STEPHEN SCHWARTZ
Author of THE TWO FACES OF ISLAM

THE OTHER ISLAM
SUFIISM AND THE ROAD TO GLOBAL HARMONY
This eye-opening, insightful exploration of Sufism, the spiritual tradition that has supported Islam for more than a thousand years, shows why it offers a promising foundation for reconciliation between the Western and Muslim worlds.

Many Americans today identify Islam with maniacal hatred of the West. The Other Islam transforms this image and opens the way to finding common ground in our troubled times. Sufism, a blend of the mystical and rational tendencies within Islam, emerged soon after the revelation of Muhammad. A reforming movement against the increasing worldliness of Muslim society, it focuses on Islam's spiritual dimension. Described as "Islam of the Heart," Sufism has attracted adherents among both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, as well as Jews, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists.

In The Other Islam, Stephen Schwartz traces the origins and history of Sufism, elucidates its teachings, and illustrates its links to the other religions. He comments on such celebrated Sufi poets and philosophers as Rumi and Al-Ghazali, and narrates their influence on the Kabbalah, on the descendants of the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, and on Christian mystics like Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila as well as the American transcendentalists.

Furthermore, Schwartz presents a fresh survey of Sufism in today's Islamic world, anticipating an intellectual renaissance of the faith and alternatives to fundamentalism and tyranny in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran.


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American religious compact that would give it common standing with other religious minorities in the country, including Jews and Buddhists, so has American Sufism failed to establish a significant place for itself in the Western dialogue on Islam. But American Islam, if it is to survive, must soon begin a transition to standing as an American religious community alongside all the others, and in that process Muslim Sufism will likely play a central role. In other transitional societies described in this book, including Saudi Arabia, Sufism is already assuming such a place. Sufism itself is in transition, as it has become a factor in the revival of Islam in countries that suffered the nightmare of Communism and other forms of antireligious persecution. I have found the most attractive forms of Sufism emanating from the Balkans, Turkey, and central Asia, where Islam seeks spiritual rebirth after decades in which religion was suppressed.

Uzbekistan includes the wonder city of Samarkand, as well as its beautiful sister, Bukhara, but Tashkent was leveled by an earthquake in 1966 and rebuilt in an uninspired, shoddy Soviet style. So Tashkent is drab and poor. Yet it also shelters an organization, In the World of Sufism, that is an exhilarating element in the landscape of central Asian and post-Soviet Islam as a center for new generations of Yasawi mystics. In the World of Sufism maintains several branches in Uzbekistan,
where its acolytes hold lectures and conferences, organize visits to sacred sites (most of them locations unknown to non-Muslim foreigners, including Russians), and propagate Sufi methods of healing, gymnastics, dancing, martial arts, and natural nutritional and cosmetic practices, through videos, CDs, and books. I was taken to its headquarters by an Uzbek sympathizer of the revitalized tariqa. A folder advertised that it is open to everybody interested in Sufism, regardless of religion, ethnicity, gender, or age.

Women, without head or face coverings, function in the new Yasawi centers in Uzbekistan, reflecting the role of Hojja Yasawi and his successors as active proponents of gender equality in Islam. It is said that when conservative Muslim clerics grew alarmed at reports that men and women met together for dhikr under the instruction of Hojja Yasawi, he sent the clerics a sealed inkstand in which they found a fire and some cotton—but the flame did not consume the fiber, and the substance did not suffocate the blaze. The scholars recognized the lesson of the fire and the cotton: that men and women could join in dhikr and prayer without committing sin. The same principle is sustained today by the Bektashi Sufis and the Turkish and Kurdish Alevis. In both groups women possess spiritual equality with men, and in neither are head or face coverings required.

One item distributed in the Tashkent center is a two-disc CD of Islamic recitation and chanting, as Sufism adopts modern methods of outreach. Titled Seek Healing in Sufism, the CD set consists of dhikr and Islamic prayers in Arabic, Uzbek, Russian, and English. Assembled by the Sufi teacher and healer Saparbai Kushkarov, the texts are addressed to God and praise the Creator as the master of all existing things, of mercy and compassion, of a universal light; they are accompanied by traditional stringed instruments in electronic arrangements. Yet their content is quite distinct from that found in many Western
spiritual offerings, and their style is different from that of New Age meditation music. *Seek Healing in Sufism* includes the Muslim call to prayer, as well as *Al-Fatiha*, along with praise of God and his Prophets and of great Sufis of the Yasawi heritage.

Kushkarov writes,

*Sufism is a mystical tradition aimed at spiritual awakening and perfection...* Being a Sufi means to be in the world, but not of the world. Outwardly the Sufi goes among the people, aspiring to serve them and do good to them, while internally abiding as a friend of the Beloved—with God. Sufism reminds the human being of his true nature. The basic Sufi vision of the world is the principle of Unity of Being. As human beings are prone to forgetting, and an individual’s worldly self is apt to be a distraction from reality, Sufis practice constant internal Remembrance of God, the dhikr. With each breath and with prayer they focus themselves on God, thus sustaining a state of spiritual wakefulness and sense of the Presence of the Most High.

Kushkarov, following Yasawi methods, emphasizes synchronizing one’s breathing with prayer and recitation as a meditative discipline.

Uzbekistan remains, at the time of this writing, authoritarian in politics, and it is in all such places that Sufism projects hope against oppression. The central Asian ex-Soviet republics have a long border with Chinese Turkestan; one may hike to the summits of the mountains near Almaty and look over into China, or drive past a road junction not far from Tashkent where a right turn would lead, in only two days’ drive, to Kashgar, a historic Muslim city inside Chinese territory.