

## Introduction to Mysticism in Islam

"Mysticism in Islam" is excerpted from a chapter in Trotter's book, *Between the Desert and the Sea - "Moslem Mystics"* - in which she shares not only her unique understanding of the Sufi soul and sensibility but their beliefs and practices. She witnessed the Sufi's thirst for the unseen mysteries, yet recognized their need for "objective, verifiable and divine revelation in contrast to their search in the "subjective realm of their own consciousness." Her conclusion states her dream of a future "where these Brotherhood men, when their thirst has been quenched by the living water, may be drawn into their own development on Christian lines, and bring into the compacting of the Church an element that no others can offer."



## MYSTICISM IN ISLAM

For North Africa is, per se, the land of the Moslem mystics, though they have ramifications all over the country, and they form the chief missionary element in the spread of their creed. In the desert the mystics might be studied in something very near their pristine form of faith and of fraternity, if only they would let us get near enough to them to study them. Here is the difficulty. The very expression of these Sufi men is inscrutable, with dark unfathomable eyes, and there is an aloofness of manner that holds the questioner at a distance. Till you show by some word that you understand them and care for them and are reaching forth also to "the things that are before", they will remain within their shell: and they will withdraw into it in a moment if they think you may ask some of their state secrets. For each Brotherhood has its own initiatory rites and formulas, as jealously guarded as any freemasonry.

Even their speech, when it touches on the inward life, is a thing apart, in sharp contrast to the dearth of spiritual expression in ordinary Arabic. The need for something deeper created a supply, and that a rich and beautiful one. The mystic has his own terminology but dimly understood by those outside.

Many influences from the past have gone to the moulding of him. The monks of the Thebaid, the Neoplatonists of Greece, the Buddhists of India, the Satians of Persia have been each welded in.

The product has been of a twofold order. The development that comes into public view is that associated with the name of dervish, recognisable as a rule by clothing, tattered and patched to the last degree. This patched garment is bestowed on those who have reached a certain point in the stages of the inward life and is an important feature. So important is it that one of the old Sufi books contains a disquisition as to whether the patches should be sewn on neatly or at random — literally, "wherever the needle lifts her head." One saint is mentioned in the same passage who sewed them so thickly one over the other that scorpions hid between the layers.

But it is when they get together that these dervish orders show the Sufi system at its worst. They meet regularly for prolonged times of prayer, called the "dhikr," i.e., the "mentioning" of the names of God in continuous chanting repetition. That forms the long introduction: the ultimate aim is to produce so-called ecstasy, and this is brought about by drugs, auto-suggestion, hypnotism and other weird processes, till they reach together a frenzy of mental intoxication where they imagine themselves beyond all landmarks that separate the lawful from the unlawful. The result and the reaction may be imagined.

In the other class of the Sufi devotees we find the souls who seek approach to God, not from the emotional side, but from that of philosophy, mental analysis and intricate metaphysics. The world is a fiction, they say; its forms are an emanation of the Divine essence, which will vanish and leave only the radiancy from which it came. Into that essence they seek to be united—united, not absorbed as in Buddhist mysticism; and this union is to be brought about through a succession of seven spiritual states to be bestowed by God. All is sought under the guidance of a director and in blind obedience to his bidding. They entrust themselves to him, to use their own metaphor, like the corpse in the hands of the washer.

Between these two extremes of the adepts sways the lay brother element, receiving its religious impulses from one and the other in varying force and kept in the path of sanity by having to work for daily bread.

There are crevices where heavenly dynamite is being lodged, for we hear now and again of little groups of these "brothers" who meet and read together the scriptures, and anything of Christian literature that comes their way. Who can foretell the issues of a spark of God's fire?

If, on the other hand, we ascend the scale in the organizations (and it is a highly developed scale) we shall find that among the upper circles of the fraternities are those whose chief outlook on the brotherhood life is as a vehicle for ambition, power and political intrigue. These cause much uneasiness in the colony, and with reason. Each Brotherhood is self-governed and has unlimited authority and can set wide currents in motion. Each is an elaborate system on the same outline, from the hierarchy of the initiated down to the unlettered fellah who hopes in some way to reach God through the mazes of the dhikr. There are large funds at its disposal and immense hospitality is available in the Zaouias, as the fraternity houses are named.

Two or three of the chief Brotherhoods have Sisterhoods recognised and attached: these organizations are worked by the women themselves. All is carried on, as in the case of Brotherhoods, without a break in the home life, except for periods of retreat. Celibacy has no place in the system.

It is among the rank and file that lies the strategic point for the new message. They have enough to awake a thirst for the unseen, but never to satisfy it, for all is subjective. As has been well said, 'Their need is objective, verifiable and divine revelation.' It is for us to bring them this in the revelation of Jesus Christ. Then will be fulfilled the word by Isaiah the prophet, 'the mirage shall become a pool'. (Isa. xxxv. 7. R V.)

Our dream is of a future where the Christian mystic shall go after the Moslem mystic, and that thus these Brotherhood men, when their thirst has been quenched by the living water, may be drawn into their own development on Christian lines, and bring into the compacting of the Church an element that no others can offer.