1. Introduction

Over the centuries, great Sufis gifted with spiritual vision have inspired those who encountered them. Their example led to the foundation of spiritual orders that have exerted immense influence on Muslim life and history. Their reflections and poetry have fired the imagination of millions throughout the Muslim world to the present day.

Since the emergence in the second/eighth century of the mystical movement that later came to be known as *taṣawwuf*, Sufi orders have taken myriad shapes and evolved diverse forms of expressions over time and space. Sufi practice, for example, has ranged from ecstatic movement in dance to meditative exercises in quiet solitude. Sufi thought and literature extend from the intense devotional lyrics and spicy aphorisms of poets such as Jalal al-Din Rumi to the elaborate philosophical constructs of individuals such as Ibn al-'Arabi. The fountainhead of Sufism is the promise of enlightenment that offers divinely-graced vision, moral clarity and an encompassing love. These blessings are granted to the individual as a result of a journey within. To the extent that this relies on direct experience rather than cogitation, the mystic journey is anti-rational, and it questions the foundations of standard ethics and ordinary conceptions of reality. Finally, this enlightenment speaks of a dissolution of the very self in a union with the divine that words cannot easily convey.

The role of Sufi orders in the formation of Islamic civilisation from Morocco to Indonesia is fairly well documented. For centuries they were among the most important institutions in Muslim society. They served as centres of learning and poetic creativity, as well as of healing and sanctity. In urban centres these orders were able to recommend spiritual exercises to traders in the bazaar. In rural areas the orders linked trade with spiritual succour and made peace along the fraught boundaries of tribal groupings. In such ways the orders helped knit

together vast segments of Islamic civilisation. It may be difficult for many Muslims today to imagine an age when Sufi orders were a pillar of their societies, thoroughly versed in Islamic law, and infusing Muslim piety with inner-directed ethics. For example, until the 19th century, in many parts of the Muslim world, membership in a Sufi order was almost as commonplace as allegiance to a particular school of law.

In recent history, especially in the last century and a half, the Sufis have come under attack for detaining Muslims from grappling with the modern world and from addressing issues of justice and poverty. They have been accused of holding the poor and the ignorant in the thrall of shrines, superstition, other-worldly poetry, and magical and ecstatic practices, at the cost of sober intervention in community problems. Various Muslim groups and organisations blame Sufis for having smuggled into a 'pure' Islam innovations that paralysed reason, imagination and action, and by so doing have contributed to the defeat of the Muslims by the Western empires. Today, many Sufi orders, particularly in the Middle East, have been pushed to the margins of society, surviving mainly in rural areas and among rural migrants in urban settlements.

Modern thought, too, cautions against the mystic impulse. Some contemporary thinkers see in it the temptation to regress from the complex challenges of adult life into child-like certainty. According to such critiques, mysticism gives comfort to those who reject the place of reason in favour of emotion, and shuns the painful choices of daily life. There are numerous examples in current Sufi practices that resonate with such criticisms. In many parts of the Muslim world Sufi dances and chanting are a far cry from the contemplative practices of the great Sufis of the past. Too many Sufis today continue practices such as writing talismanic inscriptions to ward off evil spirits. That is why some Sufis in the West, while upholding the pristine world of quietude and seclusion, poetry and personal enlightenment associated with classical Sufism, reject Sufi orders as forms of organisation contaminated by materiality. The contrast is striking between the spiritual freshness of Jalal al-

Din Rumi's poetry and the crowding that occurs today around his tomb in Konya. The mausoleum has become a museum-cum-shrine, and the whirling dervishes are now packaged as a travelling show. Yet the poetry attributed to him says, 'After we are gone, seek us not in our graves but in the hearts of good people.' These criticisms raise a number of questions about the mystic quest:

(i) To what extent does the mystical path necessitate a withdrawal from the world? Is there a contradiction on the one hand between the demands of contemplation – which include humility, submission and deep suspicion of ordinary human motivation – and on the other the demands of an active, responsible life in the world – which include making difficult choices and exercising one's will to change one's circumstances as well as those of others?
(ii) Is Sufism condemned to serving either as a repository of magical practices among the disenfranchised, or as a personal, individual escape for those better-off in modern life who are merely disillusioned with a life of action and ambition?
(iii) Can Sufism play a role in the modernisation of Muslim society?
(iv) To what extent is the mystical path antagonistic to the demands of the intellect?

This essay is an attempt to grapple with some of these issues, and raise yet others, by examining the situation of the Ismailis of Iran. It is a case-study of apeople whose actions and ideas question, at the very least, the notion that Islamic mysticism is necessarily other-worldly and passive. The community in question brings into focus the dynamic potential of Sufism's other-worldly ideas. While the essay will suggest that there is a place for mystic insight in the very encounter of Muslims with the modern world, such a place has its limits. Indeed, it questions the notion that Muslim life entails submission to any monolithic set of beliefs and practices, be they mystical or legalistic in their formulation.