

*Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*  
2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London: Archetype, forthcoming

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## Preface to the Second Edition

The opportunity to reissue *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, two decades after its initial publication, provides a moment for critical reflection on several key issues for Islamic studies. What is Sufism? What is its relation to the larger Muslim societies in which it arose? How are literary texts related to mystical experience? Why have some major Sufis (Hallaj, `Ayn al-Qudat) suffered persecution and death, while others who shared the same views were treated as pillars of society? How should one understand the outrageous pronouncements of these Sufis, particularly those that criticize conventional views of religion? What does the comparative dimension add to our understanding of these aspects of Sufism?

Scholarship has progressed considerably since the initial publication of this book, though many of the chief questions it addresses retain their force and resist easy answers. From the perspective of religious studies, one of the main advances has been the critique of Orientalist views of Islam as a static and unchanging essence that is both unrelated to history and foreign to Euro-American culture. In particular, the post-Orientalist approach to Sufism has made it possible to move beyond stereotyped concepts of Eastern mysticism to a broader appreciation of the ethical and social aspects of Sufism as a typical factor in the composition of most Islamicate societies.<sup>1</sup> And while this book does not address the status of Sufism in the contemporary world, it is increasingly being realized how modern controversies over Sufism (whether coming from fundamentalist or secularist perspectives)

have an impact on the scholarly study of pre-modern Sufism.<sup>2</sup> The understanding of the social and political locations of Sufism certainly is an important aspect of the study of the institutional aspect of Sufism, though it does not exhaust the meanings of the Sufi texts that have been so important for the transmission of spiritual discipline and for the creation of widespread literary traditions in Arabic, Persian, and other languages of Islamicate culture. The recent creation (2004) of the Islamic Mysticism Group as a constituent unit of the American Academy of Religion signals the recognition of Sufism and Islamic mysticism as a major subject in the study of religion, with a significant body of scholars in a variety of international locations pursuing its study in multiple languages. Without attempting to summarize all the work of scholarship in this field in recent years, I would nevertheless like to point out here some major recent landmarks of the study of Sufism that form significant advances in the understanding of some of the key figures and themes treated in this book, and to situate my subsequent scholarly writing in relation to the study of Sufism, with a view to suggesting future agendas for scholars.

Despite the increasing interest in the study of Sufism, it is surprising to see that the number of writings by important premodern Sufis that are available in print is still relatively small, so that a great deal remains in manuscript form. This means that original research on Sufism still has to include laborious training in the art of reading Arabic (and other languages) in the often crabbed and difficult handwriting of scribes from centuries ago. The problem of establishing what a particular Sufi actually wrote or said is made much more challenging by the variations that are inevitably found in the manuscripts. The demands of this technical scholarship are such that many of the resulting publications remain in an ultra-specialized realm of scholarly Orientalism that is relatively inaccessible to outsiders. There are two main ways that scholars can make their research more available to others. One is to

produce translations that aim at achieving independent literary authenticity and liveliness in the target language, instead of being mainly a technical aid or “crib” for scholars of the original text. We are beginning to see literary translations emerge, for instance, of the Persian poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi, as a result of collaboration between scholars and poets. Another approach to more public scholarship is to integrate one’s research into the most pressing questions and theories of particular disciplines, such as history, religious studies, anthropology, or literary criticism; comparative study with other civilizations and cultures can also accomplish much in this regard. It must be confessed that many recent academic publications on Sufism still tend to fall into the category of ultra-specialized scholarship, though there are promising developments both from the point of view of clear translation and wide-ranging theoretical and comparative treatments.

Among the most useful recent publications on early Sufism are several anthologies of texts in translation by Michael Sells, myself, and John Renard.<sup>3</sup> European scholars including Alexandre Popovic have produced a series of collective volumes on the major Sufi orders (Naqshbandi, Bektashi, Qadiri) as well as important collections of articles on the institutional aspects of sainthood in Muslim countries.<sup>4</sup> Current research also includes a number of mature scholarly studies on particular regions of Sufism, such as the important 3-volume set of articles on the heritage of Persian Sufism edited by Leonard Lewisohn.<sup>5</sup>

Considerable work has also been done in the study of the writings of major early Sufis, including critical editions of original texts and translations (both partial and complete) into modern languages. Thus, to give one example, we now have access to original texts and translations of a great many more works of one of principal subjects of this book, the great Persian Sufi, Ruzbihan al-Baqli (d. 606/1209).<sup>6</sup> In addition, several articles and studies have been devoted to the same figure, by Paul Ballanfat, Alan Godlas, and me.<sup>7</sup> Another Sufi

discussed in this book, `Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadani, has been the subject of studies in Persian by Nasrollah Pourjavady, a lengthy monograph by Hamid Dabashi, and an original treatment by Omid Safi.<sup>8</sup> Among the earliest Sufis, Abu Yazid al-Bistami has received his share of attention,<sup>9</sup> although the more famous Sufi martyr Husayn ibn al-Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 309/922) has yet to emerge from the long shadow cast by Louis Massignon's life-long obsession with him.<sup>10</sup> Critical editions and studies of a number of the writings of a number of other early Sufis cited in this study (Khargushi, Ahmad Ghazali, Wasiti) have also appeared in print.<sup>11</sup> Among the "classical" Sufis, however, it is undoubtedly Muhyi al-Din ibn `Arabi (d. 1240) who has attracted the lion's share of consideration, with a number of leading scholars plus a specialized academic journal (*The Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn `Arabi Society*) devoted to the study of his teachings.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, it is encouraging to see that a number of scholars have contributed studies to some of the key issues related to religion and authority in early Islamic society.<sup>13</sup> Alexander Knysh has discussed the extensive polemics and controversies over the Sufi teachings of Ibn `Arabi.<sup>14</sup> The contributions of the great theologian al-Ghazali (d. 1111) to the question of the nature of heresy have been analyzed in detail by Sherman Jackson, while Ebrahim Moosa has also provided new insights into Ghazali's creative engagement with religion, law, and philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Regarding the problem of ecstatic sayings (*shathbiyyat*) in Sufism, we now have a translation of Ibn `Arabi's brief remarks on the subject, rendered into English by William Chittick with the telling phrase "unruly utterances."<sup>16</sup> Leonard Lewisohn has devoted an entire book to the topic of "mystical infidelity" in the Persian poetry of Mahmud Shabistari.<sup>17</sup> The relation between language and mystical experience has been pursued by Michael Sells in several valuable studies.<sup>18</sup> In particular, the development of

the notion of spiritual ascension in early Islamic thought has now been explored in detail by Frederick Colby.<sup>19</sup>

The question of the comparative study of mysticism is raised in the concluding section of this book, initially on the premise that any religious studies analysis is by its very nature comparative, if only through the use of a generalized vocabulary that draws from one tradition to describe examples from other religions. The examples proposed there as comparisons to the ecstatic sayings of the Sufis are interesting, though not decisive. What is the value of comparative studies? There are, as it were, two extremes in the comparative study of mysticism today. One point of view, which might be termed the univocal approach to mysticism, sees it as the constant unifying element that underlies the apparent discrepancies between religious traditions. This perspective is associated with the writings of W. T. Stace as well as advocates of the Perennial Philosophy such as S. H. Nasr.<sup>20</sup> An opposing perspective, which could be called the equivocal approach, asserts that there is no generic mysticism, and that a “constructivist” epistemology reveals that the forms of all mystical experience are determined by cultural and linguistic factors; therefore all mystical traditions are radically different from one another. This perspective has been set forth in several anthologies of articles edited by Steven Katz.<sup>21</sup> I do not think that it is necessary to choose between these two extremes, however. As Thomas Aquinas might have said, there is a proportional position, an analogical perspective, which avoids both the univocal and equivocal approaches to mysticism. In a series of studies, I have tried to develop a non-essentialist approach to comparison that allows us to take account of difference, by examining historical encounters between mystical traditions (such as Sufism and yoga) that include acts of appropriation, resistance, and interpretation.<sup>22</sup> Much remains to be done to develop these new modes of comparative study.

It is strange to look again at one's first book, to realize that it was essentially completed twenty-five years ago, and to think of the considerable distance in thought and experience that one has traversed since that time. Had one the opportunity to do it over again, one might have approached the subject differently. Nevertheless, the text in this second edition is basically unchanged except for minor stylistic editing, although diacritical marks have been dropped for the reader's convenience. More substantially, I think that many of the points made in the book still have relevance. In particular, current ideological controversies over Sufism are put into historical perspective by the examples studied in this book. That is, the most spectacular crises in the early history of Sufism, the celebrated "heresy trials" of figures like Nuri, Hallaj, and `Ayn al-Qudat, were ultimately driven by political agendas. Before recent times, the Sufi movement itself was never rejected as such even by its most trenchant critics, for even conservative religious scholars such as Ibn al-Jawzi and Ibn Taymiyya were themselves members of Sufi lineages. Thus the historical findings of this study can relativize current denunciations of Sufism as "un-Islamic," and they can help underpin more wide-ranging interpretations of the significance of Sufism today.

In the final analysis, though, many of the fundamental problems posed by the early Sufis remain powerful challenges to our understanding of the relation between language and spiritual experience, the relation between mysticism and society, and the relation between different religious traditions. All these fields will continue to demand serious consideration from students of religious studies.

In closing, I would like to express my thanks to G. A. Lipton for rescuing the text of this book from the ancient digital limbo in which it languished, and to Patricia Salazar for having the vision to bring this book into print once again for a new generation of readers.

Carl W. Ernst

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, April 2005

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<sup>1</sup> Recent treatments of Sufism include Carl W. Ernst, *Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997); id., "Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism: Problematizing the Teaching of Sufism," in *Teaching Islam*, ed. Brannon Wheeler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 108-23; William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000); Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000); and the extensive multi-author article, "Tasawwuf," *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill), vol. 10. An important critique of the notion of Oriental mysticism is provided by Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> See the critique of the "golden age" historiography of Sufism developed by Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: Chishti Sufism in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Sells, trans., *Early Islamic Mysticism*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996); Carl W. Ernst, trans., *Teachings of Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1999); John Renard, trans., *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Alexandre Popovic and Gilles Veinstein, ed., *Les voies d'Allah: les ordres mystiques dans l'islam des origines à aujourd'hui* (Paris: Fayard, 1996) ; Marc Gaborieau and Alexandre Popovic, ed., *Naqshbandis: cheminements et situation actuelle d'un ordre mystique* (Istanbul ; Paris: Editions Isis, 1990) ; Alexandre Popovic, ed., *Bektachiyya: études sur l'ordre mystique des Bektachis et les groupes*

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relevant de Hadji Bektach (Istanbul: Les Editions Isis, 1995); *Journal of the History of Sufism* 1-2 (2000), *Special Issue: The Qâdiriyya Order*, ed. Th. Zarcone, E. Işin, and A. Buehler; Fritz Meier, *Essays on Islamic Piety and Mysticism*, trans. John O'Kane with Bernd Radtke, *Islamic history and civilization* 30 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. 1, *Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700-1300)*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn; vol. 2, *The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150-1500)*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn; vol. 3, *Late Classical Persianate Sufism (1501-1750): The Safavid and Mughal Period*, ed. David Morgan and Leonard Lewisohn (Oxford: One World, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Recent translations of Ruzbihan's works include *Le Dévoilement des secrets: Journal spirituel de Rûzbehân Baqlî*, trans. Paul Ballanfat (Paris: Le Seuil, 1997); *L'ennuagement du coeur de Rûzbehân Baqlî Shîrâzî*, trans. Paul Ballanfat (Paris: Le Seuil, 1998); *L'itinéraire des esprits; suivi du Traité de la sainteté*, trans. Paul Ballanfat (Paris: Les Deux Océans, 2001); *The Unveiling of Secrets: Diary of a Sufi Master*, trans. Carl W. Ernst (Chapel Hill, NC: Parvardigar Press, 1997). Original text editions include *Quatre traités inédits de Ruzbehân Baqlî Shirâzî (522-606/1128-1209)*, ed. Paul Ballanfat (Tehran: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1998); *Kashf al-asrar*, ed. Firoozeh Papan-Matin and Michael Fishbein (Leiden: E. J. Brill, forthcoming). Ballanfat and I propose to edit the Arabic text of Ruzbihan's *Mantiq al-asrar*, the original text on ecstatic sayings that he translated into Persian as *Sharh-i shathiyyat*.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ballanfat, "L'échelle des mots dans les ascensions de Rûzbehân Baqlî de Shîrâz," in *Le voyage initiatique en terre d'Islam. Ascensions célestes et itinéraires spirituels*, ed. M. A. Amir-Moezzi, Publications de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Section des Sciences Religieuses (Paris-Louvain: Editions Peeters, 1996); id., "Ivresse de la mort dans le discours mystique et fondements du paradoxe," *Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales* XLIX (1997), pp. 21-51; id., "Légitimité de l'herméneutique dans le commentaire des traditions du Prophète de Rûzbehân Baqlî,"

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*Annales Islamologiques* 31 (1998), pp. 17-42; "Interprétations de la notion de ruse divine (makr) dans la mystique musulmane," *Mélanges offerts à Luce Lopez Baralt*, ed. Abdeljelil Tamimi (Tunis: Fondation Temimi pour la recherche scientifique et l'information, 2001); Carl W. Ernst, *Ruzbihan Baqli: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism*, Curzon Sufi Series, 4 (London: Curzon Press, 1996); id., "Vertical Pilgrimage and Interior Landscape in the Visionary Diary of Ruzbihan Baqli," *Muslim World* 88/2 (1998), pp. 129-40; id., "Ruzbihan Baqli on Love as 'Essential Desire,'" in *Gott is schön und Er liebt die Schönheit/God is Beautiful and He Loves Beauty: Festschrift für Annemarie Schimmel*, ed. Alma Giese and J. Christoph Bürgel (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), pp. 181-89; id., "The Stages of Love in Persian Sufism, from Rabi`a to Ruzbihan," in *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. 1, pp. 435-55; id., "The Symbolism of Birds and Flight in the Writings of Ruzbihan Baqli," in *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. 2, pp. 353-66; Alan Godlas, "Psychology and Self-Transformation in the (Arabic) Sufi Qur'an Commentary of Ruzbihan al-Baqli (*`Ara'is al-bayan*)," *Sufi Illuminations* 1 (1996) 31-62; id., "Surrender to God, its significance today and in the Qur'an commentary of Ruzbihan al-Baqli," in *Beacon of Knowledge: Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. by Mohammad Hassan Faghfoory (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003), pp. 157-78.

<sup>8</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Truth and Narrative: The Untimely Thoughts of Ayn Al-Qudat Al-Hamadhani* (London: Routledge/Curzon, 1999); Nasr Allah Purjavadi, *Sultan-i Tariqat: savanib-i zindagi va sharh-i asar-i Khvajah Ahmad Ghaẓali* (Tehran : Mu'assasah-'i Intisharat-i Agah, 1979; id., *`Ayn al-Quẓat va ustadan-i u* (Tehran: Asatir, 1995); Omid Safi, *Islam and the Politics of Knowledge, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks*, 5 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming).

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<sup>9</sup> Carl W. Ernst, "The Man without Attributes: Ibn `Arabi's Interpretation of Abu Yazid al-Bistami," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn `Arabi Society* XIII (1993), pp. 1-18; *Les Dits de Bistami: shatabât*, trans. Abdelwahab Meddeb (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> Louis Massignon, *The passion of al-Hallaj: mystic and martyr of Islam*, trans. Herbert W. Mason (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> `Abd al-Malik ibn Muhammad Kharkushi [i.e., Khargushi], *Kitab tabdhib al-asrar*, ed. Bassam Muhammad Barud (Abu Dhabi: al-Majma` al-Thaqafi, 1999); Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ghazali, *Majmu`a-i asar-i Farsi*, ed. Ahmad Mujahid (Tehran : Mu'assasa-i Intisharat va Chap-i Danishgah-i Tihiran, 1991); Joseph Edward Barbour Lumbard, "Ahmad al-Ghazali (d. 517/1123 or 520/1127) and the metaphysics of love," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2003; Laury Silvers, "Tawhid in early Sufism: the life and work of Abu Bakr al-Wasiti (d. ca. 320/928)," Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> The number of publications on the writings of Ibn `Arabi is far too large to permit any listing here, but the works of Michel Chodkiewicz, William Chittick, and James W. Morris are particularly valuable in this area. For extensive information on this subject, see the website of the Muhyiddin Ibn `Arabi Society (<http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/index.html>, accessed 5 April 2005), which includes an index of the society's journal and many other materials.

<sup>13</sup> Carl W. Ernst, "From Hagiography to Martyrology: Conflicting Testimonies to a Sufi Martyr of the Delhi Sultanate," *History of Religions* XXIV (May, 1985), pp. 308-27; id., "Blasphemy (Islamic Concept)," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade et al. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), vol. 2, pp. 242-45.

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<sup>14</sup> Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam*, SUNY Series in Islam (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's Faysal al-Tafriqa*, Studies in Islamic Philosophy, V.1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks, 3 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Futubat al-Makkiyya* 2:387.8-388.26, trans. William Chittick, in *Les Illuminations de La Mecque/The Meccan Illuminations*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris: Sindbad, 1988), pp. 265-274.

<sup>17</sup> Leonard Lewisohn, *Beyond Faith and Infidelity: The Sufi Poetry and Teachings of Mahmud Shabistari*, Curzon Sufi Series (London: Routledge/Curzon, 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); id., "Bewildered Tongue: The Semantics of Mystical Union in Islam" and "Response," in the Bernard McGinn and Moshe Idel, ed., *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Religions: an Ecumenical Dialogue* (New York: MacMillan, 1989). I must agree to disagree with the thoughtful critical review by Sells of *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19:2 (May, 1987). I remain convinced that the interpretive position I originally proposed regarding the divine "I" in ecstatic sayings is in fact most appropriate for dealing with these texts; using capitalization to indicate the process of divinization is a way of taking responsibility for interpretation, rather than leaving texts ambiguously uninterpreted.

<sup>19</sup> Frederick Stephen Colby, "Constructing an Islamic Ascension Narrative: The Interplay of Official and Popular Culture in Pseudo-Ibn 'Abbas," Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 2002.

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<sup>20</sup> W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and philosophy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *Islamic spirituality* (2 vols., New York: Crossroad, 1987-91). See my remarks on this approach in "Traditionalism, the Perennial Philosophy, and Islamic Studies (review article)," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, vol. 28, no. 2 (December, 1994), pp. 176-81.

<sup>21</sup> Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and philosophical analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); id., ed., *Mysticism and religious traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); id., ed., *Mysticism and language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). My contribution to the latter volume ("Mystical Language and the Teaching Context in the Early Sufi Lexicons," pp. 181-201) did not take the constructivist approach, but proposed instead a model of intentionality in mystical teaching, attempting to take account of the growth of a tradition without prescribing essentialist limitations to a religion.

<sup>22</sup> Carl W. Ernst, "Situating Sufism and Yoga," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 15:1 (2005), pp. 15-43; id., "The Islamization of Yoga in the Amrtakunda Translations," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 13:2 (2003), pp. 199-226; id., "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Persian and Arabic Translations from Sanskrit," *Iranian Studies* 36 (2003), pp. 173-95; id., the "Admiring the Works of the Ancients: The Ellora Temples as viewed by Indo-Muslim Authors," in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamate South Asia*, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (University Press Florida, 2000), pp. 198-220.