

Sufism, Scripture and Scholarship: From Graham to Guénon and Beyond

By Atif Khalil and Shiraz Sheikh

We do not see the world as it is.
We see the world as we are.

(Talmud)

The origins of the academic study of Sufism in Western scholarship may be retraced to the second half of the 18th century, with the first independent work on the subject appearing in 1819 by Lt. James W. Graham (d. 1845), an officer working on the staff of Sir John Malcolm (d. 1833), a scholar-general in the British colonial army. Originally delivered as a lecture for the Bombay Literary Society, Graham's thirty-four page article¹ would be followed a few years later by the more comprehensive *Ssufismus, sive Theosophia Persarum Pantheistica (Sufism, or the Pantheistic Theosophy of the Persians)* by Friedrich T. Tholuck (d. 1877).² As the first major analysis of Sufism in a European language, with little to rely on by way of previous scholarship, it was only natural that the work would have its limitations.³ Nevertheless, the Latin work would leave a definitive mark on later Orientalism.⁴ The numerous monographs and articles that would be authored in the decades to follow would

¹ William J. Graham, "A Treatise on Sufism, Or Mahomedan Mysticism," *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay* 1 (1819): 89-119. The manuscript of Graham's lecture was used by Sir Malcolm for his own short treatment of Sufism in *The History of Persia*, published four years before Graham's own treatise saw the light of day. John Malcolm, *History of Persia: From the Early Period to the Present Time*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray & Longman and Co., 1815).

² Friedrich Tholuck, *Ssufismus, Sive, Theosophia Persarum Pantheistica* (Berlin: Libraria F. Duemmler, 1821).

³ A. J. Arberry drew attention to some of these limitations in *An Introduction to the History of Sufism: The Sir Abdullab Subrawardy Lectures* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), 16-19.

⁴ Tholuck later published influential works in the area of Christian theology and biblical exegesis. For details on his life, work, and influence, see the entry on him in the *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker House, 1954), 420-421.

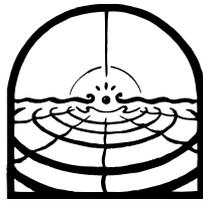
all share, to a greater or lesser degree, a common theme, and one that was retraceable to the earliest treatments of the subject, namely that Sufism was at heart not an internal outgrowth or expression of Muslim scripture, but instead the product of foreign influences, whether they were Buddhist, Hindu, Neoplatonic or Christian.

Some of these arguments were inevitable in light of the racial theories that were circulating and had gained prominence in the 19th century, evidenced by the very title of Tholuck's work. In the distinction between Semites and Indo-Europeans, the proponents of these theories often ascribed to the religions of the former a sterile, legally bound, nomocentric quality, and to the religions of the latter, an imaginative, creative and highly artistic one. Since Sufism, with its rich history of poetry, dance and metaphysical speculation was associated with the latter, it was only natural to presume that it was in some form or another an Indo-European transplantation on to the barren soil of Islam. One of the most notable exponents of this view in the study of religion was Ernest Renan (d. 1892), for whom the distinct differences between the two racial types was itself proof of the superiority of the Indo-Europeans. They had evolved in a manner that the Semites, shackled by their own languages and psychological makeup, could not.⁵ The "Semites are rabid monotheists who produced no mythology, no art, no commerce, no civilization," he wrote, adding that "their consciousness is a narrow rigid one." Elsewhere he observed, in even stronger terms, that one "sees that in all things the Semitic race appears to us to be an incomplete race, by virtue of its simplicity. This race — if I dare use the analogy — is to the Indo-European family what a pencil sketch is to a painting; it lacks that variety, that amplitude, that abundance of life which is the condition of perfectibility."⁶ It is no surprise that many of his contemporaries, who discerned in the Sufi tradition precisely the creative "amplitude" and "abundance of life" of which he had written, would trace the origins of these expressions to Persian, Indian, and Greek — manifestly Indo-

⁵ Stefan Arvidsson, "Aryan Mythology as Science and Ideology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 2 (1999): 327-354, in particular 336-338.

⁶ Cited in Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 149.

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