

Paths to the Heart
Sufism and the Christian East

edited by

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Foreword

The essays collected in this book, written by some of the world's leading authorities on the mystical and contemplative dimensions of Islam and Eastern Christianity, were prepared for a major international conference, held on the campus of the University of South Carolina, October 18-20, 2001. Attended by nearly three hundred people, this important and most timely gathering included both academics and students, clergy and laity, spiritual leaders and seekers. To our knowledge, a symposium of this kind—on such a topic and on such a scale—was without precedent, and so also is this resulting volume of proceedings.

The aim of the conference was to do something new. Interfaith gatherings are common enough, but dialogue is almost always confined to the outward or exoteric level of doctrines and practices, and at this level, given the considerable differences among the teachings of the world's religions, contradiction or compromise often appear to be the only alternatives. This is particularly so in the case of Christianity and Islam. It seems that Jesus must either be God or not, and that the Koran is either the final and uniquely perfect revelation of God, or not—to mention only two of the more obvious “contradictions” between these traditions. It is therefore inevitable that Christians and Muslims who limit their approach to the dogmatic letter of their religions will find their perspectives to be mutually exclusive, and their “dialogue”—if and when they discuss their beliefs at all, and do not resort instead to conflict and violence—will be reduced to two parallel monologues.

Religions, however, are not just systems of exoteric beliefs and behaviors deployed on a plane, to be accepted (or rejected) by the reason and will. Each of the great traditions also has a third “dimension”, a spiritual heart, in which the deeper meaning of those beliefs and practices

comes alive, and where the spiritual pilgrim may discover, beyond the level of seemingly contradictory forms, an inner commonality with those who follow other paths.

This is certainly true of the two religions here in question. Despite the long and well-known history of conflict between Christians and Muslims, one finds that their mystical traditions, especially in the Christian East and in Sufism, have for centuries shared many of the same spiritual methods and goals, and in certain exceptional cases Sufi *shaykhs* and their Christian counterparts have even accepted disciples in the others' tradition. The anonymous Russian classic *The Way of a Pilgrim* is quite explicit in teaching that in the absence of a *starets* or spiritual father, the Christian seeker may receive spiritual instruction "even from a Saracen", and evidence of the reverse relationship can be found in the spiritual friendship of the Sufi Ibrahim ibn Adham and the Orthodox monk Symeon. One also recalls that the oldest continuously existing Christian monastery in the world, St Catherine's on Mt Sinai, contains a mosque within its precincts, constructed by the monks for the local Bedouins. These and other commonalities and historical contacts suggest the possibility for a deeper and more inward kind of conversation between Christians and Muslims than has been customary in our day. Our aim in organizing this conference was to lay the foundation for just such a dialogue in hopes that spiritual travelers in both religions might come to realize what the great Sufi teacher Ibn Arabi meant in saying, "My heart has opened unto every form: it is ... a cloister for Christian monks ... and the *Ka'ba* of the pilgrim."

Of course, whatever the commonalities between these traditions and no matter the fruitfulness of the occasional contacts between them, it is clear historically that most masters in the Christian East and in Sufi Islam would nonetheless have stopped short of embracing so explicitly universalist a point of view, insisting instead on the superiority of their own religions.

As the reader will discover in the following pages, this same insistence was by no means absent from our conference. Some of the Christian contributors in particular, while readily expressing their appreciation for the teachings of mystical Islam, preferred to accentuate the insights of their own Hesychast tradition, and were considerably less willing than Ibn Arabi to concede the premise that the Divine Son of God might be equally “incarnate” in more than one saving path to the heart. The conference was therefore not without its controversial moments.

On the other hand, other speakers, both Muslim and Christian, were very open to the idea of searching for a unified truth beneath their dogmatic differences, and in undertaking this search, several acknowledged their indebtedness to the perennial philosopher and spiritual authority Frithjof Schuon (1907-98), whose perspective has shaped their contributions to this volume, and to whom the editor has offered a grateful dedication. Schuon, who was a teacher and guide for many people, including both Muslims and Christians, throughout the world, was one of the most forceful and influential voices in our day in describing what he referred to as the “transcendent unity of religions” and in underscoring the importance of an “esoteric ecumenism”, a form of interfaith dialogue which, while fully respecting the integrity of traditional dogmas and rites, “calls into play the wisdom which can discern the one sole Truth under the veil of different forms”. The chapters that follow, which range from studies focused on major figures and themes in one of the two traditions to more explicitly dialogical and perennialist essays, have been organized in such a way as to lead the reader toward a clearer and deeper appreciation of Schuon’s perspective.

But whatever one’s opinion of the perennial philosophy, there is little doubt that explorations of the kind collected in this book are of greater importance now than ever before. Meeting just five weeks after the tragic events of September 11, the speakers and other

conference guests were all keenly aware of the precariousness, but also the potential, of the present moment for the relationship between Christians and Muslims. Some who had intended to come to the symposium, including one invited speaker, were obliged to cancel their plans in view of concerns about air travel, but many others made the decision to attend precisely because of their heightened sense that a new level of understanding simply must be reached, and reached soon. Not surprisingly, however, a few participants wondered aloud what good could come from the reflections of a few scholars and mystics. How could discourse in the rarified atmosphere of contemplative vision ever reach the “solid ground” of actual human events? But a ready answer was supplied in the famous apothegm of St Seraphim of Sarov, quoted by several speakers: “Acquire inner peace, and thousands around you will find their salvation.”

We could not but recall as well the words of Socrates spoken near the end of Plato’s *Republic*, historically one of the most decisive texts for both Eastern Christians and Sufis, and deeply influential in shaping the vocabularies and trajectories of these two great traditions. Having described in considerable detail the ideal spiritual commonwealth—a “republic” ordered toward man’s vision of the Divine Sun—Socrates finds himself faced with the criticism that a state of this kind “can be found nowhere on earth”. He quickly responds to the objection, however, by explaining that “it makes no difference whether such a commonwealth exists now or will ever come into being, for there is a pattern of it laid up in Heaven for him who wishes to contemplate it and, so beholding, to constitute himself its citizen” (592b). Our prayer is that the readers of this book, whatever the course of future events may bring, will find their own sights lifted to precisely this contemplation.

James S. Cutsinger

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