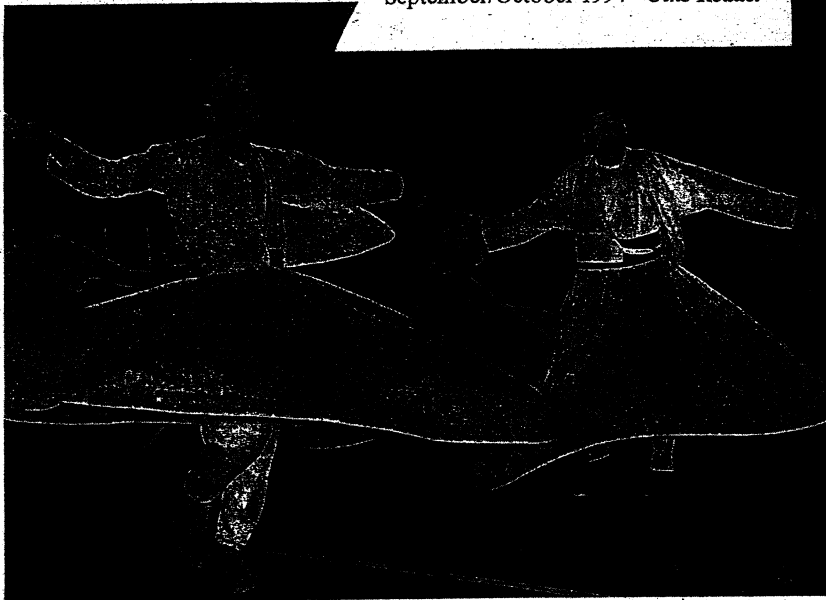


SUFI'S CHOICE

Mystical Islam has the power to jump-start the imagination

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"Whirling dervishes" of the Mevlevi Sufi order spin in praise of God in Konya, Turkey.

If there have been more and more references to the Islamic mystical tradition called Sufism among postmodern spiritual seekers lately, it should come as no surprise. A field of spiritual activity whose roots go back at least 1,400 years (some say thousands more), Sufism embodies much of what people disillusioned with mainstream religions admire. It is anti-dogma, pro-humor, pro-women, pro-love, and pro-ecstasy (in both the spiritual and the physical sense). It's a genuinely multicultural tradition that has evolved unique branches in Turkey, India, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, as well as parts of Eastern and Western Europe and the United States—and has done so via natural assimilation rather than missionary muscle. Sufism is an inner discipline that sees itself at once beyond religion and aiming for the transcendent unity of all religions. It embraces the arts, has given rise to some of the world's most beautiful and compelling poetry, and encourages the cultivation of spiritual ecstasy through music and dance—most famously in the practices of the "whirling dervishes" of the Mevlevi Order.

Sufism is a path emphasizing individual presence, human affection, aesthetic beauty, practicality, and divine love" writes Kabir Helminski in a special issue of the esoteric spirituality journal *Gnosis* (Winter 1994) devoted to Sufism. "It does not oppose spiritual attainment to individual, social, or family life [and] does not see seclusion, asceticism, celibacy, monasticism, social parasitism, or religious professionalism as either necessary or helpful to attaining spiritual maturity." Furthermore, as Maureen Clark writes in the same issue of *Gnosis*, Sufism "differs from other mystical traditions in the emphasis it places on the evolutionary journey of mankind as a whole. The restoration of the soul of humanity to consciousness is not just the task of man as individual, but of all mankind."

Sounds good so far. Yet because of its chameleon-like nature, Sufism can be a slippery thing for the layperson to grasp (*perplexity* and *comundrum* are words used frequently by both outsiders and dervishes [students of Sufism]). At its core, Sufism has a close relationship to Islam—though whether Sufism is an offshoot of Islam, constitutes the true essence of Islam, or predates, includes, or goes beyond Islam is a question that different Sufi sects have different views on. Add to these apparent perplexities our culture's long-standing ignorance and distrust of Islam and a lingering impression that the tradition is an esoteric love cult for hippies, and it's understandable that some think Sufism is a theosophical shell game.

Because Sufism is a living esoteric tradition, its teachings are primarily oral, and are primarily learned from a teacher—or *shaykh*—and through experience. But there are many writings that can introduce the layperson to something of the Sufi way. In addition to *Gnosis*, which often addresses Sufi thought and practices, there is the periodical *Sufi Review*, which prints excerpts of volumes available through the Sufi Book Club, for which the *Review* serves as catalog. Among the offerings are numerous volumes by Rumi (b. 1273), the preeminent Sufi poet whose work has been experiencing a renaissance of late, as well as volumes of philosophy by Hazrat Inayat Khan, the Indian teacher/musician who first introduced Sufi thought to this country at the turn of the century, and analytic works by Idries Shah, a Sufi teacher and prolific writer who interpreted Sufism through modern (largely Jungian) psychology.

If Sufism's malleability is part of what makes it so attractive and valuable to modern theosophical pilgrims, then the works of authors Peter Lamborn Wilson and Hakim Bey are notable for the way Sufi thought has jump-started two very radical imaginations. Wilson, described as an "anarcho-Sufi scholar" by Erik Davis in an article on the writer in the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* (Feb. 1994), has translated poetry—collected in *The Drunken Universe* (Phanes Press, 1987)—and, working with the *Semiotext(e)* publishing collective, has written numerous visionary essays on Islam and Sufism that, according to Davis, "argue for the ultimate unity of imagination and intellectual investigation." Many of them are assembled in the recent *Sacred Drift* (City Lights, 1993) and in *Scandal: Essays in Islamic Heresy* (Autonomedia, 1988). The latter, as Davis notes, is particularly heretical: "Besides praising the mystical use of hashish (and including a recipe for the cannabis brew bhang), Wilson offers a sympathetic portrayal of 'sacred pedophilia,' the [obscure Sufi] practice of staring at beautiful boys as a kind of 'imaginal yoga.'"

Bey's work, believe it or not, can make Wilson's seem fairly stuffy by comparison. Bey's *T.A.Z.* (Autonomedia, 1985), in its promotion of "ontological anarchy" and "poetic terrorism," finds particular power in the Sufi concept of the dervish as *rend*, a secret spiritual journeyman "clever enough to drink wine without being caught." Bey sees the *rend* as a combination of Nietzsche's "overman" and a sort of elegant slacker anarchist, a free spirit who embraces rules (in this case, rules of Islam) in order to realize a will to power in breaking them.

But for all the particular forms that modern Sufism can take, it is perhaps the tradition's own self-effacement that makes it unique. As *Gnosis* editor in chief Jay Kinney points out, "the true Sufi, that is, one who has reached realization, may well step beyond Sufism, or any other ism. At such a point, the questions of whether Sufism is Islamic or not, or whether this path is superior or inferior to others, are largely irrelevant."

—Will Hermes