INTRODUCTION

The image of Rabi‘ah al-‘Adawīyah, who was born in the second century A.H./early 8th century C.E., is a distinct and imposing presence for those studying the development of Sufism and those interested in the history and role of women in Islam. Unfortunately no thorough or systematic treatise has been written by or about Rabi‘ah to explain her overall teachings and spiritual perspective. What original material we do have is mainly collected fragments: poems, supplications, anecdotes, and sayings attributed to Rabi‘ah. Some of these attributions are questionable, and none of them completely verifiable. The most complete account of Rabi‘ah among the early works is a biographical account by Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār. However, ‘Attār has drawn from earlier sources and shaped, rather than merely transmitted, this material. His presentation is intertwined with his own perspective on the mystical life, which invariably contributes to his interpretation of Rabi‘ah. Therefore, we cannot talk of a strictly “historical” Rabi‘ah. Moreover, leaving the question of historicity aside, it is virtually impossible to discuss Rabi‘ah as she appears in the primary sources without first taking into account the factor of the narrator’s interpretation present in the most extensive primary source: ‘Attār’s Tadhkirat al-awliyā’. Hence it follows that my investigation is centered on an attempt to understand and define ‘Attār’s image of this important saint,
based mainly on his work *Tadhkirat al-awliyā‘* and complemented by passages from his poetical works. My analysis of ‘Attār’s Rābi‘ah is broken into three parts corresponding to the three primary aspects of her person: her mystical dimension, her relation to orthodox Islam, and the significance of her sex, in other words Rābi‘ah as mystic, Muslim and woman.

Prior to the exploration of ‘Attār’s image of this saint, I will offer a brief review and critique of the previous studies. Here I will attempt to discern the consistency of earlier interpretations with the image of Rābi‘ah presented by ‘Attār (and other ancient authors). Following this is a discussion of Rābi‘ah’s milieu (2nd century A.H. Basra), particularly the ascetical and mystical influences that existed just preceding and during her time, situating Rābi‘ah within her historical context.

**RĀBI‘AH IN SCHOLARSHIP**

Only two monographs have been done on Rābi‘ah. The first, and by far the most substantial work, is Margaret Smith’s *Rābi‘ah the Mystic and her Fellow-Saints in Islam*. Smith has drawn from an extensive amount of primary source material and attempted to define Rābi‘ah within the context of the states and stages of the Sufi path. However, Smith has a clear a priori perspective behind her analysis, specifically that Sufism is foreign to Islam and is the direct result of Christian influences. Smith outlines her conception of “the Sufi doctrine,” greatly emphasizing its similarity to Christian spirituality and its apparent contradiction to the teachings of orthodox Islam. What emerges from this analysis is the image of Rābi‘ah as an ecstatic mystic overflowing with love for the Divine Beloved, who has — except in her “weaker moments” — overcome all fear of God, reaching to union with Him. According to Smith, temporary mystical union is possible in this life and foreshadows complete and unending union after death; she regards this experience as synonymous with the Christian concept of deification of the soul. From this perspective Smith interprets Rābi‘ah’s mystical journey as begin-
ning with exclusive and “disinterested” love (love that seeks no reward except the Beloved Himself), leading her to a vision of the Divine and union with Him that is “attained, not by annihilation, but by absorption and transmutation, so that the soul transmuted into the Divine Image ... becomes itself part of God, in Him abides and lives for ever.”¹⁰

The premise of Smith’s interpretation is the Christian origin of Sufism, so it is not surprising that Rābi‘ah is shown to approach the Christian concept of sainthood.¹¹ Consequently, Smith regards particular traits, such as Rābi‘ah’s life-long practice of asceticism and celibacy, her emphasis on divine love and her direct experience (as opposed to what Smith sees as the “formalism and traditionalism of orthodox Islam”)¹² as evidence of Rābi‘ah’s affinity to Christianity, and likewise of her distance from orthodox Islam. Smith gives particular emphasis to Rābi‘ah’s choice of celibacy, maintaining that a celibate life-style was “indeed almost a necessity, for the woman Sufi, if she was to pursue her quest without hindrance” and that “the adoption of the celibate life gave [women] an independence and freedom in the exercise of the religious life which was quite alien to the ideal of orthodox Islam.”¹³

The main critical response to this and other theories of the Christian origin of Sufism has come from Louis Massignon. Massignon constructs a quite different interpretation of Islamic mystical spirituality, tracing its root back to the Quran which he, unlike Smith, accepts as an authentic revealed scripture.¹⁴ He discusses the common Christian-Muslim milieu and interaction, particularly between Christian monks and Muslim ascetics in the first two Islamic centuries.¹⁵ However, he views the many Christian-Muslim exchanges not as evidence of the incorporation of Christian ideas into Muslim spirituality but as an indication of the reciprocal curiosity that existed especially among the spiritual elites.¹⁶ Likewise Massignon discusses the phenomena of common and borrowed terminology, similar concepts and similar spiritual characteristics of individual saints,¹⁷ yet does not assume that the existence of similarities necessarily indicates a causal relationship. Massignon’s thesis concerning the origin of
Sufism rests on his study of terminology in the development of the “lexique technique” of Muslim mystics. He insists that the linguistic influence of Christianity (or of any other religious or cultural entity) cannot be assumed unless one has proven a clear historical and philosophical connection that has given rise to a hybridization of concepts. Although Massignon speaks of a common life shared between Arab Muslims and Christians during the first two Islamic centuries, he does not find evidence to establish such a hybridization of concepts in the development of Islamic mysticism. Instead, Massignon argues that Sufi practices and concepts have originated from constant recitation, meditation and implementation of Quranic terms and prescriptions. In his view the Quran has preceded Islamic mysticism in origin and development and has given it its distinctive characteristics, seen particularly in the practice of dhikr. Massignon also discerns the influence of the Quran in the allegorical themes and concepts employed by Sufis to express their mystical ideas and experiences.

In terms of the development of Islamic spirituality and mysticism in Basra proper, Massignon describes the growth of “l’école ascétique de Basrah” over the first two centuries Hijra, beginning with Hasan al-Baṣrī and ending with Rābi‘ah and her kinsman Riyāḥ al-Qaysī.

Basra, second century A.H./eighth century C.E., was a thriving city some distance inland from the banks of the present day Shatt al-‘Arab, which flows into the Persian Gulf. Built during the caliphate of ʿUmar ibn al-Khattāb in 17 A.H./638 C.E. by a companion of the Prophet, ʿUtbaḥ ibn Ghazwān, Basra served initially as a military outpost. Its strategic access to and from the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, as well as the Persian Gulf, compensated for its unfavourable geographical conditions, particularly its shortage of water and fertile agricultural land. Within a relatively short time it developed into a busy commercial center that intersected important river and sea routes, and also overland caravan routes coming from the Arabian Peninsula.

The inhabitants of Basra came from several distinct ethnic backgrounds: a small indigenous population, probably of Iranian
descent, the conquering Arab tribes and the groups — clients and slaves — attached to these tribes, including clients and slaves of Arab, Iranian, Indian (Sindi), Malai and East African descent. The convergence of different peoples and cultures helped create a rich and diverse religious and intellectual milieu. The religious character of the city was present from its foundation. The Caliph ‘Umar charged ‘Utba’h ibn Ghazwân to teach the Quran to the Bedouins, and during the first two decades of its establishment Basra was home to over a dozen of the Prophet’s companions. The religious and intellectual activities that had started with the instruction of the Quran eventually expanded into the areas of hadith (the collected sayings of Prophet Muhammad) and linguistics. The founding Arab tribes followed the practices of Mecca and Medina, the places of leadership at that time, and in this sense Basra had a traditional character. However, the city also proved to be a suitable environment for the growth of divergent doctrines, such as those of the Mu’tazilites in the second century A.H.

Although this pluralistic setting provided intellectual stimulus, the existence of different religious factions also gave rise to political and doctrinal conflict. The problems of instability and sectarianism that plagued the Muslim community following the assassination of ‘Uthmân and the later succession of ‘Ali also surfaced in Basra, where the partisans of ‘Uthmân, Imamites, Kharijites, and several other religious minorities maintained an uneasy coexistence. Basra had social ills as well. The deterioration of public morality was manifested in a general weakening of religiosity combined with an increasing interest in material wealth and sensual preoccupations. By the time of Jâhîz (c. 160–255 A.H./c. 776 (777)–868 C.E.), the practice of usury was common, and the institution of concubinage flourished within a social setting that also tolerated the presence of singing girls, courtesans, prostitutes and pederasts. It is against this social, political and religious background that we should seek to understand the emergence of “l’école ascétique de Basra.”

The existence and growth of asceticism in Basra during the first few centuries (A.H.) was a discernable phenomenon.
Charles Pellat remarks that this is not, properly speaking, mysticism. Massignon, however, describes the mystical doctrines and characteristics of important ascetics of "l'école de Basrah," indicating that at least on an individual basis many of the Basrian ascetics could be considered mystics as well. He traces the development of this movement, beginning with the companions and tābiʿūn (companions of the Prophet’s companions) of the first century A.H. who resided in Basra and were known as ascetics. Massignon names and classifies the ascetics of the second century according to their particular roles or traits, such as popular preachers (quṣṣāṣ), weepers (bakkāʿūn), jurists, theologians, hadith specialists, and so on. He observes that this period was characterized by the general tendency of the ascetics to maintain their connection to the daily life of the community while devoting themselves to the practice of brotherly correction (nasīthah), especially in the role of public preacher.

Important among the first century ascetics was Hasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110 A.H./728 C.E.); his disciples figured prominently in the second century. This can be explained at least in part by Hasan’s effectiveness as a teacher and popular preacher, but perhaps also by his model of conduct and position vis-à-vis the often troubled Muslim community. As political unrest gripped the community, Hasan maintained a position of neutrality, refusing to take sides, to condone or participate in rebellion, or to conceal his views through dissimulation. Instead, he insisted on the unity of the ummah (Muslim community) and argued that to remain obedient to God — the Ultimate source of all power and authority — one was bound to obey external authority except in rulings that directly violated the Islamic faith. This stance, which Massignon sees as the first historical manifestation of Sunnism, earned Hasan the censure of Kharijites and Imamites alike. Hasan’s acceptance of temporal authority did not mean overlooking moral corruption or misuses of power and privilege. Hasan was candid in his criticism of Muʿāwiyyah, Yazīd, Ḥajjāj and others. Though politically neutral, Hasan understood himself
to be in line with the example of the Prophet, preaching the message of warning to society.\textsuperscript{37}

At the same time that Hasan affirmed obedience to external authority he also practiced moral introspection, which involved the interiorization of certain religious ideas.\textsuperscript{38} Massignon observes that the lexicon of mystical terms is already discernable with Hasan in his use of words such as *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *niyāh* (intention), *nīfāq* (hypocrisy) and *ridā* (contentment). For Hasan, these terms no longer carried their usual sensible and rational connotation but alluded to direct, inner experience.\textsuperscript{39} It also appears that Hasan’s emphasis on inner experience was a process of spiritual discernment and validation of religion rather than a departure from the externals of faith. Whereas he criticized the pharisaism of insincere jurists, the literalism of certain traditionists (*hashwiyyah*) and expressions of blind, emotional piety, he strictly adhered to orthodox faith.\textsuperscript{40} As an ascetic and mystic, Hasan stressed the life of piety, the avoidance of doubtful things, and, above all, the complete renunciation of the perishable world. Massignon writes that detachment from the world formed the base of Hasan’s religious perspective, which was combined with fear of God and the need to listen attentively to the Divine Word. Massignon credits Hasan with laying the foundations of the science of the heart, as Hasan referred to the concept of states (*ḥāl*), levels of differentiation in intention and suggestion (*waswās*), and the importance of moral introspection.\textsuperscript{41} Thus, at a time of political and doctrinal conflict, when the discontent of factions such as the Kharijites and Zaydites had led to open rebellion, Hasan maintained an active, though politically neutral, role in society, exhorting the people to turn inward, to encounter and repent of their own selves, to renounce the world and to turn whole-heartedly towards God.\textsuperscript{42}

Second century Basra witnessed an “intense religious fervour” that was manifested in various practices, yet was not controlled by a specific or unified doctrine or set of rules.\textsuperscript{43} According to Massignon, it was Hasan’s disciples who gradually systematized the concepts and life-style introduced by earlier figures. Mālik ibn Dīnār (d. 127) started this process and was
succeeded in the following generation chiefly by ‘Abd al-Wáhid ibn Zayd (d. 177). Other important figures of this generation included Riyāḥ ibn ‘Amr Qaysī (d. circa 180) and Rābi‘ah al-Adawīyah (d. circa 185 A.H./801 C.E.). The former, Riyāḥ, gave doctrinal form to mystical concepts such as tajallī (to explain the vision of God on Judgement Day), tafṣīl al-walī (the superiority of the saint), and khullāh (divine friendship). As for Rābi‘ah, Massignon refers to her concept of divine love as the vision of the Beloved Himself, and her unconcern for Heaven and Hell in yearning for God alone. Rābi‘ah and Riyāḥ belonged to the same tribe (Qays) and are said to have associated with each other. Massignon, however, includes two anecdotes from Isfahānī’s hagiography which “underlin[e] the nuance that separates [Riyāḥ] from Rābi‘ah,” these anecdotes suggest that although Rābi‘ah and Riyāḥ are depicted as spiritual companions, Rābi‘ah’s all-consuming love extended beyond the I–You duality of divine friendship (c.f. Riyāḥ) and led her to become completely immersed in the Presence of the Divine Friend, the Beloved Himself.

“L’école ascétique de Basrah,” founded largely by Hasan al-Basrī, ended in the posthumous condemnation of Riyāḥ and Rābi‘ah by the strict traditionists. The external context for the origin of “l’école ascétique” was formed by political and doctrinal confusion, together with the rise in social decadence that characterized early Basra. The pious call to repentance, to turn inward and amend the heart in front of God, was, at least in part, a response to these conditions. Society no longer provided the ideal context for moral development and perfection of faith, and instead had become the place of moral jihad against the increasing tendencies towards division and corruption. As for the inner inspiration of “l’école ascétique,” apart from the basic human yearning for God that transcends time and place, Massignon regards the Quran as the manifestation of Muslim spirituality in history and hence the essential starting point for all further developments in Islamic spirituality and mysticism, including the ascetical–mystical movement of early Basra.
Massignon has mentioned Rābi‘ah only in brief; yet his perspective and its implications provide the framework for an interpretation of this saint. Seen in terms of both the inner and outer dimensions of “l’école ascétique de Basrah,” Rābi‘ah appears in continuation to Hasan. Hasan already had broken from the early Islamic ideal of fulfilling one’s spiritual life through full participation in society; he was a detached, independent observer and critic of society, a preacher and Warner. Rābi‘ah took this detachment one step further. Although not a public preacher, she lived in semi-seclusion and received, advised, consoled and even rebuked those who sought her out. As the deterioration of society meant, by extension, some degree of breakdown in family structure, it is likely that the pious ascetics not only turned inward, but also reconsidered the original Islamic emphasis given to societal and family roles. For a decline in the spiritual legitimacy of these roles would serve to highlight the sense of exigency for the observance of asceticism, especially for the observance of celibacy.50 From this point of view, one would interpret Rābi‘ah’s life-style of seclusion and celibacy not as a departure from Islamic practice but as part of the general response to changing and troubled times. Furthermore, following Massignon’s thesis, the inner essence of Rābi‘ah’s spirituality arose in continuity to the Quranic revelation. Within this perspective Rābi‘ah is understood as an essentially Muslim saint, despite her less typical life-style as a celibate ascetic.

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The present state of scholarship on Rābi‘ah is limited. Massignon has outlined Rābi‘ah’s historical context in his study of the first vocations in Islamic mysticism and “l’école ascétique de Basrah.” Margaret Smith has produced the only significant work devoted specifically to this saint and in it has attempted to analyze Rābi‘ah in terms of the states and stations of the Sufi path. Yet the views of Smith and Massignon are quite different; hence the image and interpretation of Rābi‘ah that emerges from each perspective is quite different as well.
Leaving aside judgments concerning the correctness of Smith’s theory, there are serious problems in her use of source material that affect her analysis of Rābi‘ah. Smith has a strong tendency to exaggerate the similarity of Rābi‘ah’s spirituality (and Sufism more generally) to Christianity, while downplaying, or omitting the positive connections between Rābi‘ah, Sufism, and orthodox Islam. Although Smith refers to Sufi authorities such as Ghazâlî, Qushayrî, and Makkî, she does not acknowledge that these ancient authors based themselves on the authority of the Quran and hadith. Instead, Smith compares the “Sufi view” to passages from the Bible and other Christian sources, and relates Sufi concepts to Christian doctrines in a way that cannot be substantiated with reference to the Sufi authorities mentioned above. Thus, she looks outside of the historical context of the material in order to prove the pre-assumptions of her historical argument. In terms of her analysis of Rābi‘ah, Smith emphasizes Rābi‘ah’s radiant faith and direct experience as opposed to the “ritualism” of Islam, and only mentions in passing Rābi‘ah’s continued observance of ritual obligations and her regular night-long vigils of supererogatory ritual prayer. Consequently, Smith misses the important distinction between ritual and ritualism and presents a somewhat distorted picture of Rābi‘ah’s spiritual life.

Although Smith treats the more orthodox features of Rābi‘ah’s life as incidental factors, she discusses at length the more “personal” aspects of Rābi‘ah’s spirituality, such as her “free prayer.” Finally, Smith presents Rābi‘ah as a saint who has attained the final stage of mystical union with God (a stage which Smith defines as deification of the soul, and specifically not as annihilation); however the source material only contains descriptions of Rābi‘ah’s preoccupation with God, her annihilation in Him (fanâ), and her yearning for proximity and union. Not in any account (by ‘Aţţâr or other ancient author) is Rābi‘ah described as having attained “union” with God.

In all, Smith has abstracted Rābi‘ah from the context of her spiritual environment and actual practice, and has introduced concepts and interpretations not found in the source material. Her
image of Rābiʿah is not consistent with ʿAttār’s presentation, nor with the accounts of Rābiʿah found in the other source material. Nor has Smith proven a clear historical and philosophical connection giving rise to a hybridization of concepts (c.f. Massignon) that would substantiate any direct affinity between Rābiʿah and Christian spirituality.

Since Massignon has not given us a thorough study of Rābiʿah, we can only consider the implications of his perspective for an interpretation of this saint. He has been criticized for minimizing the apparent conflict between orthodox Islamic teachings and ascetical practice, specifically concerning the issues of celibacy and monasticism. Yet in spite of this weakness, the implications of his theory are more in agreement with ʿAttār’s portrayal, as ʿAttār’s Rābiʿah is unique among saints, but nonetheless exists within the context of Islamic practice and spirituality. A qualification of this point is that whereas Massignon presents Rābiʿah in line with Hasan, within the continuing development of “l’école ascétique,” ʿAttār brings out the clear contrast between these two figures. This difference can be explained in terms of the inner and outer dimensions of the ascetical-mystical movement. Both Rābiʿah and Hasan, as ascetics, appear against the background of an unstable, deteriorating social structure. They represent the shift away from identification with society towards a personal search for God; hence, both are part of the ascetical “counter-culture.” Yet in terms of inward state, ʿAttār shows Rābiʿah as possessing a far higher degree of attainment and depicts Hasan, in contrast, more as a zāhid (ascetic), at times even a hypocrite. Hasan’s unrelenting emphasis on purification from the world reveals that he is still attached to it, whereas Rābiʿah is detached from the world — and the world beyond — so completely that it rarely needs mention. She is so utterly preoccupied with God and effaced in her yearning and love for Him that she can no longer be occupied with the world, even for the sake of condemning it. ʿAttār portrays Rābiʿah at once as a woman on fire with love and nothing but dust on the Way, illustrating a mystical secret and paradox that one — more
significantly, that a woman — who is nothing for the sake of God is, at the same time, unsurpassed among His friends.

‘ATTĀR’S IMAGE OF RĀBI‘AH

Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār, the Author, and the Story of Rābi‘ah

Abū Hamīd Muhammad ibn Abī Bakr Ibrāhīm, better known as Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār, was born at Nīshāpūr, circa 540 A.H./1145–6 C.E. Little can be said with certainty about his life. ‘Attār, as his pen-name indicates, was a pharmacist. He was successful at his work and began to write books out of keen personal interest rather than as a profession. He appears to have led a quiet life, especially during his later years, and died at an old age, it is said, at the hands of the Mongol invaders who swept through Nīshāpūr in 618 A.H./1221 C.E. As for ‘Attār’s involvement with Sufism, leaving aside legends, there is no definite proof that ‘Attār was a Sufi in any formal sense. Nonetheless, it is clear from ‘Attār’s writings that he was very much influenced by it. B. Reinert writes, “... it can be taken for granted that from childhood onward ‘Attār, encouraged by his father, was interested in the Sufis and their sayings and way of life, and regarded their saints as his spiritual guides.” It also seems likely that ‘Attār engaged in interior spiritual practices, which would account for his deep insight into the struggles and states of the spiritual path, even though he himself claimed that he did not belong to the Sufis but tried to resemble them.

‘Attār’s works center around the various aspects and difficulties encountered in the journey of the soul from its state of earthly bondage to the state of proximity to God. The world, according to ‘Attār, is vain and false and a source of great evil and temptation to the soul. Thus, the practice of asceticism and a life of moral and ethical purity are crucial if one is to free one’s soul from the grasp of the material world. Within this ascetical perspective, ‘Attār also emphasizes the importance of self-effac-
ing love in the presence of the Beloved, and the all-pervasive Oneness of God.65

‘Attār has a special talent for expressing deep meaning and truth within the guise of everyday events. Though he ventures into didactic homilies and theoretical explanations, he often illustrates his message through exemplary events. His main protagonists are Sufi saints and ascetics, although he also introduces other figures from history and legend as fit the needs of his narrative.66 Reinert observes that ‘Attār “has no objection to putting his words of wisdom into the mouths of fools and madmen.”67 This appears as part of ‘Attār’s more general tendency to turn social norms upside down, to strip away the veils of convention in order to get to the essential truth, to the heart of the matter.68

Although ‘Attār hardly ever specifies his sources, he seems to have relied on previously written works. In some instances, in transmitting Sufi sayings, he is very diligent in passing on full and accurate information; yet in other instances he shows a strong tendency to select and shape material according to his particular perspective and even more definitely according to the didactic or theosophical point he is trying to bring out in his narrative. Reinert considers his works valuable more for the study of “hagiology and phenomenology of Sufism” than for the study of history.69 However, despite ‘Attār’s tendency to shape information, he does not seem to suppress material because it conflicts with his basic perspective. In his narrative of Rābi‘ah, ‘Attār includes a variant tale in which Rābi‘ah is depicted as a converted musician, an image quite different from the rest of his presentation. The only motive I can suggest for including this story is ‘Attār’s conscientiousness in presenting all the material at his disposal. Yet, after including this variant image, he frames it leaving his own estimation.70 Thus, because of ‘Attār’s general tendency to be selective and to mold material, it should be clear that we are dealing with ‘Attār’s Rābi‘ah, Rābi‘ah as understood and presented by ‘Attār, which is, by and large, how she has been enshrined within Sufi tradition.
‘Attār’s Rābi‘ah is a unique, and even provocative, figure among God’s saints. The basic outline of her life, as given in Tadhkirat al-awliyā’, is as follows. She was born into a poor but pious family, the fourth of four daughters. At the time of her birth, her family was so desperately poor that there was no cloth in which to wrap her, no lamp to light the house, no oil to anoint her naval. That night the Prophet appeared to Rābi‘ah’s father in a dream, comforting him with the news that his daughter was a “queen among women” who would be the intercessor for seventy thousand of the Prophet’s community. After a number of years Rābi‘ah’s parents both died, and she and her sisters became separated during a famine. She was seized by an evil man and sold as a slave for a small amount of money. Rābi‘ah’s master put her to hard labor. One day she was approached by a stranger. Afraid, she fled, but fell and broke her hand. She cried out to God not to remove her sufferings but to know if He was satisfied with her or not. Rābi‘ah was answered by a voice that foretold of her high rank in the hereafter, and she was inspired to intensify her life of devotion. One night her master awoke and saw Rābi‘ah absorbed in prayer with a holy light suspended in midair above her head. He was amazed and felt ashamed to keep someone of her spiritual rank as a slave. He freed her, and she retired into the desert to devote her life to worship and seeking proximity to God.

It is around this basic outline that ‘Attār weaves various anecdotes, sayings and supplications attributed to Rābi‘ah in order to fashion and bring to life his image of this remarkable woman saint. ‘Attār illustrates not only Rābi‘ah’s profound level of spiritual insight and attainment but also her intense and frequently sharp-witted personality which together commanded the respect of all who encountered her. Although ‘Attār emphasizes Rābi‘ah’s mystical dimension and particular spiritual characteristics, he does so within a context that takes into account her relation to orthodox Islamic practice and the significance of her womanhood. In this light we seek to understand ‘Attār’s Rābi‘ah as mystic, Muslim and woman.
Rābi‘ah as Mystic

‘Atṭār’s Rābi‘ah is, above all, a saint and friend of God who enjoyed intimacy with the Divine Presence by virtue of her high level of spiritual realization. It is from the basis of her spiritual attainment that all other aspects of her character and being derive their legitimacy. Rābi‘ah’s special relation with God found expression in her karāmāt (miraculous acts of saints), karāmāt which was manifested not only in her miraculous abilities, but more particularly in her direct communication with God and in His immediate response to her needs and prayers.

Karāmāt (miraculous acts)

Rābi‘ah had several types of karāmāt, beginning with the miraculous events that occurred more-or-less on their own, without her active intercession. A holy light suspended in midair to illuminate her prayers, the Kabah coming to welcome her in the desert, food which cooked itself while she engaged in spiritual conversation and prayer, verses of the Holy Quran recited from the unseen as she lay dying: all of these miraculous events attested to her level of saintliness. Rābi‘ah also had an active ability to perform miracles. When Hasan challenged her to pray two ra‘kats (units of ritual prayer) while floating on water, Rābi‘ah threw her prayer carpet in midair, challenging him to perform prayers with her there, where everyone could see. And one night when she had no light for her guests, Rābi‘ah blew on her finger, causing it to glow until morning.

The most significant type of karāmāt, however, was manifested in her direct, interactive relation with God, emphasizing her position of intimacy rather than her supernatural power to work miracles. At crucial points in her life, Rābi‘ah cried out to God in supplication, yearning and even complaint, and received an immediate response. This response was often verbal, described usually as a “voice,” and, on one occasion, as God’s direct address “without intermediary.” Sometimes the response was
a miraculous event, such as when God revived her dead donkey after she complained, “O my God! Do Kings treat a weak woman in this manner? You called me to Your house, then in the middle of the way, You killed my donkey and left me alone in the desert!” These examples attest to her experience of direct relation to God and indicate that this direct relation was the central and exclusive focus of her worship, life and being. Rābi‘ah was once asked, “Do you see Him Whom you worship?” She replied, “If I did not see Him I would not worship.” Hence the goal of her worship — whether personal supplication or ritual practice — could not be separated from her direct experience of God and sense of relationality to Him.

Sincerity and Hypocrisy

Rābi‘ah’s karāmāt was the result of her closeness to God and specifically did not involve a search for miraculous powers. After throwing her prayer carpet in the air, demonstrating her superiority to Hasan, Rābi‘ah consoled him, “what you did a fish can do. And what I am doing a fly can do. The real work is other than both of these.” Through the medium of his narrative, ‘Attār indicates that the “real work” is the annihilation of self in seeking proximity to God. This is the authentic task and goal of the spiritual life, and it requires exclusive attention to God, untainted by outward or secondary concerns that distract the seeker from God and inevitably strengthen — rather than annihilate — some aspect of the ego self. At the heart of Rābi‘ah’s faith and behind her acts of worship and service was her selfless devotion to God for His sake alone. It was this central reality that gave her words and actions sincerity and that made anything less appear, in comparison, as hypocrisy or empty asceticism. ‘Attār relates many exchanges between Rābi‘ah and other associates, Hasan in particular, that reveal her superiority precisely on this point.

Rābi‘ah often rebuked Hasan for outward shows of religiosity and spiritual prowess. Once while passing Hasan’s
house, she was splashed by water falling from the rainpipe. Looking for the source of this water, she found Hasan, sitting on his rooftop and shedding a river of tears. “O Hasan!” she scolded, “if these tears are from the tenderness of your nafs (ego), keep your tears until your heart becomes a sea, so that if you seek your heart in that sea, you [can] not find it except in the keeping of a King Omnipotent.” Hasan found her words heavy, and one day when he encountered Rābi‘ah on the banks of the Euphrates, he threw his prayer carpet on the water and challenged her to perform two ra‘kats of prayer there. Perceiving the egotism of his words, Rābi‘ah replied, “O teacher! In the market of the world you offer what belongs to the next world? [If you want to do so] it should be in a way that members of the same group would be unable to do the same.” So saying, she threw her prayer carpet in the air — a station that Hasan had not reached — and called, “‘O Hasan come here, so that you will not be hidden from the eyes of the people.”

Despite Rābi‘ah’s unsettling frankness, Hasan often came to her for spiritual conversation and counsel. Once he asked her to tell him something “‘from that knowledge which has not come through learning or hearing, but has [been] poured in your heart without the interference of people.’” She replied,

I had spun a [span] of ropes to sell [in order] to buy some food. I sold it for two dirhams, and kept one coin in this hand and another in the other hand, because I was afraid that if I kept both of them [together in one hand] they would become a pair and deviate me. This was my [spiritual] earning today.

‘Attār includes a poetic rendition of this conversation in Manṭiq al-ṭayr, afterwards describing the woes of the worldly man who spends his life amassing wealth, yet when his treasure is secured he promptly dies, leaving the heir “his legal right to strife and misery.” ‘Attār scolds, “You sell the Simorgh for this gold; its light has made your heart a candle in the night! We seek
the Way of perfect Unity, where no one counts his own prosperity..."\(^{81}\)

Rābi‘ah thus reminded Hasan that the Way to truth was purification from the world. Yet she also taught him that purification from the world was more than limiting his appetite and desires. One day Rābi‘ah had gone to the mountain and herds of wild animals gathered around her. Hasan appeared and the animals ran away. He was angry and asked her, "Why did they run from me but had friendship with you?" She asked him what he had eaten that day, to which he replied onions fried in fat. "You have eaten their fat," she remarked, "How should they not run away from you?"\(^ {82}\) In Ḩāfiṣ-nāmah ‘Attār repeats this conversation, adding an admonishment to the reader:

Thou wert told to purify thy soul and thou art always cultivating thy body.

Thou shouldst always respect the inner reality and yet thou dost nought but serve the outward appearance.

Someone said: "Set fire to thy self. When thou hast eaten a morsel, sit down and be silent."\(^ {83}\)

The reflection of this admonishment on Ḥasan made him appear as a hypocrite, despite his rigorous efforts, his piety and asceticism. He had eaten only a little fat; yet by merely limiting his tastes he had achieved nothing but the outward appearance of asceticism. In search of the "inner reality," the task was to "set fire to thy self," to sever every worldly inclination and desire that veiled the goal of the quest, the true object of desire.\(^ {84}\)

Rābi‘ah understood that asceticism was not a goal in itself but the means of attaining the goal of proximity to God. Furthermore, for Rābi‘ah spiritual purification extended beyond abstinence from material things; it meant complete detachment from outward and secondary concerns. She once sent Ḥasan three
things: some candle wax, a sewing needle and a strand of hair. She advised him, “Like wax, burn to give light to the world; like a needle, be naked and constantly working; once you have [attained] both of these qualities, be like a hair so that your efforts should not turn to null.” Using humble, ordinary objects Rabi‘ah counselled Hasan “to burn” and “work,” to attend to the spiritual task before him; yet like wax that is consumed in the fulfillment of its task, like the needle that remains naked when working and when its work is done, and like the hair that is almost imperceptible due to its thinness, he must refrain from outward show or secondary reward if he wished for his efforts to reach their spiritual fruition. Hasan once exclaimed, “O Rabi‘ah what earned you this rank?” She replied, “It is because I lost all ‘founds’ in Him.” “How do you know/find Him?” Hasan asked. “It is you who know by how, we know without how,” she answered. The sincerity of Rabi‘ah’s words and the authenticity of her spiritual knowledge — knowledge that was poured in her heart directly, without the interference of people — derived from selflessness, from the complete absence of ego desire, of concern, even of theory or theological concept in between her heart and God. After spending all day and night talking to Rabi‘ah about the path and the truth (tartqah va haqīqah), Hasan realized, “When I got up I found myself an indigent [insincere] one and her the sincere one.”

Rabi‘ah and another spiritual associate, Sufyān al-Thawrī, were once engaged in conversation. Sufyān said, “I cannot say anything for you. You say something for me.” She replied, “You are a good man, except that you love the world.” Surprised, Sufyān asked, “What is that?” “Narration of traditions,” she answered. “Attār adds, “meaning [even] this is a dignity.” Sensing the truth of her words, Sufyān implored, “God be satisfied with me.” Yet to Rabi‘ah, this statement also lacked sincerity. “Are you not ashamed to seek the satisfaction of One with Whom you are not satisfied?” she questioned, implying that the servant who loved anything besides God had not found His Sole Reality to be sufficient. Yet it seemed that Sufyan’s insincerity sprang precisely from this problem; he had not yet
found God’s Sole Reality. And so he was tempted to incline towards something short of God Himself. Sufyān, like Ḥasan, had not completely conquered his desire for outward show and enjoyed the worldly esteem that came from being a man of religious learning. Instead of public esteem and the outward appearance of knowledge, Rābiʿah sought true knowledge, knowledge that was inward and hidden from public view. “An ʿārif,” she said, “is he who asks God for a heart. When God gives him the heart, he returns it right away to God so that it is guarded in His grasp, and is veiled from people in His veil.”

Rābiʿah’s sincerity and her spiritual superiority rested on her direct experience of God. Hearing Sāliḥ al-Murri repeat, “Whoever knocks on a door, eventually it will open,” she remarked, “How long will you say that... when did He close it?” Likewise, her sincerity arose from her inner state rather than outward action. ʿAttār relates that Ibrāhīm ibn Adham journeyed fourteen years to get to the Kabah, performing two rakʿāts (units of ritual prayer) for each step. When he arrived at Mecca, he found that the Kabah was not there and he was informed by a voice that it had gone to welcome a woman. Ibrāhīm was intensely jealous and when he saw the woman, Rābiʿah, he asked, “Rābiʿah what is this fervour you have caused in the world?” She said, “You have caused fervour, you who have taken fourteen years to get to the house.” “Yes!” replied Ibrāhīm. “I have crossed the desert in fourteen years in prayer.” “You crossed [the desert] in namāz ([in the state of] prayer),” she said, “and I did it in niyāz (in the state of [spiritual supplication and] need).”

For Rābiʿah, sincerity came from one’s inward state, not outward statement: from the heart, not the tongue. Once when she heard a man lamenting “What sorrow!” she replied, “Say this: what lack of sorrow! For if you had [true] sorrow you would not have the courage to breath.” Another time she said “Asking for forgiveness by the tongue is the work of liars. If we repent, we are in need of another repentance.” Yet she also taught that if God first granted the desire and will to repent so that repentance proceeded — not from the tongue — but from a sin-