

THE GLOBAL MYSTICAL UNION

Mystics share an experience of the divine and the true nature of humanity that holds unharvested potential for easing conflict and advancing harmony.

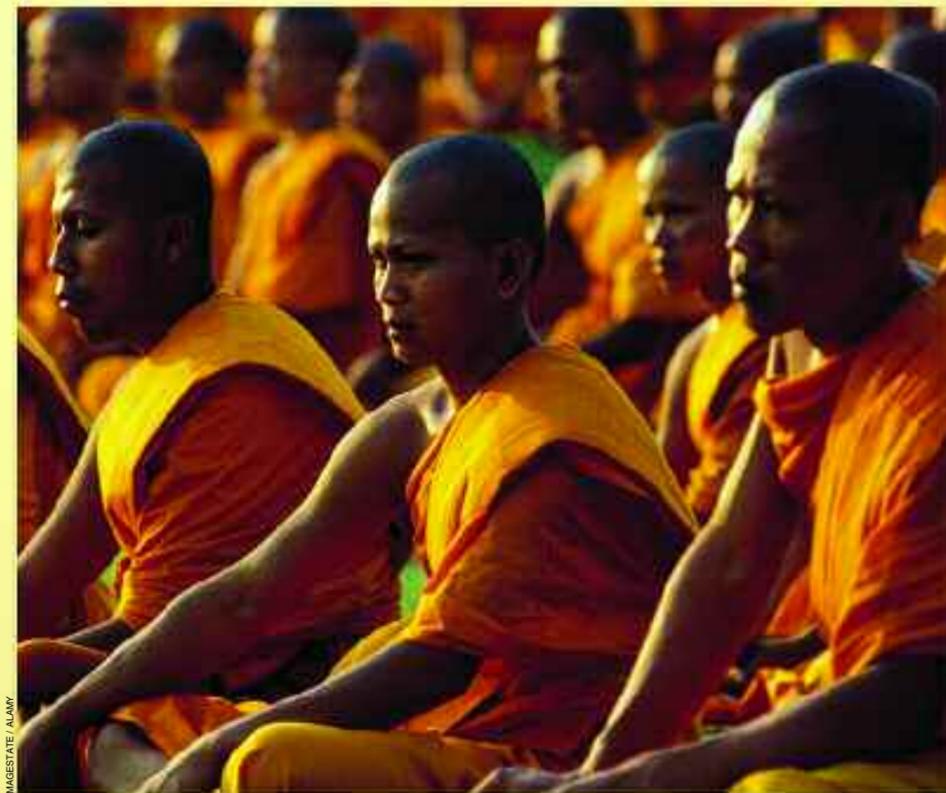


SUCHETA DAS / REUTERS/CORBIS

Embroiled in intolerance, alienation, agitation, terrorism, and bloodletting that seem to have no end, the people of the world at the same time adhere to religions containing divine commandments for forgiveness, mercy, modesty, patience, and tolerance and admonitions against aggression, oppression, discrimination, anger, greed, arrogance, and violence. Tragically, compassion, cooperation, humility, and love are being stripped away from society due to the mutual misunderstanding and mutual ignorance of the world's divergent faiths. When humans perpetrate and perpetuate atrocities under the banner of religion, it is not because they have plunged into abject poverty but because they are ignorant of the true nature of humanity—a nature taught by all religions.

Humans forget that their unique position as the crowns of creation superior to all creatures in this world is not due to their physical power or economic strength but to their unique spiritual endowment. In the Qur'an, for example, Allah says, "I will create a viceregent on earth" (2:30). This insight is affirmed in the world's religions by messengers and divine messages, which the mystics understand as being products of human feeling,

by *Golam Dastagir*



IMAGESTATE / ALAMY

Though following different doctrines and practices, Catholic nuns (opposite) and Buddhist monks (left) both pursue oneness with a universal Reality, the Supreme Ideal, or God.

emotion, instinct, ritual, belief, faith, and temperament. Beyond these aspects of religion, however, mystics pursue an even more intensified feeling as they seek oneness with Reality. They aim to transcend the filthy material world while living on a high level of spirituality in order not just to know about but to be with the Supreme Reality through the practice of self-denial. Every religion, thus, contains in its essence a mystical aspect that can be traced through the enlightened prophets, the religion founders, and the saints—those who claim to have experienced the immediate indwelling presence of God, a mystical experience foreign to ordinary people.

The mystical experience of the numinous is of a universal Reality, the Supreme Ideal or God; it is an experience reached through the hierarchical stages of contemplation, vision, and union and based on prerequisite processes of purgation and illumination. To be near to and receive the divine blessings of God, mystics put emphasis more on intuition than intel-

ligence. For them, intuition is the highest and subtlest faculty of man. Its core characteristic is a peculiar privacy that is immediate, unlike reason and sense experience, which are mediate. Foundational to the mystic experience is immersion in a beam of divine light that is beyond intellect and beyond sense experience and reason. The experience is largely inexpressible and incommunicable, as its fundamental features are privacy and immediacy.

Knowledge by intuition is immediate in the sense that here the subject is merged with the object. Moreover, the citadel of intuition is the heart—not the physical lump of flesh located in the left side of the body but the spiritual heart, which Islamic mystics (Sufis) call *qalb*. The principal function of *qalb* is love. As they pursue knowledge of Reality, mystics use intellect and experience to support intuition in a spiritual process for advancing toward the goal commonly known as the flight of the individual soul to the universal Soul. Reaching the destination is known as "spiritual marriage," a

RELIGION

joyous apprehension of, and union with, Reality. The mystic of any tradition relentlessly pursues activities leading to the true path of the Supreme Spirit. Along that path the mystic's first and foremost activity is love, which is higher even than acts of complete surrender and supreme perception.



Asceticism and austerities demanding rigorous subjugation of the body to the disciplines and directions of the mind are an important aspect of many mystical paths. Here Swami Shiva Nand Jee, who aims to teach people to be at peace, practices yoga along the Ganges River at Varanasi, the holiest Hindu city.

Love, the loftiest kind of spiritual activity, upwells within, compelling the mystic to respect and love all things and all people—on the grounds of knowing all the creation as a product and manifestation of God. In every major religion, there is a universal and unanimous appeal for people to maintain their love of humanity while also loving God or the Supreme Ideal. The Christian view that “God is love” (1 John 4:8) is reflected in Judaism, which says, “Love is the first and last principle of the Torah.”

Islam shares and advocates the same view. As the Prophet says in Hadith (Sahih Bukhari, 093:473), “Allah will not be merciful to those who are not merciful to mankind.” Hadith is a narration about the life of the Prophet. Similarly, the Hindu mystic believes that the innermost nature of God is love and that to know God one must love all, just as is also said in Buddhism, “The great compassionate heart is the essence of Buddhahood” (Dandavyuha Sutra).

Islam preaches and establishes a strong and universal thread of brotherhood of mankind. A saying of the Prophet, “No man is a true believer unless he desireth for his brother that which he desires for himself” (Sahih Bukhari, 002:012), implies that we must treat all men regardless of creed and caste with dignity, sensitivity, and generosity. Islam claims that he is the most favored of God from whom the greatest good comes to God's creatures; this is a message that sways us toward the love of all people without considering their social status or religious faith. “Love thy fellow beings first” is a popular Qur'anic verse reminding us that to live in harmony and peace, a universal brotherhood has to be maintained.

The Sufis believe that if they hurt anyone, they hurt themselves, for all are God's beloved creations, as His compassions penetrate everything and pervade everywhere. Indeed, the true mystics see themselves in others and find Godhead in them. God says in the Qur'an, “My mercy embraces all things” (7:156), just as Judaism and Christianity proclaim “The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made” (Psalms 145:9). Mystical Taoism presents a similar expression, “Tao never acts with force, yet nothing is left undone” (Tao Te Ching, 37). The position of the Sikh mystic is almost identical: “This world is a garden, the Lord its gardener, cherishing all, none neglected” (Adi Granth, Majh Ashtpadi M.3, p. 118).

To purify the heart

Love springs from the heart, which first must be purged of all sordid and malicious attitudes and elements. Jesus said, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy

soul, and with all thy mind” (Matt. 22:37). Becoming such a true lover of God requires a rigorous course to purify the soul, which, in the face of ignorance and avarice, is attached to the body and the material world. The mystics of all faiths embrace asceticism and austerities as paths to purge the heart.

The mystic's ascetic life starts with a strenuous effort to fight what Islamic mysticism calls *nafs*, or ego. This important first step is one of the psychological stages through which the human soul needs to pass in its purification toward perfection. Somewhat comparable to Plato's concept of an appetitive part of the soul, the Sufi concept is that *nafs* is the seat of all lust, crime, slander, covetousness, hatred, and all other passions and sins that corrupt the true nature of the soul. Khwaja Enayetpuri, one of the pioneer Sufi saints in Bengal, says, “One who has friendship with Allah has hostility to *nafs*, and thus to fight against *nafs* is the greatest holy war (*zehad-e-akbari*).”

Jainism as well holds purity of the soul as a precondition for acquiring the Truth; it emphasizes three jewels—right insight, right knowledge, and right conduct—in a fashion similar to Buddhism's eightfold discipline (*astangika marga*), which includes right vision, right conduct, and right speech. The underlying meaning is to pursue virtues and give up vices, most of which are, to some extent, related to those rejected by Sufism. As a precondition of purifying the soul, Jainism insists on freeing it from four types of attachment: anger (*krodha*), vanity (*moha*), infatuation (*maya*), and greed (*lobha*).

We are reminded here of the fourfold means (*sadhana chotustaya*) of the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta, the means of detaching from all selfish endeavors and developing of the virtues, such as control of mind (*sama*), control of senses (*dama*), and renunciation of wrongdoing (*aparati*), all with an intense desire for liberation (*moksa*).

Writing in his *History of Philosophy*, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell pointed out that although Arthur Schopenhauer, a nineteenth-century German philosopher, was not known as a mystic, he agreed, to some degree, with the Sufis. Schopenhauer held that the cause of suffering is intensity of will; hence, the

less we exercise will, the less we shall suffer. He ultimately aimed at breaking down his individual will and embracing a perfect life like that of a saint.

Since casting out imperfection through drastic renunciation of material desires is essential for purging the soul, many a mystic identifies the mystical union as the self-deification through self-simplification. Suggesting renunciation of worldly things, Khwaja Enayetpuri says, “Die before death, because one who dies to *zehad-e-akbari* [the fight against *nafs*] never dies at all, and thus to die before death means to attain eternal immortality (*hayate abadi*). This reflects the saying of the Prophet, ‘die before ye die.’”

Hegel, the German idealist, shares this view in saying, “die to live.” If mystics seek God's compassion and mercy by giving up undue attachment to the worldly things that mislead them from the true path, God may forgive their sins and listen to their prayers. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism and the first of the ten leaders of the Sikhs, has repeatedly stressed remembrance of God, charity, ablutions, worship, and meditation—practices that closely resemble those of Sufism and other traditions.

On the Sufi path for purifying the soul, prayer is essential for the aspirant. In the first step, regular ritual prayer (*salat*) restrains the individual from shameful and unjust deeds. Second, the Sufi practice and perform, both loudly and silently, in group or alone “remembrance of God” (*zikr*) by surrendering to Him with an intense desire to come closer to the Reality. Having already purified the soul in the fires of austerity, abstinence, fasting, restraints of speech and action, as well as prayer, the mystic, in the second step, moves on to receive the divine illumination, known as *tajalli* in Sufism. Divine illumination, Islamic mystics believe, is attained by “remembrance of God in the heart” (*zikr-e-qalb*) and “remembrance of Allah is the greatest [thing in life]” (29:45).

Meditation on God (*morakaba*), the third

“Love thy fellow beings first” is a popular Qur'anic verse reminding us that to live in harmony and peace, a universal brotherhood has to be maintained.

RELIGION

stage of the purification process, leads to the fourth stage, salvation, known as *fana* (annihilation of individual self) in Sufism. For the mystic, this means union of the soul with the divine nature of God and identification of himself with other beings of the whole world. This view is shared by the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, who says, “I receive God into myself, and through love I enter into Him. . . . We are transformed into God, so that we may know Him as He is.”

Fana is the last stage of spiritual development in Islamic mysticism, as moksa is the goal in Jainism and Hinduism, nirvana in Buddhism, and oneness with God in Judaism and Christianity. Upon attaining fana, the mystic is endowed with the divine nature of God. He then sees what God wants him to see, hears what God wants him to hear, and speaks what God wants him to speak, for his mind is no longer dominated by sense impressions. Fana itself has three levels, and in the last of these, *fana fi-Allah*, the Sufi dives into the attributes of Allah and identifies Him in his soul.

A clear sign of fana is to be found in the ode of Hallaj. It begins: “I saw my Lord with the Eye of the Heart. I said: ‘Who art thou?’ He answered: ‘Thou.’” In the state of fana the Sufi is mingled with God and the two entities become only one, as one sees none but oneself—a state in which “I” and “we” and “thou” do not exist. Since his attributes are extinguished in the attributes of God, the Sufi sees no other reality but God. As Samkara says in Vedanta, “Brahman is everywhere” (*sarbang khalidang Brahman*).

Mansur Al-Hallaj (858–922), a Persian Sufi master, is believed to have attained such truth and uttered in ecstasy “I am the Truth” (*Ainal Haqq*). In like manner, having conquered the many passions the mystic of Vedanta undergoes the methods of listening (*shravana*), concentration (*manan*), and meditation (*nididhyasana*). When the Hindu mystic expunges the false impressions and establishes

strong faith in the reality of the Brahman, the spiritual saint teaches the aspirant the secret of the knowledge of the Reality, as he says, “That ‘Thou Art’” (*Tattvamasi*). At this, the disciple concentrates on this truth, realizes it, and utters “I am that Brahman” (*Ahang Brah-mashmi*). This is the state of liberation (moksa) in Sankara’s Advaita Vedanta.

The Qur’anic verses such as “Allah cometh in between the man and his own heart” (8:24) and “I [Allah] have breathed into him [man] of My spirit” (15:29) appear to be of great importance for those who seek to reconcile the neo-Platonic expression of “soul’s likeness to God” with the Sufi view of the soul’s nearness to God. One of the telling sayings of Hadith in this respect is “He who knows his soul knows his God.” The Chinese philosopher Mencius (372–289 BC) holds that he who knows his nature knows his heaven, just as Eckhart claims that God dwells nowhere but in pure soul.

This view is also expressed in other traditions. The Katha Upanishad (2.2.12) says, “The Supreme One dwells in the inmost part of our being.” In fact, in Advaita Vedanta, the unity of being means more than the soul’s becoming united with God; it is rather to become God. As Hinduism holds, “He who knows the Supreme Brahman, verily becomes Brahman”; “the soul is Brahman” (*Atman ca Brahman*) is the essence of all the Upanishads (Mundaka, 3.2.9; Chhandogya, 6.14.3; Taittiriya, 2.1.2). Radhakrishnan rightly points out, “The seeking for the highest and inmost self is the seeking for God.”

The mystic view that God dwells in the innermost part of man is not alien to Christianity, which reveals “hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us” (I John 3:24). This insight can be likened to the Qur’anic view, “and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein” (50:16). The image of God is explained as an ideal of holiness in other mystic traditions: Shintoism speaks of the saint or superior man, and Buddhism characterizes the Buddha as the one who manifests the attributes of God. As Buddhism says, “Every being has the Buddha Nature; this is the self” (Mahaparinirvana Sutra, 214). This

means that the inner nature of man, which is his soul, the essence of man, is the manifestation of the Absolute.

Salvation, the goal of the mystics, is not just liberation from ignoble, baneful, and sinful activities; rather, it is also extinction of all sufferings and sorrows in this world and return to the original abode because everything goes back to its origin. That everything proceeds from God and returns to Him is corroborated by the Qur’an: “To Him do all things return” (2:206). Man, created by the direct breath of God’s spirit (*ruh*), has the capability to know

verse. Furthermore, Sikhism holds that the “True one is seated in the hearts of all men.” Therefore, people are urged “to practice all the virtues and discipline themselves.”

Peace within and without

Regardless of their religious affiliations, the mystics of the world traditions can only help establish and maintain peace in this world as they find peace in themselves. The mystics, with their wisdom and vision, know with immediacy that the Truth is only one and that



God, to return to Him, and to return to his origin, provided he traverses all the required steps and the soul reverts to its original nature. That God is present in all humans and makes a constant and continuous contact with them is further corroborated by a Qur’anic verse, “I have breathed into man of My spirit” (15:29).

Christian mystics find affinity with this truth in their holy scripture, which says, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). A similar message can be traced in Judaism: “Let a man always consider himself as if the Holy One dwells within him” (Taanit, 11b). The pathway of knowing God through the soul is also proclaimed by Sikhism, which teaches that the realization of the soul can help a man to achieve union with God and the whole uni-

all people, regardless of gender, class, and caste, are created by the same God with a unique purpose: to serve and glorify Him by serving humans, which is the key to living in amity and peace in society. Judaism says, “The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace” (Gittin 59b). Jesus appeased us by saying, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you” (John 14:27).

The Qur’an says the believers are but a single brotherhood, enjoining them to make peace and reconciliation between their two brothers (49:10); it also clearly states that all children of Adam are honorable (17:70). This means that peoples of different faiths are equal, with equal rights to live with dignity and promote their cultural and religious identities.

Sufi mystical practice includes the ritual whirling dervish dance, which symbolizes a release from earthly ties and a liberation of the soul that prepares it for union with the divine.

RELIGION

Because a true mystic is a renewed human being with a pure heart filled with love, tolerance, respect, and forgiveness, the mystic seeks compassion and cooperation that exhibit humanity and generosity even against the backdrop of adversity and animosity.

This truth is akin to what Hinduism says: “I look upon all creatures equally; none are less dear to me and none more dear” (Bhagavad Gita 9:29). Attaching importance to the unity of humankind, the Qur’an states that “mankind is a single nation” (2:213) and that all men are created from a single male and female (49:13). God

made different tribes and nations so that we may know each other and identify one from another while living in peace with others. This unity within diversity is endorsed by Islam and other traditions.

To raise hope and ensure global peace, people of various faiths must learn to understand and appreciate a multitude of perspectives on mystic issues, and people should demonstrate the unprejudiced love for humanity that the mystics find only in the pure heart. In some cases, this might mean accepting a loss of face for the benefit of others. For example, the Ahmadiyya sect living in Bangladesh tends to deviate from mainstream Islam on some crucial aspects, but for greater unity and humanity, it is the responsibility of other Muslims not to violate the rights of the Ahmadiyya to their own beliefs but rather to respect their convictions. Pathways for establishing and maintaining global peace require that we recognize and respect different faiths, whatever form they may present to us.

To sum up, the principal teachings of all faith traditions are almost alike, since moral ideals such as love, humility, justice, righteousness and brotherhood are held equally self-evident by the mystics of all faiths. All religions embrace a moral way of life and prescribe some practices to that end. Unity with God, virtuous deeds in this life, and serving fellow human beings are some of the common truths found in the world’s major traditions. Mystics cherish the view that man is the best of all creatures, believing that a bond of love should unite all human beings as they find in their purified hearts that God is one, regard-

less of the fact that founders, preachers, and prophets have experienced and used different names and forms to address Him.

For an enlightened saint, as all the major religions recognize, every person possesses a divine entity; thus, the life purpose of every person is grounded in the attainment of enlightenment, or as others may say, the realization of goodness or union with God—for perpetual bliss in this life and the hereafter. The mystical understanding of the oneness of God is based on the firm belief that all humans possess a divine soul gifted by God and that communion of the individual soul with the Divine is the ultimate goal of human life.

The methods of reaching this goal, however, vary according to people’s customs, cultures, and beliefs. To reach our ultimate end, we should, as stated above, purify our souls from the pollution of blind bondage to the world’s nefarious activities. Truth can be understood not just in the remembrance of God through prayer but in the realization of God in the pure heart, in which there is no difference between the knower, the known, and the knowledge.

Society today suffers most from the misleading and misguiding spiritual interpretation of orthodox fundamentalists. Thus, a sea change in our thinking, an adjustment to our attitudes, is an urgent necessity, for the human mind-set is at the center of all contentions and conflicts among divergent faiths and nations. Our first and foremost endeavor should be to bridge the chasm between God and humanity. This is precisely where the mystics of divergent faiths can contribute to compensate for the unfavorable outward conditions of the age. The various mystic paths, with their strong similarities, should advocate common values, teachings, and precepts for the whole of mankind.

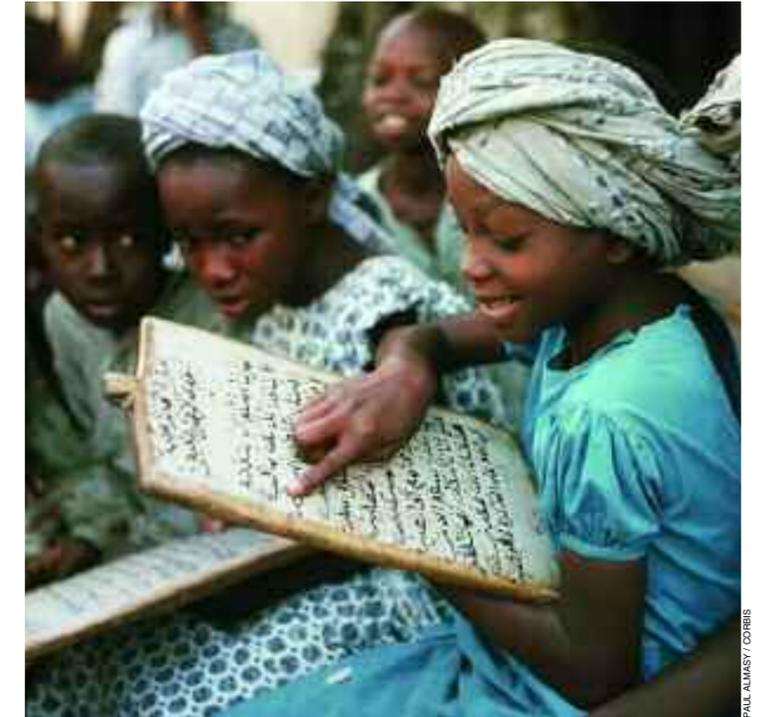
If properly understood and practiced, the core teaching of mysticism—that every person belongs to a universal soul and thus all people have been created by one God and hold equal status in the eyes of God—could be a powerful force for restoring peace and harmony. The salient point that can help maintain communal harmony is to acknowl-

edge others’ faiths as equally important to our own and to let go of the thought that we belong to any particular religion superior to others. The mystics of divergent traditions recognize the inherent value in each human being and all living things; the mystics honor the rights of others with dignity and love.

True ways have the power to transcend traditional theism while maintaining tranquility and harmony. Ignorance of this reality and rejection of the plurality of our faiths underlie most of the quandaries affecting the global community. Achieving coexistence and communal harmony in this trouble-torn world requires that we embrace religious pluralism and that the world’s diverse faith communities together build a society based on social justice, mutual love, and mental peace. To live in peace in society, we must first attain our own peace of mind by cultivating virtues and eliminating vices.

This effort may require that we change our own mind-set, that we conquer ourselves by enriching our souls with spirituality and identifying with our souls, in their pristine purity, as revealed by God Himself. A clean-hearted man is a true-tongued saint who cannot indulge in any sinful action. Seldom can he commit sin, for his conscience is guided by the divine conscience of God and his knowledge is illuminated by the light of the Truth. Nowhere does he find evil, pain, or enemy, for his thought and vision are nothing but those of his God, in which everything is a sign of the Beloved.

The beauty of a mystic life lies in the awareness that selfishness, which is repugnant to the true spirit of religions, brings disharmony and mutual mistrust. Because a true mystic is a renewed human being with a pure heart filled with love, tolerance, respect, and forgiveness, the mystic seeks compassion and cooperation that exhibit humanity and generosity even against the backdrop of adversity and animosity. This is the mystical pathway of peaceful coexistence for all who exist. If and when the mystic’s physical and spiritual bondage is removed through mortification of his will, he cannot hurt anyone, for he realizes God permeates in every heart; nor



can he harm anything, for he experiences God’s manifestation in everything. He serves others and others serve him. This, the essence of mysticism found in all faiths, is the true pathway of peace. ●

Additional Reading

Selwyn Gurney Champion and Dorothy Short, *Readings From World Religions*, Premier Books, New York, 1959.

Meister Eckhart, *Anthology of Sermons*, selected and translated by J. M. Clark, London, 1957.

Martin Lings, *What Is Sufism*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1981.

Sayings of Muhammad, 4th ed., Islamic Foundation, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1978.

S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1977.

Bertrand Russell, *History of Philosophy*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1961.

Khwaja Saifuddin, *Adarsha Murshid (Ideal Sheikh)*, Sirajganj, 1989.

Golam Dastagir (dastagir02@yahoo.com) is professor of philosophy at Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He is also secretary general of Religions for Peace, Bangladesh, a sister concern of Religions for Peace, USA.

Through the written word, the mystics’ profound insights provide instruction and inspiration across cultures and peoples. Here, a Nigerian girl studies an excerpt from the Qur’an.