a rapid progression of mystics, each famous for adding a certain element to the emergent mystical viewpoint and creating the central tenets of Sufism. Under the influence of neo-Platonism, at least according to some writers, mystical doctrines of the love of God, the beatific vision of the mystical experience, gnosis as the goal of the experience, the image of the mystical ascension, the absorption into God and the theory of the mystical states are all seen to emerge.

Al-Junayd (d. 910), a pupil of al-Muḥāsibī, is often given the credit for establishing a true system of mystical speculation, bringing together the insights of his predecessors and creating a lasting system for all subsequent generations. He is credited with the elaboration of the doctrine of *fanāʾ*, the goal of the mystic in “dying in one’s self,” “passing away” or “absorption” into God, supported by the Quranic, “All that is on the earth will disappear while your Lord’s face abides, majestic, splendid” (Qurʾān 55/26–7). The mystic quest is based on the need to return to God, the state in which humanity was before creation. *Baqāʾ*, the “continuance,” is the existence of the mystic after *fanāʾ*, when he or she lives in God. Al-Junayd combined this goal with an ethical theory which demanded of the mystic who has reached the state of “absorption” a return to society; this was so that the individual would make clear “the evidence of [God’s] grace to him, so that the lights of His gifts in the return of his individual characteristics scintillate and attract the community to him who appreciate him.”⁷ This meant, for al-Junayd, that the Ṣūfī had the responsibility to return to his community life and fulfil all the obligations of Muslim existence; the knowledge of the individual’s absorption into the divine remains a “secret treasure” which shines through the person in everything done in the world.

Al-Ḥallāj

Contemporary with al-Junayd was al-Ḥallāj (d. 922) who, likewise, was convinced of the necessity of the mystic quest, but who was condemned to death for the blasphemy of considering that individuals could recognize their God-nature through mystical experience. Stories relate that al-Ḥallāj proclaimed, “I am the Truth,” which was taken to mean that he felt himself actually to be God incarnate in the world. Such Ṣūfīs (another early example is al-Baṣṭāmī, d. 875) have come to be termed “intoxicated” as compared to the “sober” mysticism of

al-Junayd, for they had become so overcome by the mystical experience that existence, as such, had no meaning to them; their utterances became the focal point of their understanding of their experiences and vice versa.⁸ The ethical aspect of al-Junayd's doctrine became submerged within their experiences.

Later developments

These authors were only starting to develop a truly systematic picture of Sufism; it fell to authors such as Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 988) in the following century to construct general accounts of Sufism, its history and its meaning in the Islamic context. Al-Sarrāj wrote in his *Kitāb al-Luma'* of the legitimacy of Ṣūfī practice, based upon the precedent of Muḥammad and his companions. With this, he combined a great deal of definitional material in an attempt to distil the essence of the mystical path as it existed in his time. He states, for example:

The meaning of “passing away” and “continuance” . . . is the passing away of ignorance into the abiding condition of knowledge and the passing away of disobedience into the abiding state of obedience, and the passing away of indifference into the state of continual worship, and the passing away of the consideration of the actions of the servant, which are temporary, into the vision of the Divine Grace, which is the eternal.⁹

The eleventh century brought greater systematization to the theoretical basis of Sufism in the writings of al-Qushayrī (d. 1072). Writing in 1046, al-Qushayrī was concerned with demonstrating that Sufism was not in conflict with Sunnī Islam. Part of this proof was provided by the biography of many prominent Ṣūfis. He also presented a picture of the theory of the stations through which a Ṣūfī passes on his or her mystic quest and the states which God may grace the mystic with during that quest. Such had already been detailed by al-Sarrāj before him, but al-Qushayrī added further detail to the schema. Forty-five terms are used to describe the quest, starting with *tawba*, “repentance,” which is seen as the manifestation of the conscious desire to follow the mystic way, through “patience,” “constant awareness of God” and “satisfaction with God,” culminating in “gnosis,” “love” and “yearning to be with God.”¹⁰

Abu Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī used the basis established by earlier Ṣūfī theorists for promoting the assimilation of Sufism into orthodoxy in developing his own arguments; his magnum opus, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*,

the “Revivification of the Religious Sciences,” written between 1099 and 1102, tried to accomplish just what its title suggests: bring life back into the orthodox “religious sciences” through the inspiration of Sufism. In the process, Sufism itself would be seen to gain total legitimacy as being an essential part of the Islamic way of life. His work is divided into four sections. The first, “worship”, concentrates on the “inner meaning” of the rituals of Islam. The second, “personal behaviour,” sees the progression from religious law to mystical training as intimately linked. The third, “deadly sins,” details the discipline needed for the mystic quest. Finally, the fourth, “the way to salvation,” concentrates on the interpretation of spiritual experience. This progress in the life of the individual reflects al-Ghazālī’s overall view of life and the mystic quest:

If, then, you ask, What is the Beginning of Guidance in order that I may test my soul thereby? know that the beginning of guidance is outward piety and the end of guidance is inward piety. Only through piety is anything really achieved; only the pious are guided. Piety designates carrying out the commands of God most high and turning aside from what He prohibits¹¹

The Ṣūfī orders

The tendency towards increased intellectual support and the systematization of Sufism was developed even further in the Ṣūfī orders, which are based on the principle of the relationship between the master and the pupil. The authority of the master who has ascended through the stages of the mystic must be accepted wholly by the pupil, for only with guidance will the union with God be possible. The foundation of the *ṭarīqa*, the “way” or “path,” and later coming to mean the “order” or “brotherhood,” emerged as a way of providing a practical and structured way for the initiate to be guided through the stages of mystical experience. Beginning as an informal group, companionship with an acknowledged master was the focal point of the *ṭarīqa*. Groups emerged early on, centred in dwellings known as *ribāṭs*, *khānqāhs*, *khalwas* or *zāwiyas*, all meaning “Ṣūfī retreats,” in one part or another of the Muslim world. Such retreats were not organized in any particular way, however; the participants simply wandered from one such place to another. In the eleventh century the institutionalized *ṭarīqa* movement received a boost with the Seljuq

reorganization of the *madrasa*, the Islamic school, and the provision of support and supervision of Šūfī dwellings at the same time. This trend was encouraged even further by the success of al-Ghazālī's work in bringing Sufism into the fold of orthodoxy. The process culminated in the thirteenth century with the emergence of special centres of Šūfī training; focused on the activities and way of a single man, a centre would perpetuate the name, teaching, exercises and rule of life of that person. The *ṭarīqa* was handed down through the *isnād* or *silsila* of the *shaykh*, the leader of the order, passing on to the spiritual heirs of that person. The initiate swore allegiance to the *shaykh*, and thereby became linked to the spiritual chain. Often incorporated into these *silsilas* were famous Šūfīs of the past, such as al-Junayd and al-Bastāmī; the initial stage of the chain is frequently Muḥammad and from him 'Alī, although this does not necessarily indicate any Shī'ī leanings on the part of the groups.

All such *ṭarīqas*, formally at the very least, accept the law and ritual of orthodox Islam as binding. In this way, they provide a supplement to the Islamic way of life, rather than a true "alternative vision," although, obviously, their view of the true nature of Islam and its purpose is different from those who remain outside the *ṭarīqa*. The point remained, however, that in order for the *ṭarīqas* to ensure their acceptance by orthodoxy (i.e. the jurists), the attention to the externals of Islamic life continued to be necessary.

The major *ṭarīqas* in classical Islam were the Suhrawardiyya, the Qādiriyya, the Rifā'iyya, the Yasawiyya, the Kubrāwiyya, the Āsh'ariyya, the Shādhiliyya, the Badawiyya, the Mawlawiyya (Mevlevi)¹² and the Naqshbandiyya.¹³ These groups trace their foundations to various persons who lived in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The practices of the Šūfī orders

Taking the Qādiriyya as an example of the *ṭarīqa* phenomenon, one may see the role these institutions played in the fostering of the Šūfī attitude. 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, the *shaykh* of the movement, was born in Jilan in Persia in 1077 and went to Baghdad at the age of eighteen; there he became a popular preacher within the Ḥanbalī tradition at the age of about fifty, and he died in 1166. There is no evidence that he ever consciously set out to form a Šūfī school, although the legends told in great profusion about his life certainly want to picture him as a Šūfī miracle worker. The following story is reported by a disciple of al-Jīlānī:

Once, while I was still a young man, I entered the presence of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir (may Allah be well pleased with him), together with a large group. I had with me a book that dealt with questions of abstract philosophy and the speculative sciences of spirituality. As soon as we entered his presence, the Shaykh spoke to me – to me personally, not to the group as a whole – and before he had examined the book, or asked me about its contents, he said, “That book of yours is a bad companion. You had better go and give it a thorough wash!” I reacted to this by deciding to leave his presence, drop the book into some receptacle or other, and then refrain from carrying it with me after that, for fear of offending the Shaykh. My lower self could not accept the idea of giving it a wash, because I had developed quite a fondness for it, and some of its theories and principles had stimulated my intellectual curiosity. I was about to get up and leave, intending to carry out this plan of action, but the Shaykh gave me such a stare, like someone regarding me with incredulous amazement, that I simply could not get up. I felt trapped in a state of paralysis, but then he said to me, “Hand me that book of yours!” So I opened it, and lo and behold, there was nothing inside it but blank paper, with not a single letter written on it! I gave it to the Shaykh, and he thumbed through its pages, then he said, “This is ‘The Book of the Excellent Merits of the Qur’ān’ by Muḥamad Ibn al-Durays.” When he handed it back to me, I saw that it was indeed that book, written in a most handsome calligraphic script! The Shaykh then said to me, “Are you ready to turn in repentance from saying with your tongue what is not in your heart?” I said, “Yes, O my master.” So he told me to stand up. I obediently rose to my feet, and I had forgotten all about philosophy and the principles of spirituality! They had been totally erased from my inner being, as if they had never captured my interest.”¹⁴

It was to the two sons of ‘Abd al-Qādir that the formation of the school actually fell and, by the year 1300, centres existed in Iraq and Syria, with the major expansion coming in the fifteenth century. ‘Abd al-Qādir himself is famed as a saint and the belief in his power of intercession is what has made the *ṭarīqa* a significant presence throughout the Islamic world.

The Qādiriyya’s practices reflect the beliefs of the group itself but also the general Ṣūfī stance on the role of the master and the efficacy of various mystical practices. The initiation procedure contains the promise to “recite the *dhikr* in obedience to the dictates of the

shaykh” and the *shaykh* accepts the initiate “as a son.” The *dhikr* itself is recited by the group seated in front of the *shaykh* and repeated hundreds of times. The novice members repeat *lā ilāh^a illā ʾllāh*, “There is no god but God,” 165 times, while the more advanced members repeat a series of statements praising God and ‘Abd al-Qādir 121 times, followed by 100 repetitions of *sūra* 36, 41 repetitions of *sūra* 72, 121 repetitions of *sūra* 110, 8 repetitions of *sūra* 1 and topped off by 1 recitation of *sūra* 112.¹⁵ All this is done under the control of the *shaykh* at a pace which increases as it goes on, until individual members, potentially, have a mystic experience appropriate to the level of their spiritual advancement.

Ibn ‘Arabī

Muḥyī'l-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī represents the culmination of another strand within Islamic Sufism. Born in Spain in 1165, he travelled throughout North Africa and the Middle East, becoming initiated into Sufism in 1194, and eventually dying in Damascus in 1240. He was a prolific author and wrote *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyya*, “The Meccan Revelations,” a Ṣūfī encyclopaedia, and *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, “The Bezels of Wisdom,” his most famous work which summarizes his vision. A difficult writer to comprehend, without a doubt, he was fully educated in the Islamic sciences and brought to his work a vast quantity of learning.

His thought represents a true theosophy, believing in the essential unity between humanity and God. Having brought speculative Sufism to its apogee through his emphasis on gnosis (*maʿrifa*) as the way to the experience of truth, Ibn ‘Arabī has been accused of monism, of denying the reality of the separation between God and His creation. The doctrine of God’s transcendence is often held to be essential to Muslim orthodox theology, denying as it does any possibility of the incarnation of God in the world, a consequence of its ancient polemic with Christianity. In theory, the theosophical Ṣūfīs got around the problem with the notion of “the reality of Muḥammad” in control of the universe, that being the power to which the Ṣūfīs could aspire in their mystical quest. Ibn ‘Arabī argued for the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd*, the “unity of being,” where certain implications seem hard to avoid: being and existence are all one and are combined in God; being which is apart from God exists only by virtue of His will, but was, prior to its being made separate, one with God; the “perfect human” (*al-insān al-kāmil*) is the one who knows of oneness with God, who loves God, and who is loved by God. For Ibn al-‘Arabī, the concept of the *barzakh*, the barrier and bridge between material existence and

the divine world referred to in Qur'ān 25/53 and 55/20 in a metaphor of “the place where the two seas join,” is of central importance because that is the realm of existence in which humans play a critical role. The ability, or even the necessity, for humans to bridge that gap both in life and in death provides the unity of being but preserves the conceptual tension between the immanence and transcendence of God.¹⁶

The role of Sufism

The influence of Ibn ‘Arabī, despite the complexity of his thought, has been enormous, not only on all Sufism from that point on, but also in the modern scholarly world, which is still trying to get to grips with his ideas.¹⁷ But Sufism was not only of this elevated intellectual type, for the role of the brotherhoods in bringing Sufism closer to the popular level cannot be underestimated. It was the efforts of the brotherhoods which spread Islam into many far-flung corners of the contemporary Muslim world, often facilitated by means of mystical poetry and aided by a tolerant attitude towards local religious practices as long as they were accompanied by the basic spiritual impulse of Islam in its Ṣūfī guise. Such attitudes within Sufism are often seen as key to empowering local culture through its association with the worldly powerful religion of Islam; furthermore, the empowerment of social groups, notably women, has often been facilitated by Sufism especially given the exclusion of females from many aspects of normative, formal Islam.¹⁸ As well, Sufism has served throughout its history as a source of general religious revival for Muslims, breathing life into institutions when they tended to reach the point of self-suffocation. While many of the orthodox have remained deeply suspicious of many Ṣūfī practices and, at certain points in history (most notably with Ibn Taymiyya, d. 1328), renewal of Islam has been sought by means of a purge of non-mainstream Ṣūfī influences, Sufism has remained alive and well, catering to those who picture life in terms of the “mystic quest.”