

Introduction

How else can any past, which by definition comprises events, processes, structures, and so forth, considered to be no longer perceivable, be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an “imaginary” way?

HAYDEN WHITE, *THE CONTENT OF THE FORM*

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT SUFISM, the ascetic-mystical stream in Islam that emerged at the very early stage of this religion’s development and that subsequently took a wide variety of devotional, doctrinal, artistic, and institutional forms. Sufism’s internal diversity has produced an equally wide variety of its assessments by both insiders and outsiders. They range from soberly detached and critical to empathetically enthusiastic and apologetic. Our study of the phenomenon of Sufism itself and its conceptualizations by various actors with vastly different intellectual and devotional agendas will reveal a great deal not just about Sufism but also about human beings’ religious imagination more generally. What lies beyond this imagination does not concern us here. We leave it to believers, philosophers, and theologians to explore and appreciate.

Our task is to examine how Sufism has been imagined and, in the case of insiders, practiced based on this imagination, by various parties and actors since its inception up to the present. Our approach to the subject is inspired, in part, by Hayden White’s (b. 1928) aforementioned statement about history as a product of imagining and emplotment¹ of facts and figures. The continual imagining and emplotting of the historical vicissitudes of the ascetic-mystical movement in Islam by insiders and outsiders allow us to discover ever-new nuances and aspects pertaining to it. The

process of imagining and emplotting is also revealing of the changing cultural, societal, and aesthetic assumptions current in the societies whose members seek to conceptualize and explain the phenomenon of Sufism and the actions and statements of its followers. Excluding or delegitimizing one party to this collective act of imagining (for example, academic and nonacademic Orientalists, non-Muslim anthropologists of Muslim societies, or the Muslim fundamentalists/Salafis²) in favor of the other inevitably impoverishes our understanding of Sufism and Islam generally.³ Moreover, as will be shown, in describing the ascetic-mystical stream in Islam, different actors with different intellectual backgrounds and sometimes incompatible methodologies and goals feed off each other's discourses, thus creating epistemological bricolages that are as fanciful and illuminating as they are puzzling or occasionally incredible.⁴

As some postmodernist⁵ critics of history writing have claimed, cogently, "history is always history for someone, and that someone cannot be the past itself, for the past does not have a self."⁶ Like all historians, historians of Sufism are not neutral observers: they always "take a stand within the world, [are] occupied with it, fascinated by it, overjoyed or horrified by it."⁷ Prompted by their all-too-human (and humane) "care"⁸ for the world, historians of Sufism "transform into ultimately imagined narratives a list of past events that would otherwise be only a collection of singular statements and/or a chronicle."⁹ In other words, like all historians, students of Sufism are on a mission of emplotting disparate events and statements related to the object of their concern in order to convey their personal understanding of it, on the one hand, and perhaps also to teach us a certain moral-ethical lesson, on the other. This being so, they are usually deeply, inextricably, and passionately invested into their own storytelling.¹⁰ The historians' act of arranging of events, statements, dates, and actors—usually depicted without any plot or logic in chronicles, literary works, or other historical documentation—has an obvious aim: to give these disparate pieces of historical evidence some "unity of significance."¹¹ How exactly this raw historical evidence is emplotted into narratives remains uncertain. Hayden White has discussed its transformation into history writing mostly in literary terms, arguing that a "narrative account is always a figurative account, an *allegory*" aimed at the translating or "carrying over" of meanings from one discursive community to another.¹² Whereas one does not have to agree with White on the predominantly literary nature of history writing, one can hardly deny that the success or failure of arranging raw historical evidence into a story depends, in the end, on its resonance or lack thereof with cultural and intellectual prefer-

ences of the members of the society in which a given historical account has been produced.¹³ The same, of course, is true of any literary work.

It is probably in the spirit of such postmodernist conceptualizations of Western (“bourgeois”) historiography as a work of fiction par excellence that in his seminal book on Sufism Carl Ernst has presented its modern understanding in the West as “an invention of late eighteenth-century European Orientalist scholarship.”¹⁴ Bearing in mind its origins in the subaltern studies, which purposefully aim at dislodging Western intellectual paradigms, we should take Ernst’s deconstructive¹⁵ statement *cum grano salis*, as the saying goes.¹⁶ Sufism, no matter how fancifully construed and emplotted, was and still is quite real for its followers, opponents, and students, both inside and outside the Sufi tradition. What Sufis of Islam’s “classical age” (the ninth to twelfth centuries CE) said, implied, or wrote about Sufism in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, or the other “languages of Islam” was diligently translated by the oft-criticized Orientalists of western and eastern Europe as well as Russia into the languages of their native cultures. In the process, the Orientalists *inevitably* couched the original Sufi ideas and practices into the cultural codes intelligible to their own societies.¹⁷ The same applies to other phenomena within Islam, such as law, discursive theology, or the biography of the Prophet (*sira*).¹⁸

The repackaging of Muslim discourses into one or the other European cultural idiom was, in our view, largely a natural process by which European intellectuals sought to comprehend and convey to others a complex, multifaceted foreign culture and religion. In order to be understood and appreciated by the European and Russian reading publics of a given age, Islam and its various trends, including Sufism, had to be defined, classified, and presented in the intellectual conventions that would make sense to the intended recipients. Presenting Sufism on its own terms, namely, as it was professed by countless Sufi teachers and their disciples, was simply not an option for European and Russian scholars of Islam. First, there was no one uniformly accepted, transregional metanarrative about Sufism and Sufis in the premodern and modern Muslim world. There were, of course, numerous textbooks of Sufism or even dynastic histories composed from a Sufi perspective,¹⁹ but they were socially, linguistically, and culturally specific to the regions where they originated and, to boot, hardly representative of the internally diverse Sufi movement in Islam as a whole. Mentions by Sufi authors and teachers of their predecessors reveal a genealogy of their thought and practice, but do not provide a comprehensive picture of how, when, and why Sufism had arisen and developed in time and space. Second, as already mentioned, when translated literally into Western

languages, Sufi teachings and biographies would have no doubt fallen flat on European audiences. It is in this sense that a general notion of Sufism had to be “invented,” or, rather, imagined and emplotted, by European Orientalists for an average European intellectual to understand and relate to his or her own cultural and intellectual background and life experience.

In weaving a coherent and accessible narrative about Sufism for European audiences, leading experts on “Oriental studies” from the nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries first had to undertake the painstaking task of collecting, editing, and annotating Sufi texts. After this intellectual spadework had been accomplished, they would venture some general observations that have become grist to the mill of present-day critics of Orientalism.²⁰ Finally, as we shall see throughout this book, medieval and modern Muslim writers both sympathetic and unsympathetic to Sufism tended to detach it from the rest of the Muslim tradition by presenting it being either its culmination or aberration. Therefore, to hold Westerners responsible for doing exactly the same, as Carl Ernst does,²¹ is seeing the situation with one eye only, to borrow an image used by the great Muslim mystic Ibn (al-)‘Arabi (d. 638/1240).²²

On balance, one can submit that the biases²³ of Orientalist scholarship, although obvious to everyone with a modicum of knowledge of the subject, are no more or less severe than the biases of Sufis writing about their own doctrines and practices today as in the past. All writers, both insiders and outsiders, were, and still are, equally and deeply embedded in their own sets of power relations, cultural and social assumptions, and “oppressive [discursive] practices.”²⁴ Like Muslim scholars advocating their fields of intellectual endeavor (for example, jurisprudence and theology), Sufi teachers were and still are eager to assemble a certain concept of Muslim ascetic-mystical piety and to present it as the only correct, orthodox one.²⁵ Equally obvious and unavoidable are biases of Sufism’s Muslim opponents whose views of Sufism will be discussed in detail later on in this book. One, then, wonders what “an unbiased and authentic” account of Sufism, which Ernst implies is possible,²⁶ might look like.²⁷ In the end, the question boils down to whose biases are more preferable (or less distorting)—those of insiders or those of outsiders to the Sufi tradition? Some tentative answers to this question will be proposed in the present study.

To reiterate, what the European and Russian Orientalists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did was to repackage for their respective reading publics, with various degrees of success and accuracy, the diverse Sufi and anti-Sufi discourses internal to the Muslim community at various stages of its evolution. In pursuing this educational goal (which

was consonant with the spirit of the European Enlightenment), European students of Sufi texts²⁸ carefully preserved and reproduced the hidden and not-so-hidden biases inherent in their sources.²⁹ Simultaneously, they also injected into their renditions of original Muslim sources their own intellectual preferences and world-orientational convictions.³⁰ As should be abundantly clear from the recent critical examinations of Orientalism,³¹ the Western scholars' biases were, in large part, shaped by the analytical categories that they used, because these categories were specific social-cultural constructs with particular genealogies of their own.³² Thus, the very notion of "religion" itself, which had grown out of the specific experiences of Christian Europe, was widely used as "the fundamental yardstick or paradigm-case for the study of 'other religions.'" ³³ The same applies to such categories as "mysticism" and "rational/irrational"³⁴ that are of direct relevance to our study of Sufism. An unreflective, summary application of such distinctly (western) European categories to non-Abrahamic traditions of India and the Far East has been even more problematic due to the vast disparity in the cultural and social sensitivities of Eastern and Western societies.³⁵

Besides, as Edward Said and his numerous followers have shown, some practitioners of Orientalist scholarship in the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries did indeed pursue sometimes covert and sometimes obvious political and ideological agendas aimed at facilitating and justifying European colonization of the Muslim lands.³⁶ For example, a number of politically and ideologically engaged Orientalists in the service of the European and Russian colonial governments tended to exaggerate the militant, anti-Christian "resistance potential" of Islam generally and Sufism in particular.³⁷ In so doing, they followed, perhaps unwittingly, in the footsteps of medieval Christian detractors of Islam and Muslims.³⁸

This said, the views of various cohorts of European students of Islam (summarily described by Said as "Orientalists") differed significantly, determined as they were by their professional responsibilities and various audiences to whom they addressed their discourses.³⁹ The situation in which nineteenth- and twentieth-century Orientalists found themselves is not dissimilar to that of today's Islamologists in Europe, the United States, and Russia, who, when called upon to comment on an "Islamic" event, wittingly or not, adjust their comments to the expectations and levels of understanding peculiar to their audiences. Thus, a Western scholar of Sufism today, when asked by state officials to explain why his or her study is important and how it is relevant to state policy toward various Muslim communities located inside and outside his or her native country, is likely

to present a different image of Sufism from the one that he or she would in a lecture addressed to an audience of experts on the subject, in a college classroom, or while speaking to journalists. Any scholar who wants to be understood by a nonspecialist auditorium is under pressure to avoid nuances and prolixity, going straight to the heart of the matter, as it were.⁴⁰ This factor inevitably detracts from the complexity of the issues discussed, not to mention accuracy of his or her analysis. The image of Islam and Muslim societies is likely to be substantially different (usually more nuanced and self-reflective) in the scholar's academic works addressed to his or her intellectual peers. In short, one should keep in mind the diversity of consumers of Orientalist expertise, in addition to the sociopolitical positions and predilections of the experts. The experts have to weigh and adjust constantly and consciously their public pronouncements about Islam and Muslims or risk stepping on many sensitive toes and facing public outrage.

Finally, scholars, who in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries served as colonial administrators, did indeed pursue definite professional goals (as do scholars today who are working for Western and Russian governments and think tanks). However, their discourses, in our opinion, should not be lumped together with those of academic Orientalists, who were under no immediate pressure to produce actionable or ideologically driven analyses.⁴¹ So, before launching into a diatribe against their predecessors, today's experts on Islam and Muslim societies, who have taken Said's critique of Orientalism to heart, should determine which group of the Orientalists they are targeting in order not to paint them all with one brush. They should also take a long and hard look at their own knowledge production and knowledge deployment practices that are always situational, determined as they are by concrete circumstances, audiences, and venues. In short, every critical deconstruction of Orientalism should begin at home.

As for the role of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Orientalists in reconstructing Sufism's evolution in time and space, without their painstaking efforts our knowledge of the ascetic-mystical tradition in Islam today would have been much poorer and less comprehensive than it is.⁴² We can agree or disagree with their descriptions of Sufism and/or Islam, but we should be grateful, not disdainful toward them, despite prejudices, errors, and blind spots that were as unavoidable in their time and age as they are in ours.⁴³ In the present book, the legacy of European and Russian Orientalists is treated as the fruit of the collective intellectual discovery⁴⁴

of Sufism that they shared with Sufis and Muslims generally, for no one, in our opinion, has the monopoly on exploring a subject that interests and excites them, even if, in hindsight, this exploration may appear to have been incomplete or biased. Richard King argues, and we agree, that a fruitful and illuminating study of religions by outsiders is possible, despite the cognitive gap between the subject and the object of study and with the proviso that academic scholars should not “claim ultimate jurisdiction in these matters.”⁴⁵

As for the “invented” character of Sufism in Orientalist discourses that Ernst and others have pointed out, it is no less or no more real or invented than such widely used concepts as “asceticism,”⁴⁶ “religion,”⁴⁷ “Neoplatonism,”⁴⁸ “Judeo-Christian tradition,”⁴⁹ or “Islam” itself.⁵⁰ All these intellectual abstracts and constructs, whether external or internal to the phenomenon in question, are made real (realized) by the actors who take them to heart, discuss, debate, teach, or implement. Sociologists and anthropologists have shown that to exist and to have staying power, ideas and practices have to be constantly enacted or performed by various groups of actors.⁵¹ If a certain idea or practice is no longer enacted/performed by one group, it either vanishes or, as Bruno Latour has suggested, “the *other* actors have taken over the relay”⁵² to sustain it in a different type (or site) of performance. The actors are, in other words, the real agents, not the abstracts and practices themselves. However, abstracts, constructs, and practices do matter as motivations, frameworks, and sources of arguments insofar as they are being reimagined, emplotted, and debated by various categories of participants who thereby help to sustain them. In this respect, the notions of “Sufism” and “Islam” are not different from any other abstractions created by human beings to serve as explanatory tools.⁵³

Having just mentioned “Islam” alongside “Sufism,” in the chapters that follow we treat the latter as “Islam in miniature.” In other words, all the features of the encompassing larger tradition (Islam) are reflected in its ascetic-mystical stream (Sufism), albeit on a relatively smaller scale. We submit that, like Islam or any other religion for that matter, Sufism comprises the following major components:⁵⁴

1. Teachings (discourses), both hegemonic and counterhegemonic, stabilizing and destabilizing, widely accepted and marginal;
2. Practices, defined by the teachings (discourses) and instrumental in the production and maintenance of certain world outlooks, values, lifestyles, cosmologies, and social orders;

3. Community of intellectual and, in the case of Sufism, also spiritual commitment that constitutes a source (and, occasionally, the primary source) of identity/subjectivity⁵⁵ for its followers;
4. Institutions that ensure the continuity of the Sufi stream of Islam by creating a propitious milieu for the cultivation, performance, and reproduction of its teachings/discourses and practices;
5. Leaders, who interpret the foundational teachings/discourses, supervise rituals, secure the functioning of institutions, and determine the overall direction of the religious tradition and/or community that they guide and represent.

The aim of this book is to explore these dimensions of the ascetic-mystical stream of Islam, or Sufism, without sliding into either unbridled partisanship or adverse criticism of the subject and of its conceptualizations by both insiders and outsiders.⁵⁶ As the hope of reaching “the heights of complete ‘objectivity’” is unreachable by definition,⁵⁷ scholars, according to the British Buddhist Richard King, should frankly acknowledge “their own ‘pre-judgments;’” then attempt “to provide a balanced and fair portrayal of that in which they are claiming expertise,” even if this attempt may entail expressing “alternate opinions” and challenging “perspectives offered by the religious traditions themselves.”⁵⁸ Our hope is that the relative impartiality of our approach to Sufism and Islam generally is assured by our lack of any personal stake in either. The American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842–1910), citing the great Muslim theologian al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111),⁵⁹ has argued that “to understand the causes of drunkenness, as a physician understands them, is not to be drunk.”⁶⁰ Likewise, to understand Sufism, one does not have to “imbibe” and “digest” its principles with a view to implementing them in practice. On the contrary, to maintain a modicum of objectivity, one should remain immune to Sufism’s potent allure. This detached, nonparticipatory kind of understanding, limited and limiting as it may appear, does have the right to exist. This is exactly our position: that of an outsider looking inside the “Abode of Islam/Sufism” without embroiling him or herself in debates about its true essence or what constitutes correct or incorrect Muslim or Sufi doctrine and practice.

This said, one can never hope to avoid having personal intellectual preferences, simply because they are humanly inescapable. Our approach to Sufism and Islam has been shaped by our lifelong academic study of Islam and Muslim societies. In the course of this study we have grown increasingly weary of the rampant ideological partisanship that has been the hall-

mark of the field of Islamic studies over that past few decades.⁶¹ While being cognizant of the fact that partisan approaches to Islam and the Muslims in the academic world and beyond are unavoidable under the current geopolitical and cultural conditions, we have endeavored, to the extent this is possible, to steer clear of ideologically and personally driven debates over Islam's and Sufism's true nature and orthodoxy (or a lack thereof). This does not mean that they are ignored. On the contrary, these debates are given serious consideration as long as they are germane to the issues raised in this book.⁶² For us, these debates are but evidence that should be treated objectively and impartially, not arbitrated, nor taken sides with or against. It is certainly true that any serious scholar of Sufism and/or Islam is not immune to a certain level of empathy for his or her subject. Nevertheless, our overall position is to try to keep our personal preferences to ourselves as much as possible.

On the methodological plane, we are not wedded to any particular theory for its own sake. Conversant with the latest methodologies offered by sociologists, anthropologists, literary critics, cultural historians, and adepts of so-called subaltern studies, we employ this or that method and theory only as long as it sheds new light on the aspects of the subject that would otherwise have remained invisible or underappreciated. At the same time, we are convinced that none of the methods or theories mentioned or applied in the narrative that follows is sufficient to explain such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon as Sufism, not to mention Islam as a whole. New theories offered by social sciences and the humanities can indeed be of great help in that they allow the investigator to see one and the same event, personality, or concept from a variety of vantage points, which occasionally, but not always, can be quite illuminating. Furthermore, Islam and Islamic studies should not, in our opinion, be the limit in telling a comprehensive story of Sufism and its five components enumerated above. Methods used and insights obtained in academic fields and contexts outside Islamic studies proper often prove to be extremely helpful in exploring the ascetic-mystical stream of Islam. Therefore, in this book we will be drawing parallels between Sufi Islam and other religious traditions as well as Sufism and secular ideological systems.⁶³ This perspective should help us to avoid the common trend among scholars of Islam to focus on "things Islamic," while ignoring rich opportunities for comparative analysis offered by other religions and cultures. The lack of such a comparative perspective, as will be shown, is in part a result of the ideological self-censure performed by scholars out of a misguided (in our opinion at least) sense of political correctness or for apologetic considerations.

The main objective of this book is to give an accessible, while also nuanced, account of Sufism as a system of thought and action. The chronological scope is from Sufism's beginnings in the second/eighth century to the present day. Because our approach to Sufism is novel in many respects and departs from the traditional historicist and positivist perspective that we adopted in our earlier works, we have titled our study *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism*. Whether this title accurately reflects the content is for the reader to judge.

In order not to digress from the plot lines in the main body of this book, a definition of several key concepts that inform our analytic framework is in order. We treat Sufism as an ascetic-mystical movement, stream, or trend within Islam (both Sunni and Shi'i). Our choice of the hyphenated definition indicates our reluctance to separate strictly and unequivocally "ascetic" beliefs and practices from those commonly understood as "mystical."⁶⁴ This separation takes its origins in Max Weber's concept of early Islam as "this-worldly asceticism of a warrior group" that was later somehow "adulterated by Sufism which catered for the emotional and orgiastic needs of the masses."⁶⁵ Basing himself on this initial axiom, Weber defined Sufism as "other-worldly mysticism" that was derived "from Hindu and Persian sources" and that "in no case did constitute 'asceticism' in the special sense of the term which we have employed."⁶⁶ Although adopted by a number of present-day Islamologists,⁶⁷ such a neat and occasionally useful dichotomy is, in our opinion, unsustainable.⁶⁸ The same applies to Weber's concurrent dichotomy of "ascetic virtuoso" versus "mystical virtuoso."⁶⁹

Renouncing this world often entails reorienting oneself to the world to come and, as a consequence, attempts to experience visionary glimpses or even somatic sensations of its glories and pleasures (for example, seeing God, partaking of paradisiacal fruits, drinks, and delicacies, embracing hours, and such) already in this life.⁷⁰ The purpose of ascetic self-discipline and self-imposed strictures is, as numerous Sufi masters have argued for centuries, to purify the soul and to prepare it for a vision of or communion/communication with God here and now.⁷¹ That this originally Platonic idea was adopted by some early Christian thinkers (for example, by Justin Martyr, 100–165 CE) is evidenced by their descriptions of "the soul's return to God through purification (*askēsis*) followed by contemplative vision (*theōria*)."⁷² In other words, the desire to "starve out or punish the animal elements of the human condition" exhibited by early Christian monks (those "athletes of Christ")⁷³ has always been supported by "a highly articulated [mystical] theology."⁷⁴

Therefore, distilling asceticism and mysticism into two “ideal types”⁷⁵ may be helpful and elegant at first sight, but, at closer look, fails to account adequately for the messiness and originality of the thought and practice of real-life “spiritual athletes.” After examining the statements of early Muslim heresiographers, the German Islamologist Bernd Radtke (b. 1944) has unequivocally linked the ascetic practices and self-imposed strictures of early Muslims to their mystical aspirations and goals.⁷⁶ In fact, the two usually went hand in hand and were inseparable. The early Muslim heresiographers cited by Radtke considered both ascetic feats and mystical aspirations of the first Muslim pietists to be equally objectionable insofar as they had the potential to entice some gullible members of the Muslim community into thinking of themselves as God’s beloveds, thereby causing them to neglect their religious duties. Much later, the renowned advocates of Sunni “orthodoxy” Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and al-Dhahabi (d. 748/1348) also conflated asceticism and mysticism by mentioning certain individuals who acted simultaneously “on the basis of the asceticism and Sufism of the philosophers.”⁷⁷ At the same time, Muslim scholars such as Ibn Khaldun (d. 808/1406)⁷⁸ believed that “philosophizing Sufis” had corrupted “the originally pious tradition of *zuhd*” with their mystical metaphysics.⁷⁹ This view was reproduced by Western students of Islam, such as Louis Massignon (1883–1962) and Christopher Melchert, both of whom have argued that asceticism is not the same as mysticism and vice versa. According to Massignon, for example, by diluting the originally pure ascetic tradition of Islam with Neoplatonic metaphysics, later followers of Sufism sacrificed its suprarational, emotional impulse and directness. As a result, Sufism turned into a sterile scholastic theology.⁸⁰ As for the Sufis themselves, they have never tired of emphasizing an intimate link between the Sufi’s “action(s) and elegant deeds of devotion,” on the one hand, and the “divinely-inspired knowledge” bestowed on him by God, on the other.⁸¹ In any event, the very dynamic of merger and separation of asceticism and mysticism in insider and outsider accounts of Sufism is indicative of the two being, essentially, conterminous and complementary.

Similar conclusions about the relationship between ascetic and mystical belief and behavior have been reached by scholars of Christianity. Thus, the major expert on Western Christian mysticism Bernard McGinn (b. 1937) has argued that “rather than being something added on to mystical experience, mystical theory in most cases *precedes and guides* [emphasis ours—A. K.] the mystic’s whole way of life.”⁸² This way of life, as McGinn’s

multivolume project demonstrates, invariably requires that Christian devotees engage in ascetic exercises and rigorous self-discipline (defined as “monasticism,” “penance,” and “absolute poverty”) with a view to “attaining the ‘loving knowledge of God.’”⁸³ In other words, the ascetics’ arduous feats of perseverance and self-disciplining strictures, according to McGinn, inevitably produce “visualizations,” “contemplations,” and ecstatic “trances.” Thus, both ascetic practice and mystical longing for God are equally necessary for the devotees to achieve their destination.⁸⁴ A similar opinion was articulated by Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958) in his study of the mystical aspects of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. In his rather apologetic description of Russian Orthodoxy, he argued, among other things, that mystical theology constitutes the very core of its faith and practice.⁸⁵ In sum, ascetic life and mystical theology are inseparable and feed off each other. The conclusions reached by McGinn and Lossky, as well as numerous other scholars of Christianity, apply neatly to the ascetic-mystical tradition in Islam. Like their Christian brothers-in-spirit, medieval Muslim devotees organically combined, albeit in varying degrees, ascetic practices (or “bodily regimes/praxis” as they are often dubbed in today’s Western scholarship⁸⁶) with mystical speculations about God and his relations with his human creatures.⁸⁷

Should one still insist that there is an obvious heuristic validity to the asceticism-mysticism dichotomy, we can suggest that the former is more about disciplining the human appetitive soul or *anima*⁸⁸ (by means of vows, vigils, fasting, and other self-imposed rigors and penances),⁸⁹ whereas the latter is more about imagining and experiencing “symbolic” cosmologies⁹⁰ as well as an often ingenious linking of concrete ascetic actions to broader, and loftier, cosmic contexts and goals.⁹¹ Concisely put: asceticism is primarily about body, whereas mysticism is primarily about mind; however, the two are usually merged organically in one and the same personality and are thus inseparable, except for heuristic purposes. To go against one’s natural instincts one has to have a really good cause.⁹² Therefore, in unison with McGinn, Lossky, and others, we submit that one cannot engage in ascetic “bodily regimes” without a mystical theology or metaphysics (that is, a “symbolic universe”),⁹³ no matter how rudimentary, unstructured, or illogical. Whereas discoursing about mystical experience usually falls within the rubric of “mysticism” or “mystical theology,”⁹⁴ with asceticism being commonly conceived as practice par excellence, separating them may distract us from their organic coexistence and interdependence.⁹⁵ As already mentioned, subduing one’s appetitive nature demands a really good cause, in our case, either salvation or intimacy/union with

God. However, we admit that occasionally such a separation may come in handy for educational purposes, for example, framing Sufism as a sequential progression from simpler to more sophisticated forms of belief and practice.

Nevertheless, one has to acknowledge that differences between “asceticism” or “renunciation of the world” (Arab. *nusk*; *taqashshuf*; *zuhd* [ʿfi ʿl-*dunya*]) and “mysticism” (*irfan*; *kashf*; *hikma*) were as real for medieval Muslim scholars as they are for modern-day Islamologists.⁹⁶ Moreover, recent scholarship on the subject has suggested that one could pursue a rigorous type of ascetic piety without ever engaging in mystical speculations or attaching oneself to a Sufi community or spiritual lineage (*sil-sila*).⁹⁷ Such assumptions notwithstanding, the two more often than not go hand in hand,⁹⁸ which, in our view, warrants bringing them together in a hyphenated phrase. The usefulness and viability of numerous other terms and concepts pertinent to the ascetic-mystical movement in Islam are discussed in what follows. In particular, the ideologically driven contractions and expansions of the term “Sufism” itself constitute the subject matter of chapter 1 of this book.

This study has been inspired, in large part, by the author’s editorial work for E. J. Brill’s monumental *Encyclopedia of Islam* (*EI*). To its erudite, eloquent, and perceptive contributors he owes a profound debt of gratitude. In the process of editing submissions to the section “Sufism” of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*’s third edition (*EI3*), he has had a unique chance to observe the overall evolution of the academic field of Sufi studies, a subfield of Islamic studies, or “Islamology/Islamologie,” as it is sometimes dubbed in the European and Russian academe. One important advantage of his editorial duties was that they allowed the author to discover new scholarship on Sufism and Islam generally. This does not mean that the insights of the contributors to the *EI3* have been simply integrated into this monograph. Most of the entries edited by the author were too narrow in their focus to serve as the foundation of a general analytic survey of Sufism such as the one intended here. The author’s task was to synthesize disparate facts about Sufism in order to produce, hopefully, a cohesive and comprehensive whole.

The Gist

1. In exploring various manifestations of the phenomenon called “Sufism” (*tasawwuf*), one should bring together both “internal” and

“external” perspectives on it that are often being intricately engaged in conversations with one another.

2. Sufism is “Islam in miniature” with the major features of Sufism present in Islam and vice versa. This being the case, Sufism, like Islam, comprises all the major components of a religious tradition, namely, teachings/discourses, practices, communities, institutions, and leaders.
3. The author has strived to steer clear of both barefaced apologetics and theological criticism of Sufism, seeking impartiality and objectivity as far as humanly possible.
4. The author takes a holistic approach to Sufism by refusing to separate its ascetic and mystical elements, in particular Sufi teachings from Sufi practices. The two always go hand in hand and are reciprocal. Hence, the author’s use of the hyphenated adjective “ascetic-mystical” in describing and analyzing various components and manifestations of Sufism.
5. The book summarizes the major insights that the author has acquired in working as an editor of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*’s third edition (E. J. Brill, Leiden and Boston), the seminal reference for the field of Islamic studies today.⁹⁹