



THE ARRIVAL OF “ORIENTAL” SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS IN THE WEST IN THE 20th CENTURY

In the mid nineteenth century, in Europe, the so-called “Oriental” or Eastern religions filled a need and cleared some obstacles in discussion of religion that Western philosophers and intellectuals had encountered in Christianity for some time. These traditions also aroused the interest of members of the population who were looking for new spiritual paths that might be more *experiential* and conducive to personal growth than the traditional Christianity they were used to. The great American Psychologist William James introduced some of these Eastern traditions in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Late in the 19th and early 20th Century, religions and spiritual practices from the East—that is from the Middle East to East Asia—began to fill a need for some people that Western religion did not seem to offer, in terms of finding meaning in existence.

The twentieth century saw a dwindling in the sizes of Catholic and Protestant congregations, especially in Europe. In some cases this was due to the fact that some political progressive movements shared a negative opinion on the influence of religion. (Karl Marx’s famous remark that religion was the “opium of the masses” continues to be quoted to this day.) However, over time it became clear that people in the West were simply finding that it was not enough to have a minister, pastor or priest tell them about God and matters relating to the spirit: they wanted experience of a spiritual life. More and more writers explored the “alternatives.” Along with James’ book, the 20th Century saw the publication of Aldous Huxley’s widely read *The Perennial Philosophy* about the world’s mystical paths and the collection of Buddhist scriptures edited by Dwight Goddard, *A Buddhist Bible*, as well as a host of other works that have now become modern classics in the topic. English and German editions of the Hindu Upanishads came out early in the 20th century; translations of the Qur’an became more available; and the greatest of the so-called Orientalist scholars such as Reynolds Nicholson and A.J. Arberry, fluent in Arabic and Persian, brought out editions of The Qur’an, Jelaluddin Rumi’s 6 volume work of Islamic mystic teachings *The Masnavi*, as well as Rumi’s many volumes of poems, the *Divan-i Kabir*, and Fariduddin Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds (Mantiq ud’Tayr)*, a popular classic work of the Islamic world.

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Aside from the translators, certain remarkable figures became the first “couriers” of these “Oriental” religious traditions to the West. G.I. Gurdjieff, born near Russia in the Caucasus Mountains, began a set of journeys taking him through the Islamic and Orthodox Christian regions where “wisdom traditions” were practiced. Deeply influenced by teachers of Sufi Islam and practices he encountered (as well as some Christian mystics)—recounted in his book *Meetings with Remarkable Men*—he then embarked for Western Europe where he developed over decades a considerable following.¹ He taught these followers with his colleague P.D. Ouspensky, creating the “Third Way” movement, with centers established throughout Europe and North America. The emphasis was not just on attending mass or large rituals. Taking his cue from the Sufis, he called upon people to do “the work”—which meant dedicated work on *oneself*. To this day Gurdjieff circles thrive throughout Western Europe and North America.

Helena Blavatsky founded another spiritual movement that she dubbed “Theosophy” in the late 19th century, and that too soon spread throughout Europe. Her Theosophical Society held talks, lectures, and much more than Gurdjieff’s movement, was tied to the mystic spiritual philosophies of India—including Yoga, Vedanta and Buddhism. By the time Madame Blavatsky died in 1891, Theosophical Society centers, publishing houses and bookstores had spread to include most countries of Europe, and the publications were numerous. The Theosophical Society, under the later leadership of Annie Besant, began grooming a quite young but spiritually attuned Indian, Jiddu Krishnamurti, as a future spiritual master. (Though Krishnamurti broke with the Theosophy movement, his writing and teachings, conveying his own brand spiritual philosophy, would sweep North American and England till his death in the 1986.)

Indian gurus and teachers of the philosophies of yoga and Vedanta aroused great interest. In 1893, at the first Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893, Swami Vivekananda gave his now famous opening speech to the massive gathering. “Man is to become divine by realizing the divine.” He said. “Idols or temples or churches or books are only the supports, the helps, of his spiritual childhood: but on and on he must progress.” The tremendous stir Vivekananda created resonates in the West over a century later.² Vivekananda introduced the idea that our consciousness would evolve by our continuous reaching for God. He was by far the most popular speaker at the lengthy event attended by thousands. The interest in Indian religion and practices was about to take off in the West in a big way—throughout the ensuing century.



Islam, also at the time looked upon as an “oriental” religion, arrived in the Western countries by various routes, for the most part in the latter half of the 20th Century. Muslims had previously lived in tiny numbers in Europe, aside from Bosnia and Albania where they were a majority. But early in the 20th century there was a growing curiosity in Europe and North America about an Islamic tradition that fit in with the growing interest in Eastern wisdom traditions: Sufism. Sufi practices happened to bear a resemblance to the Indian and Buddhist contemplative practices that began to attract westerners in ever greater numbers.

It was, therefore, the “mystical dimension of Islam” that first attracted westerners to the religion of Islam. (That is, if we exclude period of *Arab-chic*, when a mysterious, sensual and fictional Islam filled books and movie theatres in the West; from the silent film “Son of the Sheik” with Rudolph Valentino to the action-packed “Lawrence of Arabia.”) This strain of Islam was the one in which Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan was nurtured, and in turn, his daughter the writer, musician and French Resistance heroine, Noor—the subject of the documentary we are examining.

The Emergence of Sufism in Islam

Sufism, the gnostic current within Islam (the Greek *gnostic* means directing “knowing” or experience) and its teachers, had been responsible at the start for the spread of Islam to the Indian subcontinent. It blended harmoniously with the older Hindu religion and traditions in India—which almost deprived Central Asian imperialist kings of the excuse that they were “converting idolaters” when they decided to invade India.³ This merging of traditions was particularly swift in the Western part of India, the region from which Inayat Khan hailed. The actual name of Sufism in Islam is *tassawuf* in Arabic, which derives from the root word for “wool,” (*sawf*) as many early ascetics in the Middle East wore simple wool garments. Sufi Muslims for the last 1400 years have traced their view of spiritual practice to two companions of the Prophet Mohammad, either Ali ibn Abu Taleb, his cousin, or Abu Bakr. The term “mystical dimension of Islam” has been applied to describe Sufism by one of the greatest Islamic scholars in the West, Anne Marie Schimmel, in her influential book of the same name.⁴



In the 10th and 11th centuries, the beginning of the Golden Age of Islam, while science and arts began to reach a peak of activity, Sufism had become part and parcel of much of the Islamic culture. Craft guilds, artists, authors, musicians, and the advocates of science were often affiliated with Sufism. Islamic scientific and philosophical inquiry was closely aligned with it as well; these quests for knowledge and understanding moved on parallel tracks in the Islamic world.

Ibn Sina, or Avicenna, the tenth century founder of the field of Medicine as we know it in both the East and West was also the one of the most illustrious philosophers of the Islamic Golden Age. His work partly lined up with that of Sufi philosophers, as he was concerned with the nature of the “self.” However, because he cast doubt on the existence of an eternal soul, he was further from mainstream Islamic thinkers than the Sufi thinkers in that regard. Ibn Sina, was influenced by the philosophy of Aristotle, especially in his scientific work, and was not much interested in Plato, who appealed both to nation builders and mystics. For Sufi scholars, the philosophy of Plato and Neo-Platonism were the most important works from classical antiquity. Still, Ibn Sina’s inquiries into the nature of “self” and the ways the self evolves—in a theory he called the “Flying Man”—constituted a philosophical inquiry that was of great interest to Sufis.

By the 11th Century, the groups dedicated to ‘irfan (translated gnosis: direct experience of the divine) had evolved into different “paths” (*tariqa*) often named for different founders. Their centers could be mosques, but in a more intimate and controlled manner members would meet in lodges or *khanegahs* or *tekkes*. There they might focus on contemplative practice or meditation, a form of “remembrance” of the divine (*zhikr*) based on aligning the breath with sacred syllables (*wazaif*) or the divine names. Using the breath to align the “heart” they were engaged in constant remembrance of God in all they did and all they experienced. These seekers, practicing the teachings of the shaikh or master, were known as *dervishes*—those who stand at the “threshold”—or *fakirs*—practitioners of spiritual poverty or humility. In many parts of the world women were also dervishes, and teachers as well.⁵

The great tradition of “oneness” which shaped the Inayat Khan and his family.

Abu Hamed Al’Ghazzali (1058-1111), one of the most famous and influential theologians and scholars of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), determined there was an authentic and lasting



relationship between Sufism and the rest of the Muslim community (*ummah*) in works such as *The Alchemy of Happiness* (*Kimiya'-yi sa'adat*) and *The Niche of Lights* (*Mishkat al-anwar*). He embraced the inner or *esoteric* Sufi practice combining it with his own “exoteric” religious practices. Al’Ghazzali also established a firm connection between Sufi philosophy and traditional Islamic Theology (He was associated with the important Ash’arite school of theology.) This created some new possibilities for the alignment of Islam more closely with practices prioritizing peace, restraint (*sabr*) through a mindfulness of Unity (*tawhid*).⁶

After Al’Ghazzali, and until its arrival in the West in the 20th century, Sufism had a secure place within much of the *ummah* and the Islamic world, and in the Golden Age of Islam *tassawuf* became immensely popular in the areas of the former Persian Empire, Arab countries, northern Africa, and Central Asia. Today a few hundred million Muslims—out of a total 1.5 billion—openly align themselves with Sufism, even when they are not dedicated practitioners. But numbers matter little to Sufis, and in any case, Sufism’s traditions have become deeply embedded in the most populous Muslim countries of the world: both India (and Pakistan) and Indonesia. These are countries where Sufis originally drew populations to Islam without any coercion.

Sufi Muslims place special emphasis on the Islamic concept of *tawhid* or “Unity” or “oneness” – which does not simply mean monotheism. For Sufis it points to the “Unity of all Being” (*wahdat al-wujud*), suggesting all is part of the One – and the Divine is present in us and we belong to the Divine. Some of these spiritual orders emphasized study of the Qur’an and meditation (*moaqabeh*) in a state of heightened awareness, or “sobriety.” Other orders were part of the “school of ecstasy.”

One of many Persian sages who settled in India was Moinuddin Chishti, (1141-1246) whose teachings even in the pre-Mughal period were so powerful, that his *Chishti* order became one of the widespread schools in India. The *pir* or master Hazrat Nizamuddin Auwliya in Delhi encouraged and refined the development of the forms of music to enhance spiritual states. (Sufis and Muslims in general have been split on the use of music for spiritual purposes.) His followers like the great poet Amir Kushru, began designing the instruments that have become the foundation of later classical Indian music (such as the sitar and tabla), and Qawwali music—

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popular to this day—emerged in Nizamuddin’s Chishti order. After his death, the mosque and shrine dedicated to Hazrat Nizamuddin, became a great pilgrimage site Muslims all over central India, as did the other great Chishti center in Ajmer.⁷

In the Middle East, during the Seljuk and Ottoman Empires, the Mevlevi order was one of many that thrived. It had been named after the Sufi master and poet Rumi in the 13th century, who also came from the area of the Persian Empire. His widely influential spiritual poems or *ghazals*, and six volume work of stories and teachings, *The Masnavi*, had a widespread and lasting influence. Some in Rumi’s lineage have become known as “whirling dervishes,” who practice a ritual form of meditation involving turning with the body, placing the breath on the heart God. This practice, which in central Asia emerged when people engaged in sacred chanting, or *zhikr* (remembrance), had been adopted by Rumi as a dervish practice. It was refined to a ritual dance with sacred music by his son Sultan Walad.⁸ The Mevlevi order was held in special esteem for centuries by the Seljuk and Ottoman Empires, and Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent built them a splendid Octagonal Tekke in Galata in Istanbul, visited by many travellers in Istanbul to this day—just as Rumi’s tomb in Konya is a pilgrimage site for Muslims from all over the world. Rumi’s experience of union or oneness gave rise to poems that break down barriers between peoples, religions and nations:

What can I do, Muslims? I do not know myself.

I am neither Christian nor Jew, neither Magian nor Muslim,

I am not from east or west, not from land or sea,

not from the shafts of nature nor from the spheres of the firmament,

not of the earth, not of water, not of air, not of fire.

I am not from the highest heaven, not from this world,

not from existence, not from being.

I am not from India, not from China, not from Bulgaria, not from Saqsin,

not from the realm of the two Iraqs, not from the land of Khurasan.

I am not from the world, not from beyond,

not from heaven and not from hell.

I am not from Adam, not from Eve, not from paradise and not from Ridwan.

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My place is placeless, my trace is traceless,
no body, no soul, I am from the soul of souls.
I have chased out duality, lived the two worlds as one.
One I seek, one I know, one I see, one I call.
He is the first, he is the last, he is the outer, he is the inner.
Beyond *He* and *He is* I know no other.⁹

Over the last few decades Rumi, who died in 1272, has become the most consistently popular poet in the Western world, and has provided a gateway to a sincere appreciation of Islam to millions of readers who have no background in the Arab, Persian or Islamic world.

This work by Rumi is included here to provide a “taste” of the spiritual tradition of Noor Inayat Khan’s father, who had been instructed by his teacher to bring Sufism to the west one hundred and twenty years ago. As had been the case in India a thousand years earlier, the Sufi tradition emerging from Islam has done much to break down stereotypes in the West, and has helped contribute to a somewhat more welcoming environment, in North America especially, as Muslims immigration has begun to grow.

In the early 20th century the renowned Indian musician Hazrat Inayat Khan, whose spiritual teachers were aligned with the Chishti order in India—the father of French Resistance heroine, children’s author and concert musician Noor Inayat Khan—was instructed by his teacher to bring Sufism to the West. The spiritual institutions he shaped were among the first to spring from the Islamic world in Western Europe, and eventually North America. At the end of a prolific teaching career, with thousands of followers in the West, he returned to India at the end of his life, and is buried at the dargah and mosque of Hazrat Nizamuddin in Delhi.

1 G.I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. Blacksburg VA: Wilder Publications, 2010

2 Vivekenanda’s Chicago Speech.

https://arunshanbhag.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/vivekananda_chicagospeech.pdf (p.8)



3 *Macrohistory: And World Timeline*, “Islam Arrives: 711-1200.”

<http://www.fsmitha.com/h3/india02.htm>

4 Anne Marie Schimmel, *Mytical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 3-6.

5 Yousef Daoud Martin, *The Rose and the Lotus: Sufism and Buddhism*. (Xlibris Spirituality: Thorofare NJ, 2009) 102-103.

6 Schimmel. (93-97) See also Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 88-91.

7 *Ibid.*, On Muinuddin Chishti, 345-46. On Nizammudin Auwliya, 348-51

8 *Ibid.*, 324-26.

9 Jelaluddin Rumi, *The Diwan of Shams-i-Tabriz*, based on poem nr. 31, from *Selected Poems*, R.A. Nicholson (Original 1898. Reissued: Abingdon: Routledge, 1994).