
Situating Sufism and Yoga*

CARL W. ERNST

“The natives of all unknown countries are commonly called Indians”

Maximilian of Transylvania, De molucco (1523)

Orientalism and Essentialism in the Study of Religion

Since the Protestant Reformation, the dominant concept of religions has been one of essences unconditioned by history.¹ The nature of religious traditions can best be understood, from this perspective, by analysing religions into their original components. Scholars have used various metaphors to describe how one religion ‘borrows’ doctrines or practices from another, which is consequently the ‘source’ by which it is thus ‘influenced’. By a mechanical and ahistorical conception of a religion as a pure and unchanging essence, variations from what was perceived to be the norm (or from the definition of a religion as defined by scholars) could be easily explained as the result of importing foreign doctrines or practice. This terminology, which is highly abstract and metaphorical, is rarely questioned in the intellectual history approach to religious studies, even though it tends to make religions rather than people into agents. How often have we read that a particular school or thinker ‘was influenced’ by so-and-so? Even those who reject a particular case of alleged influence unconsciously accept it as a category of analysis.

Once influence has been established, it is felt, one has said something of immense significance; the phenomenon has been explained – or rather, explained away. There is in addition an implicit evaluation in this kind of language. ‘Sources’ are ‘original’ while those ‘influenced’ by them are ‘derivative’. This kind of analysis contains so many problematic and subjective assumptions that it is hard to see how it helps clarify anything. I would like to argue that what the Germans call *Quellenforschung* (‘search for origins’) often misses the point by excluding or minimising the significance of an author’s reinterpretation of sources. As Wendy Doniger observes with respect to the study of myth, “The problem of diffusion is more basic than the mechanical complexities or political agendas of this sort of tale-tracking. For on the one hand, diffusion still fails to account for the particular genius of each telling”.² In the comparative study of religion, this approach also perpetuates an implicitly Protestant

* This article is based on the Annemarie Schimmel Memorial Lecture, delivered at the Royal Asiatic Society, London on 11 December 2003.

¹ See my *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill, NC., 2003), Chapter 2, for a discussion of modern concepts of religion.

² Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York, 1998), p. 141.

concept of religions as ideologies competing for world domination, and any evidence of dependence on foreign influences is a sure sign of weakness in this game. This model is fine if one is engaging in missionary activity, but for an analytical appreciation of the nature of religion, it is seriously flawed.

One of the chief examples of this search for sources and influences in religious studies was the study of early Christianity and its relationship to the religions of late antiquity. Early scholars in this field liked to talk about ‘Oriental-Gnostic’ influences on Christianity, deriving from India. Such borrowing sometimes was said to have been carried out by the elite, or alternatively by the superstitious masses; though the favourite explanation was deliberate borrowing from paganism by priests, who were keen to aggrandise their power by this deception. As Jonathan Z. Smith has pointed out, Protestant anti-Catholic polemics are the key to understanding this jaundiced view of early Christianity.³

The language of ‘influence’ becomes especially suspect when we consider its history. The term is originally astrological, denoting the etherial emanations of the stars that control terrestrial events; subsequently it came to mean “the inflowing . . . or infusion (*into* a person or thing) of any kind of divine, spiritual, moral, immaterial, or secret power or principle”. One can also see this archaic notion at work in the term *influenza*, based on the notion that this viral disease was caused by the influence of maleficent stars. Most recently, influence means, more abstractly, the exertion of power by one person or thing over another, in a manner that is only perceptible by its effects.⁴ In the history of ideas, influence therefore signifies the “authority of prestige over the ideas or over the will of another”.⁵ Since the Enlightenment, it is above all in intellectual history that the term ‘influence’ has come to function as a major category of analysis. The task of the historian of ideas was seen as simplifying complicated philosophical systems into their basic components, much like a chemist reducing compounds to elements. In the quest for these basic factors, in the phrase of Arthur Lovejoy, the history of ideas “is especially interested in the processes by which influences pass over from one province to another”.⁶ If it is correct to trace this enterprise to astrology, then the historian of ideas would resemble a latter-day astrologer, charting the influences of the stars of our intellectual cosmos. This chemist, or perhaps better, alchemist, reduces the intellectual compounds of history to their essential elements, and in the process may attain the philosopher’s stone of academic immortality. This kind of detective work can be seen as the principal thrill of the hunt in scholarship. “Spotting certain thematic likenesses or disclosing related verb patterns between as well as within texts seems to inaugurate the excitement fueling the critical act”.⁷ Unfortunately, the connections discerned by the history of ideas may exist only in the mind of the theorist. As Jonathan Z. Smith observes, “Similarity and difference are not ‘given’. They are the result of mental operations”.⁸ The mechanical

³ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 1990), pp. 21–22, 34.

⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “influence”.

⁵ André Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, 5th ed. (Paris, 1947), p. 498, which also stresses the astrological origin.

⁶ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA, 1936, reprint ed., 1976), p. 16.

⁷ Louis A. Renza, “Influence”, in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (eds), *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago, 1990), p. 187.

⁸ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, p. 51.

character of the influence metaphor obscures the role of selection and intentionality that takes place in any thinker's evaluation of previous formulations, and it privileges the superior position of the analyst who triumphantly announces the detection of decisive influence of one thinker upon another. If we wish, in contrast, to understand how complex intercultural exchanges take place, it will be necessary to re-examine the freight of meaning carried by this kind of metaphorical language, which all too often substitutes for analysis. We need a wider range of categories that take account of acts of interpretation, appropriation, and resistance.

Another example of a problematic metaphor is the vaguely disapproving term 'syncretism', which by its neo-Greek etymology metaphorically suggests either pouring two different liquids together or allying two independent forces. The term was originally introduced during the Protestant Reformation as a derogatory description of misguided attempts to reunite Catholics and Protestants. The underlying assumption was that these two religions were irrevocably separate; those who attempted to rejoin them were attempting to combine two alien substances or powers. Subsequently the term was used to refer to philosophical and religious positions that identified various deities of the ancient world as being simply different aspects of the same god or goddess. By the nineteenth century, syncretism was a familiar term in religious studies, usually applied disparagingly to non-Christian contexts.⁹ I would like to suggest that the concept of syncretism is problematic in the study of religion because of the underlying assumptions that either of its etymologies conveys. If religions are treated either as homogeneous substances or autonomous individuals, this vastly oversimplifies the question. Any one-sided characterisation of the 'essence' of such a religion makes historical change, complexity, or diversity into a deviation from the norm. Syncretism, by proposing that religions can be mixed, also assumes that religions exist in a pure unadulterated state. Where shall we find this historically untouched religion? Is there any religious tradition untouched by other religious cultures? Has any religion sprung into existence fully formed, without reference to any previously existing religion? If pure and irreducible religions cannot be found, a logical problem follows; syncretism becomes a meaningless term if everything is syncretistic.¹⁰

The term 'religion' itself lends itself to equivocation as well. We use the term equally to describe the interior consciousness of a single believer, the religious community as a corporate entity, and the vast historical complex of tradition as it has accumulated over the course of centuries. If this ambiguity is not clarified, then misconceptions easily occur. If the discussion concerns an author normally assigned to one religious tradition, who nonetheless deals with concepts or texts customarily associated with another religion, is this an inter-religious exercise? Does the author necessarily have a consciousness of overstepping a boundary? If one applies a fixed abstract notion of religion to this kind of analysis, the result can be a mechanical history of ideas with a bias toward doctrine as the essence of religion.

⁹ *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh, New York, 1908–26), "Syncretism", an article that is sensitive to the polemical historical origins of the term. Oddly, the 1987 *Encyclopedia of Religion* more or less accepted syncretism as a legitimate category and offered no critical analysis of the concept.

¹⁰ See Robert D. Baird, *Category Formation and the History of Religions*, Religion and Reason, 1 (2nd ed., Berlin, 1991), pp. 142–152; Tony K. Stewart and Carl W. Ernst, "Syncretism", in Peter J. Claus and Margaret A. Mills (eds), *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, (New York, 2003).

To speculate briefly on the reasons for the powerful urge to find unity or genetic relationship in diverse religious phenomena, one may point to the disorientation of Christian Europe by the colonial encounter with other civilisations. The dislocation of the Christian version of sacred history was perhaps inevitable, once the ancient and independent civilisations of China and India were clearly in view. Likewise, the authority ascribed to tradition underwent severe questioning after the discovery of the New World, unaccounted for in the works of the ancients revered throughout Europe.¹¹ Another major factor in the need to define religious genealogies was the anxiety over the very existence of Judaism and Islam, which has continued to be a defining factor in European modernity. Yet the impulse to give history a single line of meaning, as an alternative to sheer arbitrariness, still expressed itself, not in theology but in various scientific theories of cultural diffusion. These ranged from Abel-Remusat's 1824 essay explaining the historical relation between Greek and Chinese thought (based on a comparison of Lao-Tzu and Heraclitus), to the excesses of the Pan-Babylonian school at the turn of the century, which sought to derive all forms of religion from Babylonia via a process of cultural diffusion. As philosopher of history Eric Voegelin observed,

*A horror, not vacui but pleni, seems at work, a shudder at the richness of the spirit as it reveals itself all over the earth in a multitude of hierophanies, a monomaniacal desire to force the operations of the spirit in history on the one line that will unequivocally lead into the speculator's present. No independent lines must be left dangling that conceivably could lead into somebody else's present and future.*¹²

Similarity between two formulations could be explained as the result of historical dependency. Thus we can explain the farfetched but self-assured Romantic pronouncements about the essential identity of all Oriental (i.e., non-European) religions in their Indian core. The rough edges of particularity, smoothed out by reducing formulations to a doctrinal core, could be safely disregarded as accidental. The real meaning of religious phenomena was to be found in the exercise of theoretical imagination through comparison and detection of sources.

Another factor in the quest for influences is reflexive and contrary to the first, viewing non-Christian cultures primarily in terms of their difference from European Christianity. This was particularly prominent in the intellectual climate of nineteenth-century colonialism. Theories of evolution and race were freely applied in the comparative study of religion, originally understood as a disingenuous comparison intended to reveal which religion was superior.¹³ The study of religion in Christian theological faculties initially exempted Christianity from this kind of historical investigation, since Christianity (in whatever form the theorist professed) was assumed to be still pure and integral, despite such events as the Protestant Reformation. More than other literary texts, the Christian scriptures were accorded the authority of tradition in a way that defined authenticity both through the witness of history and the sanction of divine truth. If, however, other religions could be

¹¹ Donald E. Pease, "Author", in Lentricchia and McLaughlin, *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, pp. 105–120.

¹² Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. IV, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1974), p. 3.

¹³ Eric Sharp ("Comparative Religion", *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 3, pp. 578–580) links the term 'influence' to evolutionistic schemes that rank religions, and he optimistically considers the term to be now "seldom used".

shown to be hybrids composed of various 'Oriental' influences, that was a testimony to their dependent and inferior nature. Despite the later progress of historical research into the relation of Christianity to the cultural and religious world into which it was born, the colonial legacy of ambivalence toward 'Oriental religions' still lingers. In addition, it is also important to recognise the extent to which Romantic concepts of the 'mystic East' were a screen for debates about religion in the European Christian context.¹⁴ Problematic issues coded under the names of mysticism and pantheism could be projected in this way onto a foreign Oriental substratum.

The problem with the comparative approach to religion just mentioned is its irrelevance and lack of significance with reference to the religious phenomena that are being described. The magisterial comparison by the scholar detecting 'influences' previously unsuspected by anyone else exhibits a disconnection from historical tradition that can border on solipsism. Some scholars, secure in their conviction as to the essential nature of 'classical' Islam, still have contempt for any attempt to discover what later Muslims have thought about their predecessors and how their religious interpretations have evolved over time. I would like instead to turn attention to the internal dynamic of the evolving tradition insofar as it is available to us in individual examples provided by history, and its self-interpretation. We need to understand the origins of religious traditions as formulated by participants as well as the factual beginnings noted by academic observers.¹⁵ As a gesture to indicate the dethronement of the magisterial observer, I wish to be explicit about abandoning the project of comparative religion, insofar as it entails essentialist assumptions about religion.¹⁶

Recent critical scholarship on the concept of religion has stressed the provisional and heuristic nature of religious categories, proposing in place of the essentialist model a polythetic analysis of religion. This is analogous to a model already familiar in zoology and anthropology, in which "it was no longer true that what was known of one member of a class was thereby known of the other members . . . classes of creatures were grouped by what were in fact family resemblances".¹⁷ This means that multiple various and even conflicting authoritative positions can be included under the rubric of a single religious category; definitions of religions based on unvarying sets of characteristics are no longer acceptable, since they implicitly entail endorsement of one authoritative position rather than another. It is especially noteworthy to see the flexibility of analytic categories in recent scientific thought, since the phrase 'comparative religion' was clearly based upon the earlier notion of 'comparative zoology', so that it evidently perpetuates an outmoded notion of unvarying genus and species in the definition of religions. Avoiding essentialism means striking a practical balance between similarity and difference, and it makes comparison a problematic enterprise, but it abandons a number of *a priori* prejudices about religion that are

¹⁴ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'* (London, 1999), pp. 33, 97, 118–145.

¹⁵ For Marc Bloch's distinction between origins and beginnings as applied to the study of religion, see Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: Chishti Sufism in South Asia and Beyond* (New York, 2002), pp. 48–49.

¹⁶ Ironically, the book in which I argue against an essentialist interpretation of Islam, *Following Muhammad*, is catalogued by U.S. Library of Congress categories under "Islam – Essence and Character".

¹⁷ Rodney Needham, "Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences", *Man*, 10 (1975), pp. 349–369, quoting pp. 350, 352. See also Doniger, *The Implied Spider*, pp. 143–145.

no longer justifiable. While there is in fact a strong emerging argument for non-essentialist interpretations of religion among academics, essentialism still dominates in ideological, media-driven, and mass marketing concepts of religion, as we shall see below.

“This is the practice of the Yogis; this is not an activity of the community of Muhammad. Nevertheless, it is correct”.

– *Muhammad Muhyi al-Din*, ca. 1748

Sufi Interpreters of Yogic Practices

The foregoing remarks on the study of religion expand on a problem that has dogged the modern study of religion since its inception. As I have argued elsewhere, since the beginning of Orientalist scholarship over two centuries ago, it was an unquestioned assumption that Sufism was somehow derived from Hinduism, so it was not really Islamic at all.¹⁸ This conceit has endured through the nineteenth century until recent times. In Zaehner’s words, “Muslim mysticism is entirely derivative”.¹⁹ Orientalists and romantics alike agreed that mysticism must always and inevitably derive from India. The lack of historical evidence for this assumption demands that one seek elsewhere for an explanation of what one scholar has called “Indomaniac zeal”. In part, no doubt, there was some attraction in the elegance and simplicity found in theories of cultural diffusion from a single source. One typical example of the romantic Orientalist interpretation of Sufism was E. H. Palmer’s 1867 translation of an important thirteenth-century Persian text by ‘Aziz al-Din Nasafi, which Palmer entitled *Oriental Mysticism*. “Steering a mid course between the pantheism of India on the one hand and the deism of the Coran on the other, the Sufis’ cult is the religion of beauty . . . Sufism is really the development of the Primaeval Religion of the Aryan race”.²⁰ Arguments used to support this contention wavered between focusing on yogic practice and the philosophical doctrines of Vedanta as the essence of Indian mysticism.

Let me make it clear that I have no interest in upholding the purity of Islamic mysticism from pollution by foreign sources. That would simply be a reversal of the comparativist project of Orientalism. As Jonathan Z. Smith has commented,

It is as if the only choices the comparativist has are to assert either identity or uniqueness, and that the only possibilities for utilizing comparisons are to make assertions regarding dependence. In such an enterprise, it would appear, dissimilarity is assumed to be the norm; similarities are to be explained either as the result of the ‘psychic unity’ of humankind, or the result of ‘borrowing’.²¹

If we are to avoid these essentialist dichotomies, the polythetic approach to religion is extremely helpful. No longer is it necessary to attack or defend arguments of influence

¹⁸ For a general review of early scholarship on Sufism, see Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston, 1997), Chapter 1. I have presented a more detailed series of remarks on the theory of the Indian origins of Sufism in “The Islamization of Yoga in the Amrtakunda Translations”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 13, 2 (2003), pp. 199–226.

¹⁹ R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience* (New York, 1961), p. 160.

²⁰ E. H. Palmer, *Oriental Mysticism: A Treatise on Sufistic and Unitarian Theosophy of the Persians* (London, 1867; reprint ed., London, 1969), pp. x–xi. Palmer dedicated this treatise to Napoleon III, whom he described as a great patron of “European Orientalism”.

²¹ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, p. 47.

or authenticity, since it is now possible to acknowledge freely that numerous examples of hybrid and multiplex symbols, practices, and doctrines can be at work in any particular religious *milieu*. Nevertheless, it is still worthwhile to dissect essentialist and Orientalist interpretations of religion, particularly when they take the form of what literary critics call ‘strong misreadings’, in which a theorist triumphantly proposes a revolutionary explanation based on newly detected alleged sources and origins.

What, then, is the data regarding the relationship between Sufism and yoga, apart from *a priori* assumptions about Oriental mysticism? In a recent study, I have traced the history of the single text, *The Pool of Nectar*, which, in multiple versions and translations, made available to Muslim readers certain practices associated with the Nath yogis and the teachings known as hatha yoga (in standard North Indian pronunciation, yogis are called yogis).²² These practices include divination by control of breath through the left and right nostrils, summoning female spirits that can be identified as yoginis, and performing meditations on the cakras accompanied by recitation of Sanskrit mantras. All this material was increasingly Islamised over time, in a series of translations into Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, and Urdu. This remarkable text, and a number of other examples that I will mention, make it abundantly clear that in certain Sufi circles there was an awareness and use of particular practices that can be considered yogic (although the question of defining yoga, and the perspective from which it may be identified, still needs to be clarified). Contrary to Orientalist expectations, however, Sufi engagement with yoga was not to be found at the historical beginnings of the Sufi tradition, and it was most highly developed, unsurprisingly, in India.²³ Moreover, the knowledge of yoga among Indian Sufis gradually became more detailed over time. The most exact accounts of hatha yoga in Sufi texts, using technical terms in Hindi, occur in writings from as late as the nineteenth century, although these texts typically juxtapose yoga materials alongside Sufi practices without any real attempt at integration or synthesis. The Sufi interest in hatha yoga was very practical, and did not (with certain notable exceptions) engage with philosophical texts of Vedanta or other Sanskrit schools of thought.²⁴

The foregoing brief summary of the *Pool of Nectar* translations has just introduced a number of technical terms that will remain methodologically problematic if we do not pause for some basic attempts at historical and descriptive definition. What do we mean by Sufism and yoga? ‘Sufism’ is by its nature an outsider’s term, belonging to the Enlightenment catalogue of ideologies and creeds identified as ‘isms’. As such, it inevitably stands in tension with the insider vocabulary of spiritual vocations and ethical ideals of the Sufi tradition.²⁵ Historically, what we call Sufism may be considered a typical and prominent trend in most Muslim societies, gradually crystallising as a self-conscious movement in the ninth and tenth centuries. Despite the strong emphasis upon the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad in Sufi thought and practice, Sufism has been disassociated from Islam in both Orientalist scholarship and modern Muslim reformist polemics for the past two hundred years, so that now it is a

²² Ernst, “Islamization of Yoga”.

²³ To gauge the relative importance of these yoga practices for Sufism considered broadly, I would point to a recent encyclopedia article on Sufism (5,000 words), in which I devoted two sentences to yoga; see “Tasawwuf” in Richard Martin (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World* (New York, 2003), 2, pp. 684–690.

²⁴ For the larger context of this translation movement, see Carl W. Ernst, “Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Persian and Arabic Translations from Sanskrit”, *Iranian Studies*, 36 (2003), pp. 173–195.

²⁵ See Ernst, *Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, Chapter 1.

highly contested subject. Sufism can refer to a wide range of phenomena, including scriptural interpretation, meditative practices, master-disciple relationships, corporate institutions, aesthetic and ritual gestures, doctrines, and literary texts. As a generic descriptive term, however, Sufism is deceptive. There is no Sufism in general. All that we describe as Sufism is firmly rooted in particular local contexts, often anchored to the very tangible tombs of deceased saints, and it is deployed in relation to lineages and personalities with a distinctively local sacrality. Individual Sufi groups or traditions in one place may be completely oblivious of what Sufis do or say in other regions.

‘Yoga’ is a term that may be even harder to define. Georg Feuerstein maintains that “Yoga is like an ancient river with countless rapids, eddies, loops, tributaries, and backwaters, extending over a vast, colorful terrain of many different habitats”.²⁶ Some regard it mainly as a philosophy linked to important Sanskrit texts, particularly Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*. For others, yoga signifies primarily meditative ascetic practices frequently associated with the god Shiva in Hindu teachings, though yoga is also widespread in Buddhist and Jain contexts. The yogic material that the Sufis mostly encountered was a highly specialised tradition called hatha yoga (literally, “the yoga of force”), associated with charismatic figures of the tenth to twelfth centuries, especially Matsyendranath and Gorakhnath. The lineage that preserves the hatha yoga teachings is known collectively as the Nath *siddhas* (adepts) or Kanphata (‘split-ear’) yogis, due to the distinctive wooden inserts and large rings they put in their ears during initiation.²⁷ The early Nath yogis were associated with the erotic practices of Kaula Tantrism, and prominent in their pantheon are the feminine deities known as yoginis or female yogis. *Hatha* yoga has a much more complicated psycho-physical set of techniques than the classical yoga of Patanjali, and it is presented with a minimum of metaphysical explanation. Special practices include manipulation of subtle physiology including psychic centres called cakras, retention of semen, pronunciation of syllabic chants or mantras with occult efficacy, and the summoning of deities. Despite their ascetic emphasis on sexual restraint, the Kanphata yogis have become over the past millennium a recognisable caste.²⁸

Yet, in the attempt to provide even such brief descriptions of both Sufism and yoga, we are faced with an especially challenging problem arising from the gap between scholarly analyses of the history of religions and the way in which these traditions are appropriated in the global marketplace of contemporary thought, especially under the rubric of New Age spirituality. Although the scholarly Orientalist argument about Sufism and yoga addressed issues of authenticity and dependence related to anxieties about Islam and the relegation of mysticism to India, the attraction of both Sufism and yoga today rests primarily on the extent to which both traditions can be seen as transcending any religious definition. The accelerating distrust of authority that still marks the legacy of the Enlightenment values

²⁶ Georg Feuerstein, *Yoga: The Technology of Ecstasy* (Los Angeles, 1989).

²⁷ David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago, 1996); George Weston Briggs, *Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogis* (Calcutta, 1938; reprinted Delhi, 1980), pp. 179–250; Shashibhusan Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults* (3rd ed., Calcutta, 1976), pp. 191–210, 392–398; Feuerstein, *Yoga*, pp. 277–302.

²⁸ Daniel Gold and Ann Grodzins Gold, “The Fate of the Householder Nath”, *History of Religions*, 24 (1984), pp. 113–132.

experience over doctrine and authenticity over institutional approval.²⁹ The most popular forms of Sufism in Europe and America are those that minimise or ignore any form of Islamic identity. Rumi is the best-selling poet in America precisely because he is seen as going beyond all religions.

With yoga the definitional problem in relation to religion is even more severe. Yoga is often seen as the very basis of all spirituality, or alternatively as a physical technique for stress reduction that can be embraced by anyone regardless of religious affiliation. According to some estimates, over five million Americans practice yoga, and in most cases they do so in settings (physical education, YMCA classes) that downplay or ignore any connection whatever with Hindu religious traditions. A quick survey of recent library acquisitions on the topic of yoga yields a series of titles that emphasise its universal accessibility: *Yoga for Americans*; *Yoga for All*; and, inevitably, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Yoga*. Glossy magazines on yoga are available at supermarket counters, and newspapers describe the yoga fashion accessories available for “today’s yoginis”.³⁰ So when we use the term yoga now, it carries multiple burdens – the sublime philosophy of transcendence associated with Patanjali, the intricate and esoteric psycho-physical system of the Nath yogis, and also the mass marketing category of yoga as the generic basis of mysticism in all religions. Modern scholarship is not immune from these grandiose concepts of yoga.³¹

When one turns to the historical context for the encounter of Sufism and yoga, it is a curious coincidence that the arrival of Sufis in India took place not long after the Nath or Kanphata yogis became organised, that is by the beginning of the thirteenth century. While ascetic orders certainly had existed in India for many centuries, the Nath appear to have had a remarkable success at this particular time. The Nath yogis did not observe the purity restrictions of Brahminical ritual society, and were free to drop in for meals at Sufi hospices, which in turn were open to any and all visitors. While hardly representative of ‘Hindu’ culture as a whole, the yogis were perhaps the only Indian religious group with whom Sufis had much in common. This was also an encounter between two movements that shared overlapping interests in psycho-physical techniques of meditation, and which competed to some extent for popular recognition as wonder-workers, healers, and possessors of sanctity.³² Moreover, in a country where cremation was the preferred funeral method, both groups practiced burial; Sufi tombs, to the untutored eye, must have fit the model of the lingam shrines or *samadhis* set up over yogis, who were customarily buried in the lotus position.³³ The similarity between yogis and Sufis extended to the point that the heads of Nath yogi establishments became known by the Persian term *pir*, the common designation for a Sufi master. While it is sometimes suggested that this name was adopted defensively to deter

²⁹ “The modern age conflates authoritarianism with authority, hence tends to suspect the latter (and its poetic representatives) as in fact embodying the former. Only when the notion of authority becomes a pejorative social term can anxiety concerning it spread to other areas like literature and criticism” (Renza, “Influence”, p. 197).

³⁰ Sara Steffens, “Yoga Baring: Find your Inner Fashionista with Exercise Gear”, *Raleigh News & Observer*, 15 March 2004.

³¹ Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay* (Berkeley, 1975).

³² For a stimulating sociological comparison of Hindu and Islamic asceticism, see Marc Gaborieau, “Incomparables ou vrais jumeaux? Les renouancants dans l’hindouisme et dans l’islam”, *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 57 (2002), pp. 71–92.

³³ Briggs, *Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogis*, pp. 39–40; Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, NJ, 1989), pp. 422–423.

Muslim rulers from wiping the yogis out,³⁴ from the historical evidence it seems clear that many Muslim rulers were quite familiar with the characteristic specialities of yogis, and it is striking that the Mughals in particular became patrons of yogi establishments.³⁵ Acculturation by the yogis to selected Islamic norms seems a more likely reason than the presumption of religious persecution for the yogis' adoption of such a title.³⁶

The theoretical problem with the Orientalist influence model is that, even in cases where Sufis clearly recognise a particular technique (such as breath control) as being associated with Indian yogis, this does not explain the significance of the practice as adapted by Sufis. Recently, Jürgen Paul returned to the influence model to inquire into the case of Naqshbandi Sufis in Central Asia. Using what he calls a phenomenological comparison, he proposed a concept of Indian influence based on deliberate study, consideration, and adoption of religious practices such as vegetarianism, celibacy, and breath control. There seems to have been a clear awareness among these Naqshbandis that breath control, a central technique at least since the time of Baha' al-Din Naqshband (d. 1390), was also common among Indian yogis. Paul therefore concludes that these Central Asian Sufis were "inspired by non-Muslim Indian mystical techniques".³⁷ Yet the significance of this breath control technique would seem to be affected by the fact that, among these Naqshbandis, breath control invariably was used to accompany *dhikr* recitation formulas in order to make this meditation continuous, with a focus on such typically Islamic chants such as *la ilaha illa allah* (there is no god but God). In other words, if breath control was used to enhance the effect of Islamic meditation formulas, to what extent can it be considered "inspired by non-Muslim Indian mystical techniques"?

Another example raises questions about the influence model, in this case concerning a major systematisation of Sufi psycho-physical meditative practice. 'Ala' al-Dawla Simnani (d. 1336) was one of the chief figures in the Kubrawi Sufi order in Central Asia, whose vast literary output was matched by his extensive activities in training disciples. Heir to an already highly developed system of meditation established by his teacher Nur al-Din Isfarayini (d. 1317) and others, Simnani incorporated earlier practices and articulated a spiritual method of considerable subtlety, based on interior visualisation of seven subtle centres (*latifa*, pl. *lata'if*) within the body, each associated with a particular prophet and a colour.³⁸ The system of seven subtle centres developed by Simnani underwent further evolution in India in the Naqshbandi order, from the fifteenth through to the late nineteenth century, resulting in

³⁴ G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus* (Bombay, 1964), p. 139, argues protective dissimulation from the proximity of Yogi shrines and pilgrimage sites to Muslim population centres and the alleged conversion of two shrines at Gorakhpur into mosques by 'Ala' al-Din Khalji (d. 1316) and Awrangzeb (d. 1707).

³⁵ B. N. Goswamy and J. S. Grewal, *The Mughals and the Yogis of Jakhbar, Some Madad-i-Ma'ash and Other Documents* (Simla, 1967).

³⁶ On Sufi terms in yogi centres, see Véronique Bouillier, *Ascètes et Rois: Un Monastère de Kanphata Yogis au Népal* (Paris, 1997), pp. 91–93.

³⁷ Jürgen Paul, "Influences indiennes sur la naqshbandiyya d'Asie centrale?", *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale*, 1–2 (1996), pp. 203–217. In a similar vein, William S. Haas observed that the *dhikr* technique of the Algerian Rahmaniyya order "has as its centre a thoroughly elaborated technique of breathing, obviously of Indian origin", and so he speculated that the nineteenth-century founder of the order must have gone to India; see "The Zikr of the Rahmaniya-Order in Algeria: A Psycho-physiological Analysis", *Moslem World*, 33 (1943), pp. 16–28, citing p. 18.

³⁸ Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, vol. 3, *Les Fidèles d'amour, Shi'isme et soufisme*, Bibliothèque des Idées (Paris, 1972), pp. 275–355; Nûruddîn Abdurrahmân-i Isfarâyini, *Le Révélateur des mystères: Kâshif al-Asrâr*, ed. and trans. Hermann Landolt (Paris, 1986), "Étude Préliminaire", pp. 38–49.

a new assignment of six subtle centres to particular parts of the body. A typical version of the Naqshbandi subtle centres puts the heart (*qalb*) two fingers below the left breast, the spirit (*ruh*) two fingers below the right breast, the soul (*nafs*) beneath the navel, the conscience (*sirr*) in the middle of the breast, the mystery (*khafi*) above the eyebrows, and the arcanum (*akhfā*) at the top of the brain.³⁹

One could argue that the Naqshbandi–Kubrawi system has a certain similarity with the yogic concept of seven cakras or subtle nerve centres located along the region of the spine, although some of the Sufi centres are clearly unconnected with the spinal region. Both systems include visualisation of appropriate colours and sometimes images in particular bodily locations, so that one might assume either that the Sufi practices were based on earlier unspecified Indian yoga techniques, or that figures like Simani would have been interested in contemporary yogis. From his biography, however, it appears that Simnani, much against his inclination, was forced to engage in disputations with Buddhist monks at the court of the Mongol ruler Arghun; in these debates, Simnani showed considerable theological hostility to the Buddhists. Although they were probably from Mahayana schools with highly developed yogic techniques of their own, Simnani showed no interest in discussing meditation practices with them.⁴⁰

Recent research has shown that there was considerable practical variation among Sufis in the number of subtle centres, the colours assigned to each subtle centre, and even their physical locations in the body. Arthur Buehler has described the adjustable Naqshbandi system of subtle centres as “a heuristic device for the disciple to develop a subtle body or a subtle field with which to travel in non-material realms”.⁴¹ Similar variations occur within hatha yoga practices.⁴² Despite their comparability, however, the Sufi techniques do not seem to have any intrinsic relation with the psycho-physiology of yoga, and they rarely make reference to the characteristic yogic descriptions of subtle nerves (*nadis*), the breaths, the sun and moon symbolism, or the *kundalini*. In addition, Sufi texts contain a multilevelled prophetology and mystical Qur’anic exegesis tied to each of the seven subtle centres, so that distinctive Islamic symbolisms are embedded in the system. As will be indicated below, some Naqshbandi Sufis like Ahmad Sirhindi showed explicit hostility toward the practices of yogis and Brahmins. Major manuals of Sufi contemplative practice from remoter areas, such as *Miftah al-falah* or *The Key to Salvation*, by the Egyptian Sufi master Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah of Alexandria (d. 1309), make no reference to any identifiable Indian yoga technique.⁴³ Judgments about sources and influences of such practices necessarily ignore the significance accorded them in Sufi interpretations. Enamul Haq, who argued for the yogic origin of the Naqshbandi subtle centres, was forced to explain away the differences by begging the question, calling the Sufi system “quite imperfect and immature . . . due to the ignorance of

³⁹ Muhammad Dhawqi Shah, *Sirr-i dilbaran* (4th printing, Karachi, 1405/1985), pp. 298–299.

⁴⁰ Jamal J. Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God: The Life and Thought of ‘Ala’ ad-dawla as-Simnani* (Albany, 1995), pp. 18, 26; for Simnani’s concept of subtle substances or centres, see pp. 79–99.

⁴¹ Arthur Frank Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh*, *Studies in Comparative Religion* (Charleston, SC, 1998), p. 112; cf. pp. 103–116 for a full account of the *latifa* system.

⁴² Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition* (Garden City, N.Y., 1970).

⁴³ Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah al-Sikandari, *Miftah al-falah wa misbah al-arwah* (Egypt, 1381/1961); Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *The Key to Salvation and the Lamp of Souls*, trans. Mary Ann Koury Danner (Cambridge, 1996).

anatomical knowledge of the Sufis who were far inferior to the Indian Yogis with respect to the scientific knowledge of human body".⁴⁴

This being said, it is striking to see a very late Urdu text that makes explicit comparison between the Naqshbandi system of subtle centres and the yogic cakras. After giving a lengthy description of a six-centre version of the Naqshbandi method, Ghawth 'Ali Shah Qalandar Qadiri (d. 1880) remarked in conversation that "These six subtle centres are also in the Sannyasi teaching, the six lotuses (*k'hat kanwal*) or six cakras, according to the *Yoga sastra*". He then enumerated these six lotuses according to a complex yogic scheme that includes a different number of petals for each lotus, which are ordered according to the Sanskrit alphabet; these are depicted in a diagram included in the published version of his discourses, in the form of a long-stemmed plant with groups of petals bunched together at the level of each lotus. In the upper right corner of the diagram, there is also a drawing of a throne-like platform, with a marginal note on the diagram reading, "Here the student must visualise his guru or *pir* sitting on the throne, [thinking that] 'From the treasury of hidden emanation, an ocean of light has poured over my heart'". In the brief comment that follows this diagram, Ghawth 'Ali Shah remarked, "The method of this practice is that through visualization one should transfer each [Sanskrit] letter from the petal to the inside of the stem. Having imagined the stem as a single great river, after reaching the *brahmada* [the cakra at the crown of the skull], one transfers [the letter] above. When all the letters are collected above, then in due order the subtle centres become active, and the entire body becomes luminous".⁴⁵ This account shows a remarkably detailed knowledge of yoga, gained probably through contact with nineteenth-century yogis, rather than from the vaguely titled book mentioned in this passage (when the transcriber of these discourses inserted the description of the lotuses and their petals, he introduced it only as coming from "a certain sage" [*kisi gyani*]). Although Ghawth 'Ali Shah juxtaposes the Naqshbandi subtle centres and the yogic cakras as similar, this late comparison does not attempt to bridge the conceptual and technical gap between the two meditative systems. This kind of comparison is more a testimony to the author's willingness to bring in the evidence of Indian sages as external confirmation of doctrines and practices based on traditional Islamic sources.⁴⁶

In recent times, Naqshbandi Sufi leaders in northern India have taken significant steps to spread their teachings among Hindu disciples, including a number of Hindu masters who explain the Naqshbandi cosmology with terms from classical hatha yoga. These Naqshbandi branches (centred particularly on Kanpur) constitute what is in effect a new Sufi-based school of yoga, known as Ananda-yoga. Particularly important practices of these groups include silent recitation of the name Allah to awaken the cakras. The overall doctrine of

⁴⁴ Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal*, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh Publication no. 30 (Dacca, 1975), p. 139. This study, based on a 1937 dissertation, relies to a considerable extent on older Orientalist literature.

⁴⁵ Gul Hasan Qadiri, *Tadhkira-i-ghawthiyya* (Delhi, 1298/1881), pp. 148–150. This section is omitted from the English translation of this text, Gul Hasan, *Solomon's Ring: The Life and Teachings of a Sufi Master*, trans. Hasan Askari (London, 1998), but see pp. 185–193 for "Encounters with Hindu Sages".

⁴⁶ See the brief section entitled "Conversation with Mahapurusa Sannyasi Mata", *ibid.*, pp. 139–144 (trans. Askari, pp. 155–160), which acts as a Hindu supplement to four lengthy chapters on the divine unity based on the Qur'an, hadith, and Sufi authorities (pp. 22–139). Other passing references to yogic practices discussed by Ghawth 'Ali Shah are found on pp. 52 (a mantra with translation), 332 (Hindi verses ascribed to Amir Khusraw on the *anahita* or unstruck sound).

the identity of the microcosm and the macrocosm, common to both Islamicate and Indic traditions, permits a wide-ranging series of analogies between Sufi notions of subtle centres with yogic cakras.⁴⁷ This recent development, which inverts the Orientalist view of the relation between Sufism and yoga, is a striking indication of the way in which the history of religion can defy the expectations of essentialism.

Keeping in mind these cautions about the comparative approach, we can briefly survey here some important examples of how Sufis appropriated or interpreted yogic practices, with attention to the most important text, *The Pool of Nectar*. The earliest sources, from the fourteenth century, depict Sufis with a range of reactions to the teaching and practices of the yogis, ranging from sceptical criticism to frank admiration. On the critical side, Sharaf al-Din Maneri (d. 1381), for instance, felt that contemporary yogis did not understand the full meaning of the sayings that they had inherited.⁴⁸ The Chishti saint Burhan al-Din Gharib (d. 1337) believed that a certain yogi of his acquaintance used fraudulent alchemical techniques and supplemented these with drugs and the assistance of spirits.⁴⁹ Some Sufis criticised yogic practices such as meditation and ascetic exercises, on the grounds that in themselves they were devoid of spiritual grace; following the prescribed Islamic religious duties was much more beneficial. Such was the position, not surprisingly, of the doctrinally emphatic Naqshbandi Sufi, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624), who regarded yogis, Brahmins, and other non-Muslim ascetics (such as Plato and other ancient Greek philosophers) as irremediably misguided.⁵⁰ Likewise, a Sufi teacher in India named Muhammad Muhyi al-Din displayed considerable ambivalence when a disciple questioned him in 1748 about the divination techniques for estimating the end of one's life, as explained in an early version of *The Pool of Nectar* known as the *Kamrubijaksa*. "This is the practice of the Yogis," he replied; "this is not an activity of the community of Muhammad. Nevertheless, it is correct".⁵¹

All the same, considerable evidence shows that Sufis commented with interest on particular yogic techniques and concepts, and many of them seem also to have been familiar with versions of *The Pool of Nectar*. The Chishti master Nizam al-Din Awliya' (d. 1325) found one yogi's concept of bodily control impressive, and he was also intrigued by yogic accounts of the effect of different days of the month on the conception of children (until his master indicated to him that he would live a celibate life). His disciple Nasir al-Din Chiragh-i Dihli (d. 1356) commented in passing on the yogic practice of breath control in comparison to that practiced by Sufis:

The essence of this matter is restraint of breath, that is, the Sufi ought to hold his breath during meditation. As long as he holds his breath, his interior is concentrated, and when he releases his breath, the interior is distracted, and it destroys his momentary state Therefore the Sufi is he

⁴⁷ Thomas Dähnhardt, "La scienza sufica dei centri sottili presso una scuola contemporanea di yoga", *Asiatica Venetiana*, 2 (1997), pp. 19–29; *id.*, *Change and Continuity in Indian Sufism: A Naqshbandi Mujaddidi Branch in the Hindu Environment* (New Delhi, 2002).

⁴⁸ Simon Digby, "Encounters with Yogis in Indian Sufi Hagiography", unpublished paper presented at the Seminar on Aspects of Religion in South Asia, University of London, January 1970, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Carl W. Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center*, SUNY Series in Muslim Spirituality in South Asia (Albany, 1992), p. 328, n. 361.

⁵⁰ Ahmad Sirhindi, *Maktubat-i imam-i rabbani* (2 vols., Karachi, 1392/1972; reprint ed., Istanbul, 1977), I, p. 130 (letter 52); I, p. 366 (letter 221); I, p. 394 (letter 237); I, p. 666 (letter 313); II, p. 157 (letter 55).

⁵¹ *Kamrubijaksa*, Pakistan National Museum, Karachi, MS 1957–1060/18–1, fol. 2b (marginal comment).

whose breath is counted. The adept is the master of breath; this has but a single meaning. The accomplished yogis, who are called *siddha* in the Indian language, breathe counted breaths.⁵²

Nasir al-Din's disciple Muhammad al-Husayni Gisu Daraz (d. 1422) felt that breath control was essential for Sufi disciples. In a manual of discipline composed in 1404, he remarked,

Following the habit of stopping the breath, as is done among the yogis, is necessary for the disciple, but not everyone can do it to the extent that those people can. Those who follow this habit must completely abstain from association with women. Diminution of intake of food and drink permits the performance of required and supererogatory prayers in the case of one of fixed abode, and the traveller retains mobility. One should avoid idle talk. If control becomes habitual, many thoughts can be banished; thought is natural to the carnal soul.⁵³

Nonetheless, Gisu Daraz was extremely careful to limit the extent to which yogic practice was acceptable.

Except for breath control, which is the specialty and support of the yogis, it is necessary for the disciple to avoid all their other kinds of practices. These two points which I have written respecting the yogis are also incumbent on [advanced] Sufis.⁵⁴

Another Chishti, Ashraf Jahangir Simnani (d. 1425), is credited by his biographer with a victory over a yogi, and he was also familiar with mantras of the Naths used for purposes of curing snakebite and similar purposes, which he regarded as magical charms (*afsun*).⁵⁵ The later Chishti master 'Abd al-Quddus Gangohi (d. 1537) was probably more familiar with the yoga of the Naths than anyone else in that order. He wrote Hindi verses on the subject under the pen-name 'Alakhdas' or 'Servant of the Absolute'. It is in connection with 'Abd al-Quddus that we find the earliest external reference to the Arabic version of *The Pool of Nectar*, which he is said to have taught to a disciple, Sulayman Mandawi, in the late fifteenth century, in exchange for instruction in Qur'anic recitation.⁵⁶ He also composed a treatise called *Rushd nama* or *The Book of Guidance* with considerable yogic content.⁵⁷ Later masters of the Chishti order such as Nizam al-Din Awarangabadi (d. 1729) and Hajji Imdad Allah

⁵² Nasir al-Din Mahmud Chiragh-i Dihli, *Khayr al-majalis*, comp. Hamid Qalandar, ed. Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, Publication of the Department of History, Muslim University, no. 5, Studies in Indo-Muslim Mysticism, 1 (Aligarh, 1959), pp. 59–60 (session 12).

⁵³ Gisu Daraz, *Khatima-i adab al-muridin al-ma'ruf bi-khatima*, Urdu trans. Mu'in al-Din Darda'i (Karachi, 1976), no. 168, p. 158.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 205, p. 171.

⁵⁵ Ashraf Jahangir Simnani, *Lata'if-i ashrafi*, comp. Nizam Gharib Yamani (2 vols., Delhi, 1295/1878), II, p. 396.

⁵⁶ Simon Digby, "'Abd Al-Quddus Gangohi (1456–537 A.D.): The Personality and Attitudes of a Medieval Indian Sufi", *Medieval India, A Miscellany*, III (1975), pp. 1–66, citing p. 36, equivalent to Rukn al-Din Quddusi, *Lata'if-i Quddusi* (Delhi, 1311/1894), p. 41, anecdote 5. From this source it is known that 'Abd al-Quddus composed a *Risala-i qudsi*, possibly in answer to Mandawi's questions on the yogic text, and a manuscript of this text is preserved in Lahore; cf. Muhammad Bashir Husayn, *Fihrist-i makhtutat-i Sherani* (Lahore, 1969), II, p. 224, no. 1236. On examination, however, the manuscript (22 fols.) turns out to be a conventional Sufi treatise with no reference to yogic practices. On Sulayman Mandawi (d. 945/1538–9, reportedly aged over 150), whose Qur'anic recitation was inspired by the Prophet and 'Ali during his fifty years of austerities in Mecca, see Mandawi, pp. 243–244.

⁵⁷ For bibliographic references see S. A. A. Rizvi, "Sufis and Nātha Yogis in Mediaeval Northern India (XII to XVI Centuries)", *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*, 7 (1970), pp. 119–133, citing p. 132, quoting Rukn al-Din's *Lata'if-i Quddusi*, p. 41; *id.*, *A History of Sufism in India*, vol. I, *Early Sufism and its History in India to 1600 A.D.* (Delhi, 1978), p. 335; S. C. R. Weightman, "The Text of *Alakh Bani*", in R. S. McGregor (ed.), *Devotional literature in South Asia: Current research, 1985–8* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 171–178. Gangohi's knowledge of yoga is discussed at length by Digby in "'Abd Al-Quddus".

(d. 1899) continued to include descriptions of yogic mantras in Hindi alongside Arabic *dhikr* formulas, together with explicit accounts of yogic postures (although the latter account tends to be much abbreviated). In this way Nizam al-Din Awrangabadi gave a brief account of yogic mantras in his lengthy survey of Sufi meditative practices, *Nizam al-qulub* or *The Order of Hearts*:

Recollection (*dhikr*) in the Hindi language. Towards the sky [say] “*tuñ*”, and towards oneself [say] “*huñ*”, though some also [say] “*huñ*” towards the heart. Or one says to the right, “*uhi hi*”, and to the left, “*wuhi hi*”. Or one says to the right, “*inhañ tuñ*”, to the left, “*inhañ tuñ*”, towards the direction of prayer (*qibla*), “*inhañ tuñ*”, towards heaven, “*uhañ tuñ*”. In the heart one strikes “*inhañ tuñ*”, though some say towards the ground, “*inhañ tuñ*”, towards heaven, “*uhañ tuñ*”, and in the direction of the heart, “*inhañ tuñ*”.

Another recollection (*dhikr*) in the Hindi language. One sits cross-legged just like the position of the yogis. One turns the head and eye toward heaven and recites this recollection one thousand times, or recites it even more. In the end a world favors one’s wishes. One says this very word: “*uhi uhi*”. But one of the eighty-four postures (Hindi *baithak*) has been selected as having the benefit and special quality of all the postures, and it is as follows. One sits cross-legged and brings up both feet, placing the sole of the left foot beneath the genitals, and holding the right foot near it. Then one looks at the stomach and brings the breath up and collects it at the navel, and takes it toward the back. One closes the mouth and holds the tongue firmly on the palate. Then one practices magical imagination (*wahm*), that is, one internally thinks, “*uhi hi*”, and one remains hungry and without sleep. If he remains three days together without food or sleep, and remains occupied with this practice, he attains an unconsciousness that produces in him the unveiling of hidden things. He then returns to consciousness or becomes enraptured and intoxicated (*majdhub u mad’hush*).⁵⁸

This account of yogic mantras from the fifteenth chapter of this survey of *dhikr* techniques resembles the Hindi chant of Farid al-Din Ganj-i Shakkār, the only Hindi chant that Muhammad Ghawth (discussed below) included in his Arabic meditation manual, *The Five Jewels*.⁵⁹ Although it is said that Nizam al-Din Awrangabadi had contact with living yogis, he generally prefers to cite yogic practice via Sufi authorities and texts deriving from different Sufi orders.⁶⁰

Along with the Chishtis, it is probably the Shattari Sufis who most integrated yoga into their practice without any hesitation, giving particular emphasis to the mantra.⁶¹ Though

⁵⁸ Nizam al-Din Awrangabadi, *Nizam al-qulub* (Delhi, 1309/1891–2), p. 32. This text is discussed in detail in Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, Chapter 2.

⁵⁹ I have heard oral commentaries on these Hindi mantras, suggesting a simple mystical interpretation: “*uhañ tuñ*” resembles modern Hindi for “you are there”, while “*inhañ tuñ*” sounds like “you are here”, so the chant would underscore the presence of God everywhere. Thanks to the late Prof. M. R. Tarafdar for this suggestion.

⁶⁰ K. A. Nizami, *Tarikh-i mashayikh-i Chisht* (Delhi, 1985), V, pp. 174–175; cf. Digby, “‘Abd al-Quddus”, p. 51. In the *Kashkul-i Kalimi* (Delhi, n.d.), Shah Kalim Allah (p. 30) describes the single most efficacious of the 84 postures of yoga according to Shaykh Baha’ al-Din Qadiri (Shattari?), and he explains the yogi “unstruck sound” (pp. 40–41) with reference to the comments of Miyan Mir of Lahore (Qadiri) and Shaykh Yahya Madani (Chishti).

⁶¹ See Khaliq Ahmed Nizami, “The Shattari Saints and Their Attitude towards the State”, *Medieval India Quarterly*, III (1950), pp. 56–70; Syed Hasan Askari, “A Fifteenth Century Shuttari Sufi Saint of North Bihar”, *Proceedings of the 13th Indian History Congress* (1950), pp. 148–157; M. M. Haq, “The Shuttari Order of Sufism in India and Its Exponents in Bengal and Bihar”, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan*, 16 (1971), pp. 167–175; S. A. A. Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India* (Delhi, 1983), II, pp. 151–173.

the historical origins of this Sufi order are obscure, it seems that it was introduced to India by ‘Abd Allah Shattari (d. 1485), the first Sufi to use that name. The same order is known as the ‘Ishqiyya or Bistamiyya in Iran and Central Asia. The latter name points to the association of the Shattaris with the Iranian Sufi Abu Yazid al-Bistami, one of the most powerful early representatives of the ecstatic form of Sufism. There are, on the other hand, traditions that link the Shattaris with the Qadiri order, which trace its origin to the master of sober Sufism, Junayd of Baghdad (d. 910). The characteristic meditative practice of repetition of the Qur’anic names of God (*dhikr*, plural *adhkar*) formed a prominent part of ‘Abd Allah Shattari’s teaching, though only fragments of his written work have survived.⁶² Certainly in the work of Shaykh Baha’ al-Din Shattari (d. 1515) there is evidence of an interest in Indian spiritual practices; his work *Risala-i Shattariyya* or *The Shattari Treatise* contains repetitions of divine names in Hindi, alongside the divine names in Arabic and Persian. The fourth and last chapter is entitled “On various Arabic, Persian, and Hindi *adhkar*, with attention to certain methods (*suluk*) of the yogis and their *adhkar*, which they recite with magical imagination (*wahm*), the sentences that they recite in meditation, and other incantations (*da’awat*) related to them”.⁶³ Thus by the beginning of the tenth/sixteenth century, a member of the Shattari order was able to produce a systematic account of yogic mantras and visualisation practices, assimilated and even incorporated into the conceptual structure of Sufi tradition.⁶⁴

But it is particularly with Muhammad Ghawth Gwaliyari (d. 1563), one of the most influential Shattari masters, that yoga became a significant element in the repertoire of Sufi practice. Muhammad Ghawth was notable both for his spiritual teachings and for his political influence with the first Mughal emperors. His spiritual career began with a thirteen-year period of meditation in the hills around the fort of Chunar in eastern Uttar Pradesh, where he came into contact with yogis who were probably visiting the yogi shrine located in the fort.⁶⁵ Muhammad Ghawth completed a Persian translation and expansion of *The Pool of Nectar* in Gujarat probably around 1550, partly out of dissatisfaction with an existing Persian translation, and partly in order to clarify the obscurities of the Arabic version.⁶⁶ One of the apparently insoluble problems in the study of Indian mantras was the inappropriateness of the Arabic alphabet for precise transliteration of Hindi or Sanskrit terms, a problem complained about by a number of readers. This is an especially acute problem, because as everyone knows, charms and spells must be pronounced exactly right in order to retain their efficacy.

⁶² ‘Abd al-Haq Muhaddith Dihlawi al-Bukhari, *Akhbar al-akhyar fi asrar al-abrar*, ed. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Ahad (Delhi, 1332/1913–4), p. 176. Two manuscripts reportedly containing works by ‘Abd Allah Shattari are *Risala-i ‘Abd Allah Shattari*, MS Khudabakhsh Library, Patna; and *Tawba wa dhikr*, an anonymous treatise containing sayings of Hallaj and ‘Abd Allah Shattari, MS Karachi, National Museum 1965–210–21, cit. Ahmad Munzawi, *Fihrist-i Mushtarak-i Nuskhah-ha-yi Khatt-i Farsi-i Pakistan* (Islamabad, 1363/1405/1984), III, p. 1365, no. 2447.

⁶³ Baha’ al-Din ibn Ibrahim al-Ansari Shattari, *Risala-i Shattariyya*, MS 297/61 no. 318, Osmania University, Hyderabad, available as microfilm 1018, Middle East collection, University of Chicago, fols. 2a–3a. Unfortunately this copy lacks the fourth chapter. The use of the term imagination (*wahm*) is characteristic of *The Pool of Nectar* (ch. VII).

⁶⁴ See Ethé, no. 1913, col. 1060; numerous other copies are found in libraries in India and Pakistan. See also the undated work by Ishaq (a disciple of one ‘Abd al-Rahman Shattari), titled *Ma’rifat-i anfas*, MS 873(i) Persian (suppl. cat. I), Asiatic Society, Calcutta, which Dara N. Marshall described as “a Persian version of a Hindu tract on metaphysics”; *Mughals in India, A Bibliography* (Bombay, 1967), no. 728, p. 207. From the title, *The Knowledge of Breaths*, it appears to deal with breath control.

⁶⁵ Briggs, *Gorakmath and the Kanphata Yogis*, p. 82.

⁶⁶ Carl W. Ernst, “Sufism and Yoga according to Muhammad Ghawth”, *Sufi*, 29 (Spring, 1996), pp. 9–13.

Although Muhammad Ghawth did not have access to any Sanskrit text of *The Pool of Nectar*, he incorporated his knowledge of contemporary yoga. His version is greatly expanded from the existing Arabic text, with considerable differences based in part upon his access to an earlier recension of the Arabic version that no longer survives. It seems likely that he had been using *The Pool of Nectar* as a teaching text with his disciples in the Shattari Sufi order, and that his Persian translation emerged as an oral commentary on the Arabic. The teachings of *The Pool of Nectar*, as adapted by Muhammad Ghawth, apparently occupied a significant position in the literature of the Shattari order. Most of the material on cakras in chapter VII may be found in a manual of Shattari teachings written by Muhammad Rida Shattari of Lahore (d. 1706), *Adab-i muridi* or *The Manners of Discipleship*.⁶⁷

In this connection it is necessary to mention Muhammad Ghawth's popular mystical treatise, *Jawahir-i khamsa* or *The Five Jewels*, first composed in the shaykh's youth and later revised in 1549.⁶⁸ The Mecca-based Shattari teacher Sibghat Allah (d. 1606) later translated this text into Arabic, and under his successors these practices were taught to disciples from as far away as North Africa and Indonesia; through these Shattari channels North African authors such as al-Sanusi learned of yogis in the guise of a Sufi order called al-Jukiyya, with their own distinctive *dhikr* formulas.⁶⁹ *The Five Jewels* deserves comment here, because, despite the assertions of certain nineteenth-century Orientalists, it in fact contains hardly anything that might be considered Indian in content. Nevertheless, Hughes' popular *Dictionary of Islam* (first published in 1885, and still in print) described it as follows: "This book is largely made up of Hindu customs which, in India, have become part of Muhammadanism", without explaining what that could mean.⁷⁰ In reality, the text consists almost entirely of prayers in Arabic, together with instructions on how they can be used as charms to gain particular results, or else recited as *dhikr* recitations in familiar Sufi style. The first section (or 'jewel') explains how one may deepen one's devotional life through the Islamic ritual prayer. The second section concerns prayer using the divine names, while the third describes the use of the divine names as 'invocations (*da'awat*)' to obtain specific goals (this is the longest section of the book). The fourth section deals with the specific techniques of the Shattari order, and the fifth is devoted to the way to see God. The text contains a single *dhikr* formula in Hindi, attributed, not to any yogi, but to the early Chishti Sufi master Farid al-Din Ganj-i Shakkar (d. 1265).⁷¹ For the Shattari Sufis' understanding of the practices of yoga, the Persian translation of *The Pool of Nectar* is the primary source,

⁶⁷ Muhammad Riza Shattari Qadiri Lahuri, *Adab-i muridi*, MS 5319 'irfan, Ganj Bakhsh, Islamabad (Munzawi III: 1218, no. 2149), pp. 31–2, 62–78.

⁶⁸ Muhammad Ghawthi Mandawi, *Gulzar-i abrar* (MS 259 Persian, Asiatic Society), fol. 326a.

⁶⁹ See Muhammad ibn Khatir al-Din ibn Khwaja al-Attar [Muhammad Ghawth], *al-Jawahir al-Khams*, Arabic trans. from Persian by Sibghat Allah, ed. Ahmad ibn al-Abbas (2nd ed., Egypt, 1393/1973), pp. 3–9; Muhammad ibn 'Ali al-Sanusi, *al-Salsabil al-mu'isim fil-tara'iq al-arba'in*, in *al-Masa'il al-ashar* (Cairo, n.d.), pp. 124 ff.

⁷⁰ Thomas Patrick Hughes, *A Dictionary of Islam* (n.p., 1885; reprint ed., Delhi, 1973), s.v. "Da'wah", pp. 72–78. Cf. also J'ar Sharif, *Islam in India or the Qanun-i-Islam, the Customs of the Musalmans of India*, trans. G. A. Herklots, ed. William Crooke (Oxford, 1921; reprint ed., New Delhi, 1972), pp. 219–231, for examples of practices taken from *The Five Jewels*. Marc Gaborieau has discussed these practices in detail in "L'Ésotérisme musulman dans le sous-continent indo-pakistanaïse: un point de vue ethnologique", *Bulletin d'Études Orientales*, 14 (1993), pp. 191–210.

⁷¹ Muhammad Ghawth, *al-Jawahir al-khams*, II, p. 70. The same *dhikr* was also quoted by the later Shattari author of Bihar, Imam Rajgiri (d. ca. 1718); cf. Askari, "A Fifteenth Century Shuttari Sufi Saint", p. 157; Haq, "The Shuttari Order", p. 175 (with wide textual variations).

rather than *The Five Jewels*. Its continued popularity is attested both by a large number of manuscripts and a nineteenth-century Urdu translation by a Qadiri Sufi in southern India.

Further citations from *The Pool of Nectar* can be found during the nineteenth century. Because of the wide circulation of the Arabic version of *The Pool of Nectar* in Ottoman lands, Turkish Sufis there cited its practices as part of the continuum of Sufi experience, many of the manuscripts being attributed to the great Andalusian Sufi master Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240); we shall return to this pseudonymous attribution below. The popularity of the text led to its being translated twice into Ottoman Turkish during the eighteenth century, and one of these translations was printed in Istanbul in 1910; the text was particularly popular among Sufis of the Mevlevi order. One Ottoman testimony to this text was provided by a certain Muhammad al-Misri, who, in a Turkish catechism on Sufism in question-and-answer form, cited the importance of breath control by quoting from *The Pool of Nectar*; the passage in question (I. 2) describes how control of the “sun” and “moon” breaths in the right and left nostrils can make one impervious to heat and cold.⁷² Sir Richard Burton also encountered reference to the teachings of *The Pool of Nectar* in Sindh in the early nineteenth century, in an unnamed writing by a Sufi named Mahmud of Karya (evidently Mahmud Nizamani of Kara, d. 1818). Burton cited an unspecified treatise on Sufism by Mahmud which referred to the frame story at the beginning of *The Pool of Nectar* (Int. 2–4), in which a Hindu sage from Kamru came to Lakhnauti and converted to Islam after losing a disputation with Qadi Rukn al-Din Samarqandi, and “from a Hindoo work, the Amirat Kandha [i.e., *Amritakunda* or *Pool of Nectar*], composed a treatise in Arabic and named it *Hauz el Hayat* [*Pool of Life*].”⁷³ Burton took this story as a sign of the “popular belief” as to the Indian origin of Sufism, a subject on which he (unlike Sir William Jones and many others) declined to take a position. Although these fragmentary references testify to the wide diffusion of *The Pool of Nectar*, they also indicate that it was used very selectively. A similar instance arises in the case of the fifteenth-century Yemeni Jewish scholar Alu’el, who cited the yogic teachings on the positive and negative qualities of right- and left-hand breaths from *The Pool of Nectar* in his exegesis of a Biblical text (Genesis 13:9). In such a case, the ultimately Indian material was only of significance insofar as it contributes to the main point that the author is making.⁷⁴

While the scope of this essay is limited primarily to Arabic, Persian, and Urdu sources, it should nevertheless be pointed out that a more extensive engagement with yogic tradition took place among Indian Sufis through regional Indic languages, especially on the frontiers of Bengal and the Punjab. It may be that the process of translation into literary Persian and Arabic

⁷² John P. Brown, “On the Tesavuf, or Spiritual Life of the Softees, Translated from the Turkish of Mohemmed Missiree”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 8 (1856), pp. 95–104, quoting the *Hawd al-hayat* on pp. 99–100; reprinted in *id.*, *The Dervishes; or, Oriental Spiritualism* (London, 1868), pp. 359–370, quoting the *Hawd al-hayat* on p. 365; also reprinted in Hughes, *A Dictionary of Islam*, s.v. “Sufi”, pp. 615a–617b, where the quotation from *Hawd al-hayat* occurs on p. 616a. It is not clear which author or text was translated here by Brown; a manuscript of a Turkish catechism by Niyazi Muhammad Misri (d. 1697), similarly entitled *As’ila wa ajuiba-i mutasavvifana* (Reşit 353, fols. 25–32, Suleimaniye Library, Istanbul), does not contain this passage.

⁷³ Richard F. Burton, *Sindh* (London, 1851; reprint ed., Lahore, 1971), pp. 199, 405. Unfortunately, in the absence of the text of Nizamani it is difficult to know which version of the text he had in mind. Several Persian works by Mahmud Nizamani of Kara, including two collections of the discourses (*mal’uzat*) of his master Pir Muhammad Rashid (d. 1827) are listed by Munzawi, III, p. 1383, no. 2481; III, p. 1548, no. 2846; III, p. 1840, no. 3416.

⁷⁴ Y. Tzvi Langermann, *Yemenite Midrash: Philosophical Commentaries on the Torah*, Sacred Literature Series (San Francisco, 1996), pp. 276–277.

imposed certain limits on the transmission of Indian religious concepts, whether because of the highly developed cosmological and psychological vocabulary tied to Islamic and Hellenistic sources, or the specific teaching requirements of Sufi orders. Literary composition in local languages may have been less prone to this difficulty. The sixteenth-century eastern Hindi romance *Padmavat* by Muhammad Ja'isi, a Chishti Sufi, contains a far more extensive picture of yogic physiology and practice than *The Pool of Nectar*.⁷⁵ The same is true of a host of Bengali Muslim authors who explored the themes of yogic physiology and cosmology with considerable technical skill. Here we find full details of the cakras, the nerves, drinking nectar, and other yogic themes, together with more extensive metaphysical concepts, combined with certain Islamic identifications. A work suggestively called the *Yoga-Qalandar* identifies the cakras with Sufi mystical stations, and substitutes angels for Hindu deities in the cakras. There is even a biography of Gorakhnath called *Goraksa-vijaya* written by a Muslim author named Fayd Allah.⁷⁶ In the Indus region, while this level of immersion in yogic concepts did not occur, the yogi became a popular figure in poetry written in Punjabi and Sindhi. The writings of the great Sindhi poet and Sufi 'Abd al-Latif B'hita'i (d. 1752) furnish a very positive evaluation of yogis. He himself had worn the ochre robe and wandered like a Hindu sannyasin, visiting the major yogi places of pilgrimage in the Indus region while travelling with yogis for a space of three years. One of his cycles of poetry, the "Sur Ramkali", is dedicated to the praise of the ideal yogis.⁷⁷ Bullhe Shah (d. 1758), a Punjabi Sufi poet, used folklore motifs that portray the archetypal yogi as the mystical beloved.⁷⁸ It has been suggested that he was familiar with the Persian translation of *The Pool of Nectar* through his master Shah 'Inayat Qadiri (d. 1735), author of the *Dastur al-'amal* or *The Handbook of Practice*, a work that discusses yogic teachings.⁷⁹ Much remains to be done in the evaluation of the significance of yogic themes in these literatures.

"Baba Ratan the Hajji, that is, Gorakhnath, having been the nurse of the Prophet [Muhammad], and having nourished the revered Messenger, taught the Prophet the path of yoga".

– *Dabistan*

Competing Rhetorical Strategies of Sufis and Yogis

Much of the historical evidence for the interaction of yogis and Sufis appears to lie in Sufi hagiographical texts, and this material is definitely written from a Sufi point of view. The first attempt to analyse and classify accounts of yogis in Sufi literature was made by Simon Digby

⁷⁵ White, *Alchemical Body*, pp. 260–262.

⁷⁶ For suggestive reviews of this literature, see Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal 1494–538 A.D., A Socio-Political Study*, Asiatic Society of Pakistan Publication no. 16 (Dacca, 1965), pp. 198–225; *id.*, "Influence of the Natha cult on the growth of Sufism in Bengal", in Frederick De Jong (ed.), *Shi'a Islam, Sects and Sufism: Historical Dimensions, Religious Practice and Methodological Considerations* (Utrecht, 1992), pp. 97–104; Enamul Haq, *Sufi-ism in Bengal*, pp. 368–422; David Cashin, *The Ocean of Love: Middle Bengali Sufi Literature and the Fakirs of Bengal* (Stockholm, 1995).

⁷⁷ Motilal Jotwani, *Shah Abdul Latif: His Life and Work* (Delhi, 1975), pp. 29, 33–34, 126, 140–141.

⁷⁸ Denis Matringe, "Krsnaite and Nath elements in the poetry of the eighteenth-century Panjabi Sufi Bullhe Sah", in R. S. McGregor (ed.), *Devotional literature in South Asia: Current research, 1985–8* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 190–206; J. R. Puri and T. R. Shangari, *Bulleh Shah, the Love-intoxicated Iconoclast* (New Delhi, 1986), pp. 117–118, 169–170; Lajwanti Rama Krishna, *Panjabi Sufi Poets A.D. 1460–1900* (New Delhi, 1973), pp. 71–74.

⁷⁹ Maqbul Beg Badakhshani, "Adabi manzar", in Badakhshani, p. 129; cf. Rama Krishna, pp. 65–66, where Shah 'Inayat's commentary on the *Jawahir-i khamsa* of Muhammad Ghawth is also cited.

in an oft-cited unpublished paper.⁸⁰ Digby classifies these stories into several categories, most of which involve the conversion of the yogis to Islam: 1) spontaneous conversion of the yogis in the presence of Sufis; 2) magical contests between yogis and Sufis, in which the yogi is vanquished and converts to Islam; 3) magical contests leading to conversion of the yogi, in which a contested sacred site is yielded to the Sufi; 4) a Sufi's refusal of gifts from a yogi; and 5) casual reference to the lore and practices of the yogis. In these stories it is clear that one of the key issues is the rivalry between Sufis and yogis in terms of miraculous powers. The Sufi sources generally maintain that even when yogis perform what appear to be miracles, these must be considered in a different light than actual miracles performed by Sufi saints, who are inspired by God. Following an old distinction, Sufi writers often classify the powers of these non-Muslim charismatic figures as false miracles (*istidraj*) of Satanic inspiration, as contrasted with the genuine miracles (*karamat*) that God permits saints to perform. From the perspective of this study, it is remarkable that only one of the five categories of stories concerns the interest of Sufis in yogic techniques and practices; the first four categories all have to do with establishing the religious and thaumaturgical superiority of the Sufis over the yogis.

As Digby points out, the numerous hagiographic accounts of encounters between Sufis and yogis (or other Hindu figures) almost always depict the yogi acknowledging the superior spiritual power of the Sufi.⁸¹ There is necessarily a theological element of triumph in this kind of narrative. This is evident in a story told by Nizam al-Din Awliya' (d. 1325), describing a yogi who challenged a Sufi to a levitation contest. While the yogi could rise vertically in the air, with God's help the Sufi was able to fly first in the direction of Mecca, then to the north and south, before returning to accept the submission of the yogi; the flight in the direction of Mecca surely indicates the religious character of the victory.⁸² While this basic pattern emerged in texts of the fourteenth century, the most grandiose versions derive from the later Mughal period, as in an extravagant hagiography called *Siyar al-aqtab* or *Lives of the World-Axes*, completed by Ilah-diya Chishti in 1647. In the biographical account of Mu'in al-Din Chishti, his arrival in India is described as the result of a divine command issued to him by God from the Ka'ba in Mecca. He consequently arrived in Ajmer, with orders to unleash holy war on the infidel king, and he immediately threatened to destroy the idol temples there. He conspicuously slaughtered and ate a cow, arousing the wrath of the local populace, but they were unable to harm him. Such was his power that the deity (*dev*) worshipped in the local temple converted to Islam and became his disciple. Then the yogi Ajaypal arrived with 1,500 followers, but his numerous magical assaults on the Sufi were all rendered ineffective by the saint's power. In what becomes a typical episode in this kind of story, the yogi then took to the air and flew away on his deerskin, but the Sufi sent his shoes up in the air to beat the yogi into humble submission, and so the yogi returned and converted to Islam, becoming a disciple of Mu'in al-Din and at the same time gaining

⁸⁰ Digby, "Encounters with Yogis". See also Simon Digby, *Wonder-Tales of South Asia* (Jersey, 2000), pp. 140–220, "The Tale of Gorakh Nath", pp. 221–233, "Medieval Sufi Tales of Yogis".

⁸¹ Similar stories from the Deccan are related by Richard M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur 1300–1700; Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton, NJ, 1977), pp. 53–54, 110–111, 132–133.

⁸² Nizam al-Din Awliya' Bada'oni, *Fawa'id al-fu'ad*, comp. Hasan 'Ala Sijzi, ed. Muhammad Latif Malik (Lahore, 1386/1966), p. 84; trans. Lawrence, *Morals for the Heart*; cf. Digby, "Encounters", p. 12.

the boon of immortality. The story then continues with the refusal of the Raja of Ajmer to convert to Islam, leading Mu‘in al-Din to proclaim the forthcoming victory of Sultan Shihab al-Din, and the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate.⁸³ The story contains several elements missing in earlier Sufi biographies of Mu‘in al-Din, particularly the emphasis on conversion to Islam and strident imperialism, so that it crosses the line between hagiography and royal historiography. The story’s triumphalism thus has a strong political dimension as well as a theological one.⁸⁴ These stories of one-upmanship over yogis were not limited to Sufis, however. To this class of triumphal encounters belongs the important biography of the Sikh founder-figure, Guru Nanak, who is depicted as confounding the Nath *siddhas* of his day with his profound teachings on the nature of the “true yogi”.⁸⁵ A similar appeal to the ideal of the “true yogi” occurs in an Isma‘ili hymn, in which the Isma‘ili imam establishes his superiority to the Nath yogi Kanipha.⁸⁶

The triumphal rhetoric of the tales of Sufis humbling yogis is matched by an unusual literary phenomenon, in which extensive expositions of yogic teachings occur in pseudonymous texts that are ascribed to well-known Sufis. Most of the Arabic manuscripts of *The Pool of Nectar* in Istanbul libraries are attributed to the authorship of the great Andalusian Sufi master, Ibn ‘Arabi. The founder of the Indian Chishtiyya, Mu‘in al-Din Chishti, is likewise said to be the author of an extremely popular work on yoga that is found under several different titles, most commonly called *Wujudiyya* (*The Treatise on Existence*). This treats the subtle nerves and breath control, using the standard Hindi terms of yogic physiology; at the same time, the yogic material is followed by meditations on the Arabic names of God, but the Sufi and yogic materials remain separate, without any attempt to integrate them.⁸⁷ Another such work is the *Risala-i haft nam* (*Treatise on the Seven Names*), also called *Haft ahbab* (*The Seven Friends*), a composite work attributed to the early Sufi Hamid al-Din Nagawri (d. 1295) and others, sometimes classified as a work on alchemy. Each of the seven chapters is separately entitled with a phrase containing the number seven. The second chapter, by Gyan Nath the Yogi alias “Felicitous” (Persian *sa‘adatmand*), is entitled in Hindi as *Sat saagar* (*The Seven Oceans*), and is written in Hindi with a Persian translation. The third chapter, *The Seven Stars*, is credited to Sulayman Mandawi (d. 1538–39), a prominent Muslim scholar who had studied the Arabic version of the *The Pool of Nectar* with ‘Abd al-Quddus

⁸³ Ilah-diya Chishti, *Siyar al-aqtab*, pp. 124–133, trans. Simon Digby, in P. M. Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Mu‘in al-Din Chishti of Ajmer*, Oxford University South Asian Studies Series (Delhi, 1992), pp. 72–81.

⁸⁴ Ernst, *Eternal Garden*, pp. 90–91.

⁸⁵ Max Arthur MacAuliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, Volume 1 (Oxford, 1909), “Life of Guru Nanak: Chapter XIII”, available online at <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/skh/tsr1/tsr116.htm>>; W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford, 1968), p. 141.

⁸⁶ Dominique-Sila Khan, “Conversation between Guru Hasan Kabiruddin and Yogi Kahipha: Tantra Revisited by the Isma‘ili Preachers”, in David Gordon White (ed.), *Tantra in Practice*, Princeton Readings in Religions (Princeton, NJ, 2000), pp. 285–295.

⁸⁷ I have consulted copies of this and another Persian text on yoga ascribed to Mu‘in al-Din Chishti, kindly provided by Pir Zia Inayat Khan from his personal collection, both entitled *Risala-i wujudiyya*. Munzavi (III), p. 2101–3, no. 3820 lists ten MSS of this title in Pakistan, the earliest dated 1084/1673–4; see also Muhammad Bashir Husayn, *Fihrist-i makhzutat-i Shafi’ (ba-farsi o urdu o panjabi) dar kitabkhana-i Professor Doctor Mawlawi Muhammad Shafi’*, ed. Ahmad Rabbani (Lahore, 1392 q./1351 sh./1972), pp. 261–2, no. 305. A text with the same title in Calcutta (Ivanow, ASB Curzon 460/5) is attributed to Farid al-Din Ganj-i Shakkar.

Gangohi, but the remaining authors are obscure.⁸⁸ These yogic texts appropriated by Sufi tradition form a literary equivalent to the submission of yogis to Sufis (like that of Ajaypal to Mu‘in al-Din Chishti) in the later hagiographic legends.⁸⁹

The process of inter-religious appropriation was not entirely one-sided, however. Yogis and other ascetics on the fringes of society appear to have been open to friendly exchanges with Muslims from an early date. The Persian merchant and traveller Buzurg ibn Shahriyar, writing around 953, commented that the Kapalika ascetics of Ceylon “take kindly to Musulmans and show them much sympathy”.⁹⁰ The Tibetan Buddhist historian Taranath, writing in the thirteenth century, was critical of the Nath yogis for following Shiva rather than the Buddha, and what was more, “They used to say that they were not even opposed to the Turuskas (Turks)”.⁹¹ The yogis went on to mythologise their encounter with Sufism and with the Indo-Muslim culture represented by Turkish and Mughal emperors. A mural on a Nath yogi temple in Nepal displays the submissive visit of the Ghurid sultans in the twelfth century.⁹² Legends about the humiliation of hostile Muslims, the efforts of Muslim rulers to become disciples of yogis, and the reconstruction of yogi temples after their destruction by Muslims (especially by the late Mughal emperor Awrangzeb, d. 1707), are common.⁹³ These triumphal stories should probably be seen as part of a tradition of rhetorical inversion of Mughal authority rather than as historical evidence of temple destruction, to judge from the legendary proliferation of such stories about Awrangzeb.⁹⁴

From their conversations with Sufis over the years, the yogis also undoubtedly picked up a fair amount of information about the Sufi orders and their Islamic origins. They had a special interest in a relatively late figure known as Abu al-Rida Ratan, or simply Baba Ratan, who was buried in the Punjabi village of Bhatinda in 1243. He is well known throughout the Islamic lands as one who claimed Methuselah-like longevity; according to his own account, he had been born over six hundred years previously in India, had heard rumours of the appearance of the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia, and had gone to meet him in person and became his follower. Thus he was able at this late date to relate *hadith* reports from the Prophet with no intermediary. Although challenged by some Islamic scholars, his authenticity was accepted by others, such as the famous Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, and he was

⁸⁸ Muhammad Bashir Husayn, *Fihrist-i makhtutat-i Sherani* (Lahore, 1969), III, p. 566; Munzavi, III, p. 842, citing also Rieu, II, p. 486. Other MSS are cited by C. A. Storey, *Persian Literature: A Bio-bibliographical Survey* (London, 1972), II, p. 438, no. 3.

⁸⁹ On the general problem of pseudonymous authorship in Sufi texts, see my “On Losing One’s Head: Radical Hallajian Motifs in Works attributed to ‘Attar”, in Leonard Lewisohn (ed.), *Farid al-Din ‘Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition* (London, forthcoming).

⁹⁰ Buzurg ibn Shahriyar, *The Book of the Marvels of India*, French trans. L. Marcel Devic [1883–86], English trans. Peter Quennell (New York, 1929), p. 132.

⁹¹ *Taranatha’s History of Buddhism in India*, trans. Lama Chimpa and Alaka Chattopadhyaya (Simla, 1970), p. 320.

⁹² Bouillier, *Ascètes et rois*, pp. 68–65 (this mural is reproduced in colour in the unnumbered plate on the second-to-last page before p. 129).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 116–118; Briggs, *Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogis* (Delhi, 1982), pp. 70 (Aurangzeb as rejected disciple of Gorakhnath), 92, 94–95, 105, 144 (Akbar as initiate). See also the account of a Nath yogi’s relationship with Shah ‘Alam II (d. 1809), translated by David Gordon White, “The Wonders of Sri Mastnath”, in David S. Lopez, *Religions of India in Practice* (Princeton, NJ, 1995), pp. 399–411.

⁹⁴ Carl W. Ernst, “Admiring the Works of the Ancients: The Ellora Temples as viewed by Indo-Muslim Authors”, in David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (eds), *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville, FL, 2000), pp. 198–220.

adopted as patron saint of the gardeners' guild in Istanbul.⁹⁵ Yogis of a later date confidently told the Zoroastrian author of the *Dabistan* that Baba Ratan had in fact been Gorakhnath, and that he had initiated the Prophet into the practices of hatha yoga; this was one of the main reasons for the successful spread of Islam. Here is the full account of the yogis' philosophy of religious history, according to the *Dabistan*:

The Yogis are a famous group in India. "Yoga" in Sanskrit means "to unite" (Persian *payvastian*), and these people take themselves to have attained God. They call God *alak* (Hindi *alakh*, "pure"), and in their belief the chosen one of God, rather his Essence, is Gorakhnath. Likewise, Machhindernath and Cauranginath are among the Siddha saints, that is, perfect ones. According to them, Brahma and Vishnu and Mahesh are [merely] angels, but they [the yogis] are students and disciples of Gorakhnath, just as today some of them claim to be connected to each of these. This group consists of twelve *panths* . . . [the author enumerates these]. *Panth* is what they call a sect (*firqa*). It is their claim that the masters of all religions, communities, and teachings coming from the prophets and saints are students of Gorakhnath; whatever they have attained is attained from him. The belief of this group is that Muhammad (peace be upon him) was trained by a student of Gorakhnath, but from fear of the Muslims they cannot say it. Rather they say this, that Baba Ratan the Hajji, that is, Gorakhnath, having been the nurse of the Prophet, and having nourished the revered Messenger, taught the Prophet the path of yoga. When among Muslims, they are scrupulous about fasting and ritual prayer, but when with Hindus, they practice the religion of this group. None of the forbidden things is prohibited in their sect, whether they eat pork according to the custom of Hindus and Christians, or beef according to the religion of Muslims and others . . . In the belief of this group, even if every path proceeds from Gorakhnath, and every sect may be connected to Gorakh, still in their view they have travelled the path that is connected to one of the twelve orders of yoga.⁹⁶

The Nath Yogi tradition of incorporating Islamic prophets into its own narrative is still alive today. A recent visitor to the central Nath temple at Gorakhpur gives the following surprising account:

I visited the Gorakhnath Mandir with my wife in February 1998. There we saw, among other things, a hall adorned with . . . statues of the masters claimed by the Nath lineage. Statues were of Muhammad, as well as of Abraham (and Jesus, etc.). Below was a small board explaining that Muhammad was in fact a Nath yogi, and that the Mecca was in fact a Shaiva centre, known in some Purānas as Makeshvar.⁹⁷

This particular incorporation of Muhammad into Hindu tradition has not been publicised, however.

⁹⁵ J. Horowitz, "Baba Ratan, the Saint of Bhatinda", *Journal of the Punjab Historical Society*, 2 (1913–14), pp. 97–117; 'Abd al-Hayy ibn Fakhr al-Din al-Hasani, *Nuzhat al-khawātir wa bahjat al-masami' wa al-nawazir* (2nd ed., Hyderabad, 1386/1966-), I:112–18. Manuscripts of a collection of Persian translations of his hadith transmission are noticed by Munzawi, III:1544, no. 2838.

⁹⁶ Mobad Shah [Muhsin Fani, attr.], *Dabistan al-madhahib* (Bombay, 1262/1846), pp. 149–150. Instead of "Baba Ratan", the lithograph text erroneously reads "Baba Rin", a mistake caused by misplacing two dots. This error is repeated, moreover, both in the recent Tehran edition and in the highly inaccurate 1843 translation of Shea and Troyer; cf. *The Dabistán or School of Manners*, trans. David Shea and Anthony Troyer, reprint ed. abridged by A. V. Williams Jackson (Washington, 1901), pp. 239–240.

⁹⁷ Letter of David DuBois, 4 June 2003.

Yogis had made a further observation to their Zoroastrian interlocutor, which they normally refrained from making to their Muslim acquaintances: the spiritual power of mosques could be easily explained by the striking resemblance of the *mihrab* (prayer-niche) and the minaret towers to the *yoni* (vulva) and *lingam* (phallus) of Shaivite worship, for which reason the prayer-niche and minaret were always found together.⁹⁸ The yogis reasoned that these prominent architectural features were responsible for the spread of Islam. The various accounts of yogis and saints who had miraculous experiences at Mecca without becoming Muslims, including the famous story of Guru Nanak, founder of the Sikhs, evidently belong in this category of Indian mythologies, which relativised the sacred sources of Islam and subordinated them to Indian figures and categories.⁹⁹ Ratan Nath is in any case a name firmly ensconced in yogic tradition, and in Indian stories unrelated to the long-lived *hadith* scholar, he figures as a Nath in the third generation after Gorakhnath.¹⁰⁰

The relationship between Islam and yoga is further complicated by the participation of Muslims in the Nath Yogi tradition. Out of the thirteen principal Nath sub-orders described by Briggs, one, the Rawal or Nagnath order, located in the Punjab, consists of Muslims despite being originally derived from Shiva. Two of the six minor sub-orders, the Handi Pharang and the Jafir Pirs, are also Muslim in composition, as their names suggest; although they are Kanphatas and undergo the customary initiations, the Hindu yogis do not eat with them.¹⁰¹ The 1891 Indian census, which listed all yogis under the category of “miscellaneous and disreputable vagrants”, gave figures indicating that over 17 per cent of yogis were Muslims, though by 1921 the proportion of Muslims had fallen to less than 5 per cent.¹⁰² It is difficult to interpret these figures without more knowledge of the social context, but they are still an interesting index of continuing existence of Muslim yogis in recent times; it is impossible to tell whether they were originally yogis who became Islamised, or Muslims who were drawn into the ranks of the yogi orders.

Beyond the ranks of the yogis themselves, Muslims also formed relationships with yogi shrines, both as pilgrims and as administrators. Ratan Nath's disciple, known as Kaya Nath or Qa'im al-Din, has both Muslim and Hindu followers who have built for him separately a samadhi and a tomb, and one can find numerous examples of this kind of dual religious shrine for yogis in the Punjab and in the Deccan.¹⁰³ The important yogi shrines of Hinglaj (now in the province of Baluchistan in Pakistan) and Amarnath (in the Indian Himalayas) have for centuries been in the custody of Muslims, who regulate the pilgrimage rites in those places. In the case of Amarnath, the famous ice *lingam* in the cave there was apparently discovered several centuries ago by local Muslim shepherds, who announced this prodigy to their Hindu acquaintances. The shepherds' descendants to this day preside over the annual pilgrimage and take a good percentage of the revenue, though their position has more recently been threatened by the attempts of Kashmiri militant groups to harass the

⁹⁸ *Dabistan*, p. 157; trans. Shea and Troyer, p. 251.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147 (Akamnath); trans. Shea and Troyer, p. 235.

¹⁰⁰ Briggs, *Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogis*, p. 92.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 71.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 4–6, with 1891 figures of 214,546 yogis in all India and 38,137 Muslim yogis in the Punjab, and 1921 figures of 629,978 Hindu yogis and 31,158 Muslim yogis.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 66; J. J. Roy Burman, *Hindu-Muslim Syncretic Shrines and Communities* (New Delhi, 2002).

pilgrims.¹⁰⁴ At Hinglaj, the story is told that at one time a Muslim woman in charge of the shrine required pilgrims to become Muslims in order to perform the rituals. Consequently, on their return to India proper, at a site near Karachi, the pilgrims would receive a brand mark of Shiva, to indicate that they were remade Hindus; we are not told how they dealt with circumcision.¹⁰⁵ These examples, which fall outside the elite circles of the Sufi orders, illustrate the difficulty of drawing firm lines separating Muslim and Hindu identities in the yogic tradition. In institutional terms, dual-use shrines exhibit a profound ambiguity that allows different groups to claim ownership without any sense of contradiction.

The ambiguous relationship between Sufism and yoga may finally be summarised in the striking identification of the founder-figures of the Nath tradition and the esoteric initiators of Islamic lore, which is announced for the first time in *The Pool of Nectar*.

When you have reached this station, and this condition becomes characteristic of you, closely examine three things with thought and discrimination: 1) The embryo, how it breathes while it is in the placenta, though its mother's womb does not respire; 2) the fish, how it breathes in the water, and the water does not enter it; 3) and the tree, how it attracts water in its veins and causes it to reach its heights. The embryo is Shaykh Gorakh, who is Khidr (peace be upon him), the fish is Shaykh Minanath [Matsyendranath], who is Jonah, and the tree is Shaykh Caurangi, who is Ilyas, and they are the ones who have reached the water of life (V. 4).

The precise significance of this identification is elusive and problematic. The first case recalls ancient Indian associations of the embryo's breath as dispensing with inhalation and exhalation, a goal of yogic breathing exercise.¹⁰⁶ The comparison with Khidr rests loosely on his association with water. In the second case, the fish clearly explains the association of Matsyendra ("lord of the fish") with the Prophet Jonah, who spent three days in the belly of a fish. The third case is more obscure. Caurangi (Caurangi Nath) figures alongside Gorakh in the Marathi tradition as a disciple of Matsyendra Nath, and his name comes up in various lists of *Siddhas*.¹⁰⁷ Ilyas (Elijah) is one of the figures in Islamic lore who was granted immunity from death, and he is often pictured as flying in heaven like a bird and sitting in a tree. Tibetan tradition preserves traditions relating to Caurangi in the biographical literature devoted to the eighty-four *siddhas*. There Caurangi is described as a prince falsely accused of improper advances by his stepmother; as a punishment, he suffered dismemberment and was left under a tree in the forest, but was subsequently saved and initiated into yoga by Matsyendra with the assistance of Gorakh.¹⁰⁸ The parallel here probably rests loosely on the tree as the witness to the miraculous restoration of Caurangi's limbs, and as the paradisaic site of Elijah's deathless abode. In any case, the three identifications revolve around the practice of breath control, expressed through these allegories. Thus breath control and meditative practice is the underlying theme of the comparison between the Sufi and yogic traditions.

¹⁰⁴ Saba Naqvi Bhaumik, "Journey's End", *Indian Express*, 7 August 1994.

¹⁰⁵ Briggs, *Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogis*, pp. 106–107, 109–110.

¹⁰⁶ Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, pp. 110, 395, 419; cf. also the Chinese concept of embryonic breathing, *ibid.*, pp. 59–62.

¹⁰⁷ Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, pp. 203, 208; cf. p. 200 for an etymology.

¹⁰⁸ Keith Dowman, trans., *Masters of Mahamudra: Songs and Histories of the Eighty-Four Buddhist Siddhas*, SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies (Albany, 1985), pp. 81–90.

The rhetorical effect of identifying Islamic prophets with Hindu yogis is one of appropriation, but such a radical claim could amount to making the claimed tradition dependent and inauthentic. Discomfort seems to have arisen in several quarters. A Muslim objection appeared in a polemical text of uncertain date entitled *Hujjat al-Hind* or *The Proof of India*, which takes the form of a Muslim critique of Hinduism in story form. One of the criticisms of the text is directed against the Nath yogis, as follows: “Yet they have no proof which they can show or establish, except idle tales and verses (*caupad*) which the Yogis have ascribed to them [the *Naths*]. They also say, ‘We talk of Gorakh and you of the Prophet Khidr; we talk of Cauranga and you of Ilyas; we of Macchendar and you of the Prophet Yunus [Jonah]’. This also is false: nay, it is unbelief (*kufr*)”.¹⁰⁹ The comparison is briefer than that which occurs in *The Pool of Nectar*, omitting the references to breath control and meditation, but the figures are the same. It is possible that this identification, like the mythology of Ratan Nath, originated among the yogis as a way of constructing their relationship to Islam through narrative. On the other hand, the comparison may have originated with the translator of *The Pool of Nectar*, in precisely the reverse manner. There is no way to decide this issue at present, but the inevitable triumphalism of the comparison was evidently seen as problematic, not only by Muslims but also by Hindus.

A similar reference to *The Pool of Nectar* occurs in the *Dabistan-i madhahib* or *The Academy of Religions*, to which brief reference has already been made. The *Dabistan* was written in Persian in seventeenth-century India by Mobad Shah, a Zoroastrian author belonging to the school of Adhar Kayvan. This text is a highly complex philosophical and mystical treatise, in which Sufism, Ishraqi Illuminationism, and strands of Indian religious thought and practice (including yoga) form the basis for an original mystical reinterpretation of Zoroastrian tradition; the work contains, for instance, extensive descriptions of Zoroastrian techniques corresponding to yogic meditations. The *Dabistan* was highly regarded as an authoritative work on comparative religion during the early period of Orientalism, by Sir William Jones for instance, but critical nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars rejected it, seeing its creative approach to religious history as nothing but a fraud. Modern Iranian scholars in especially have been particularly harsh in their criticism of this work. Much of the fanciful vocabulary that this text attributed to ancient Iranian sages was incorporated into the standard early dictionaries of Persian, an event that current philologists regard as an embarrassment.¹¹⁰ In any case, the author of the *Dabistan* remarks as follows concerning *The Pool of Nectar*:

I saw the *Amritakunda*; it was also translated into Persian, and entitled *Hawd al-hayat* (*The Pool of Life*). There it is said, “Gorakhnath is an expression for Khidr, and Machhinder [Matsyendra] for

¹⁰⁹ Mīhrabi, *Hujjat al-Hind*, trans. Digby, “Encounters”, p. 4. Digby dates this text to around 1400 and locates it in the Deccan, but Munzavi (II, pp. 952–954, no. 1613; II, p. 1086, no. 1852) dates this to the period of Shahjahan, although the oldest of the nine MSS he describes (no. 4642, in a Peshawar library) is dated to the ninth/fifteenth century. Marshall gives two dates: “not later than 1084/1673” (no. 221) and 1055/1645 (no. 1809).

¹¹⁰ See H. Corbin, “Adar Kayvan”, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, III, pp. 183–187, along with the editor’s critical addendum directly refuting Corbin; cf. also Fath-Allah Mojtaba’i, “Dabestan-e Madaheb”, *ibid.*, VI, pp. 532–534, where the evidence for authorship is discussed as well. A brilliant new interpretation of the *Dabistan* and the Zoroastrian historiography of the Adhar Kayvan movement is provided by Mohamed Tavakoli-Targhi, “Contested Memories: Narrative Structures and Allegorical Meanings of Iran’s Pre-Islamic History”, *Iranian Studies*, 29 (1996), pp. 149–175.

Yunus [Jonah]”. This opinion in the *Amritakunda* is baseless; as often as they speak of Gorakhnath, so frequently the name of Alakh or Brahma appears, which is correct.¹¹¹

The quotation from *The Pool of Nectar* (corresponding to V. 4 of the Arabic text) follows the Persian translation of Muhammad Ghawth, but it is abbreviated to omit the reference to Caurangi and Ilyas. Evidently the author of the *Dabistan* felt that the identification of archetypal yogis with figures from Islamic sacred history was mistaken, since contemporary yogic tradition viewed Gorakhnath as a manifestation of divinity, better referred to either as *alakh* or the god Brahma. Either the author of the *Dabistan*, or his yogi informants, rejected the identification of the Sufi and yogic traditions as ultimately implausible, because the Islamic prophet alleged as the equivalent of Gorakh was not his equal in spiritual power; this contemptuous dismissal raises the rhetorical stakes by declaring that Gorakh is divine and no mere prophet. So while breath control was admittedly the most likely point of contact between these two groups, the construction of competing rhetorical narratives was part of a contest for supremacy rather than an explanation of an acknowledged common origin.

“When among Muslims, they [the Nath yogis] are scrupulous about fasting and ritual prayer, but when with Hindus, they practice the religion of this group”.

– *Dabistan*

Conclusion

How can we meaningfully situate Sufism and yoga, in the light of the preceding discussion? Let us sum up the evidence. Indian Sufis and Nath yogis regarded each other as distinguishable groups, with overlapping interests in psycho-physical discipline and with often competing roles as spiritual leaders. While some yogic practices were to a certain extent compatible with Sufi disciplines, it is historically impossible to derive one entire system from the other. Different Indian Sufi groups, particularly the Chishti and Shattari orders, incorporated certain yogic practices into their repertory of techniques, but this addition did not fundamentally alter the character of existing Sufi practices; Hindi mantras, for instance, were infrequent in Sufi texts and clearly subordinate to Arabic formulas of Qur’anic origin. *The Pool of Nectar* was probably the most important single literary source for the diffusion of knowledge about yoga through Islamicate languages. Sufis and yogis alike both felt the need periodically to take account of the other group, and this acknowledgement took the form of competing narratives, including conversion stories, liminal figures like Baba Ratan the hadith scholar, pseudonymous Sufi authorship of yogic texts, and the identification of primordial yogis with the esoteric prophets of Islam. The repeated insistence on the identification of Sufi and yogic themes reveals a stubborn sense of difference.

All these observations suggest that we must find a way to describe this sense of difference without essentialism. If it is true that Sufis assimilated and adapted certain yogic practices, to what extent did Sufis show resistance to incorporating yoga into their own worldview? I would suggest that we can answer this question best by dividing the material into three

¹¹¹ *Dabistan*, p. 153; Mobad Shah [Kaykhusraw Isfandiyyar, attr.], *Dabistan-i madhahib*, ed. Rahim Riza-zada Malik, *Adabiyat-i Dasatiri*, 1 (2 vols., Tehran, 1362/1983), I, p. 162 (where Alakh is misspelled as *lak*). The English translation of Shea and Troyer is hopelessly incorrect at this point.

separate categories: yogic practices, yogis as individuals belonging to an identifiable group, and the abstract notion of yoga as a religious doctrine. With regard both to yogic practices and yogis as individuals, there is a variable spectrum among Sufis, ranging from complete appropriation of certain yogic material (breath control, chants, meditation techniques, yogis, and even goddesses) to wary approval and even complete rejection; it is not possible to reduce this range of reactions to a single formula. A critical issue for assessing this process of assimilation is the character of the strategies of translation that Sufis adopted to present the Indic data in Islamicate garb. Our most notable text, *The Pool of Nectar*, presents a number of identifications between Islamic and Indic personalities; in addition to the identification of the three yogis with Islamic prophets, we are also told that Brahma is Abraham, and Moses is Vishnu. A brahmin is equivalent to a Muslim scholar (‘*alim*), and a yogi is an ascetic (*murtad*). Equivalents are also provided for a couple of minor practices; the Hindi term *japa* or counted prayer is equivalent to ‘*azima* or invocation, and *homa* or sacrifice is equivalent to *du‘a* or prayer.¹¹²

Yet some extremely important yogic terms are entirely missing from this account. In all this Sufi literature discussing practices of the yogis, the term *yoga* is scarcely ever mentioned.¹¹³ Likewise, the extremely important technical terms *mantra*, *yantra* (diagram), and *cakra* are not spelled out or mentioned, although the phenomena to which they refer are described at length and in detail with numerous examples. All these critical terms for yogic practice have been completely subordinated to Islamicate categories and represented by Arabic terms; *mantra* is replaced by *dhikr*, *yantra* by *shakl* (shape), *cakra* by *mauda‘* (place), and *yoga* itself by *riyada* (asceticism). Only with the benefit of Indological resources, which were unavailable to premodern readers of *The Pool of Nectar* and kindred texts, can we plausibly restore the Indic originals. While there seems to be a clear recognition among Sufis of the existence of the Nath Yogis as a sociological group, and of their practices as distinctive, the discursive tradition of Sufi teaching was powerful enough to make the independent existence of something called *yoga* irrelevant precisely because yogic practices could be assimilated into a Sufi perspective without much effort. In short, there is no Sufi concept of *yoga* as a completely separate system. It would probably be safe to say that there was likewise no *hatha* *yoga* concept of Sufism as a separate entity. The highly abstract language of essentialism contributes nothing to our understanding of this phenomenon of historical difference.

The old Orientalist debate about *yoga* as the source of Sufism was based on a “strong misreading”, denying the apparent significance of a tradition by triumphant announcement of origins and influences detected only by modern scholars. Anxieties about textual authority, and about the very existence of Islam, continue to fuel such grandiose projects, as one can see in the recent attempt of “Christoph Luxenburg” (a pseudonym) to unveil the Qur’an as a text, not written in Arabic, but in Syriac, in this way proposing that the entire Islamic tradition is based on a faulty reading of a Christian lectionary. Luxenburg’s announcement that the “white-eyed” virgins of the Qur’an are in reality white raisins was considered important enough to be featured on the front page of the *New York Times*, which does not

¹¹² See Ernst, “Islamization of Yoga”, Chart 4, for these translations.

¹¹³ Shah Kalim Allah in passing refers to the postures of *yoga* (*baithak-i jog*) and also mentions “the endless sound (*sawt-i sarmadi*), . . . which in *yoga* (*jog*) they call *anahid* [*anahita*]” (*Kashkul-i Kalimi*, pp. 30, 39). But these mentions of *yoga* (*jog*) are extremely rare.

often happen with large German tomes on Semitic philology.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, the New Age essentialism views Sufism and yoga as forms of spirituality that contest for the position of the mysticism that is most authentic, because it is least authoritative. Despite their appeals to the history of religions, neither of these approaches is particularly historical. Against such strong misreadings, and their quest to find the essential origins of religion either in debunked sacred texts or in a bland universalism, we can offer alternate forms of interpretation. Wendy Doniger favours a more provisional form of categorisation:

An appropriate metaphor, I think, for the network of diffused narratives with no common origin is not the family tree that folklorists used to favor, but rather a banyan tree, which must have an original root but sends down so many subsequent roots from its branches (other variants) that one can no longer tell which was the original. The pattern of banyan roots is rather like a Venn diagram of family resemblances, or the web of an invisible spider.¹¹⁵

In this sense, polythetic approaches to categorising religious traditions offer a flexibility and an attention to historical difference that is not held hostage to the all-or-nothing comparativist constructions of source and influence. For religious studies scholars, an important task for the future will be to explain these non-essentialist interpretations of religion in a way that can be relevant to the broader public spheres beyond the academy.

¹¹⁴ *New York Times* (2 March 2002). Luxenburg's book was also the subject of an article in *Newsweek* (25 July 2003), which was banned in Pakistan. For a critical review of Luxenburg's book, see François de Blois in *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 5 (2003), pp. 92–97. For the importance of the debunking of the Qur'an as a theme in recent Euro-American culture, see Ernst, *Following Muhammad*, Chapter 3.

¹¹⁵ Doniger, *The Implied Spider*, p. 139. For a Venn diagram-style description of Chishti Sufism, see Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, pp. 2–4.