

Chapter 1

Setting the scene

Across Britain today and in various other parts of the non-Muslim world, small groups of committed individuals meet regularly to study in devotion the challenging writings of Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240), an Andalusian sufi (mystic) widely recognised as the most influential thinker of the second half of Islamic history. This book is the story of their encounter with him. For many, this began during the 'sixties' (often projected as the years 1963–73), when Ibn 'Arabi was discovered by counterculture youth in Britain searching for new spiritual ways. He had arrived there in the company of a descendant of the Ottoman elite, and their joint legacy is the movement that calls itself Beshara. Since the mid-1970s, Beshara has offered substantial courses in 'esoteric education' drawing on Ibn 'Arabi's teaching, through a dedicated school. Those who have studied there make up an extensive international network of individuals personally committed to this teaching and to the actualisation of the Beshara vision.

Through the story of Beshara many other stories can be told, and some of them are unfolded in this book. There is the broad canvas of transformations in the religious–spiritual landscape of the advanced societies of the post-war West: these changes first appeared prominently during the sixties, and have grown significantly since. There is the specific story of sufism in the West: associated with love, beauty and an inclusive humanism, this has long been popular among Westerners (in contrast with suspicions of Islam as dogmatic, rigidly legalistic and exclusivist). And finally there is the particular encounter between sufism (and Ibn 'Arabi) and the New Age.

The story of Beshara and Ibn 'Arabi also raises many questions concerning the future, at a time of tension between 'Islam' and the 'West', and of heightened global interaction and exchange. What does it suggest concerning trends in attitudes towards sufism and Islam in Western contexts? Given that its story includes a successful encounter with a majority Muslim setting, might it also shed light on possible future trends in Muslim attitudes? What does it reveal concerning the current state of sufism and its possible future? This book offers some answers to such questions.

Two fields of study are bridged here: religion and spirituality in the modern West, and historical and modern Islamic and sufi traditions. We have endeavoured to avoid the assumption of detailed specialist knowledge of either, and provide a basic introduction to key studies of recent religious change in the West (including New Age studies), as well as sufism and the life and thought of Ibn 'Arabi. The hope is that readers of diverse backgrounds will find adequate guidance and something of interest in the full notes, where references range from introductory surveys to specialist works.

In the first part of this chapter we briefly outline the historical context out of which Beshara emerged. We profile sixties Britain, discuss the counterculture associated with the period, and introduce the phenomena of New Religious Movements (NRMs) and the New Age. Here and in the subsequent introduction to sufism and sufi spirituality in the modern West, we introduce working definitions of terms and concepts used in the volume.¹ We should point out here that NRMs, the New Age and the sufi presence in the West all predated and outlived the sixties. We draw on analyses of these phenomena as they appeared later in the twentieth century whenever this lends greater clarity (with the necessary qualifications). We also draw on some discussions of the USA/Western Europe where this illuminates the British case.

Having thus set the scene, we introduce Beshara as a movement of sufi spirituality that emerged in sixties Britain, and pose specific questions to map out the agenda for study. We then introduce Ibn 'Arabi as the movement's major inspiration, and clarify the notion of the Oneness of Being attributed to him. (This brief treatment is supplemented with suggested further readings on his life and thought in Appendix 2.) Finally, we discuss methodological orientations and the methods of data collection adopted, addressing questions raised by the use of certain types of sources and data.

Sixties Britain as historical context

Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me.
 I'm not sleepy and there is no place I'm going to ...
 Take me on a trip upon your magic swirling ship,
 My senses have been stripped, my hands can't feel to grip,
 My toes too numb to step, wait only for my boot heels to be wanderin'.
 I'm ready to go anywhere, I'm ready for to fade
 Into my own parade, cast your dancing spell my way,
 I promise to go under it.

Bob Dylan, *Mr. Tambourine Man*

The counter culture ... insists that we are men, not things ... It defines the proper (human) categories which make us holy. It is unique in its promise that humanity can finally be human.

Frank Musgrove, p. 19

When the Moon is in the Seventh House and Jupiter aligns with Mars
 Then peace will guide the planets and love will steer the stars
 This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius ...
 Harmony and understanding, sympathy and trust abounding
 No more falsehoods or derisions, golden living dreams of visions
 Mystic crystal revelation and the mind's true liberation.

The Fifth Dimension, *Aquarius*

For people of a certain age, memories of the 1967 Summer of Love in San Francisco, Woodstock in 1969 or the Glastonbury Festivals of the early 1970s will never fade. The significance of the social and cultural developments

symbolised by such events reached far beyond the lives of those directly involved, however, and scholars, the media and cultural commentators on both sides of the Atlantic have periodically revisited them. In Britain in the summer of 2004, for example, cultural events were organised to debate the achievements and merits of the landmark decade of the 1960s, and to evaluate the legacy for posterity of this moment in history. It was a time that brought substantial and long-lasting change to the country's identity, thanks to certain significant social and cultural transformations. One social-cultural historian of twentieth-century Britain has construed the period *c.*1958–*c.*1973 as a 'cultural revolution', in which the dominant features were 'self-expression, participation, joy and release from the social controls which had held British society in thrall since Victorian times.'² Dislocations took place in spheres of class, race, relations between the sexes, and relations between the youthful and middle-aged. The youthful emerged as the vanguard in the significant and influential minority comprising what has been widely dubbed the 'counterculture' of the time.³ It stood for human, egalitarian values against the premises of a society built on economic growth, and was marked by a distrust of authority and suspicion of leadership.⁴ Some sociologists have suggested that counterculture youth threw into stark relief the constitutive developments of modernity. They thus embodied a social and existential 'homelessness', generated by the impact of modernisation and its institutions on consciousness and social life in modern societies.⁵

The counterculture evinced certain major orientations, reflecting for those involved the outcome of the individual encounter with the structures of the modern technological–bureaucratic world. There was a bid for liberation from the controls and limitations of primary institutions experienced as coercive and repressive, and radical disillusionment with the 'mainstream' meanings and values they provided. This encompassed traditional religion, its plausibility having in any case been thrown into crisis by the undermining effects of pluralisation, itself a product of the processes of modernisation. In their homelessness, counterculture youth undertook of necessity a turn to the self as the only remaining source of meaning and significance.⁶ One major counterculture orientation thus found expression in a search for ways of life that nurture 'the authentic self.'⁷ The idea of pursuing this by taking the 'journey to the East' indeed became so popular that the countercultural interest in Eastern traditions (religions of the 'Orient') was one of the most striking features of the sixties.

As hinted at above, changes in patterns of religious belief were not confined to counterculture youth: they were more broadly evident in the industrialised societies of the post-war West. In Britain traditional patterns associated with institutional religion declined significantly, especially from 1960 (measured as ritual participation and institutional attachment). This suggested a future based on an 'empty church' scenario.⁸ It also encouraged a confident mood among sociologists convinced that the death-bell had begun to toll for religion in the advanced societies of the West (as it would, eventually, in other

societies).⁹ At the same time, however, new forms of religious expression began to proliferate, leading to a new level of religious diversity in British society. Such developments added to the mounting evidence that was eventually to confound those who had predicted the inevitable demise of religious belief and life, based on their confidence in the secularisation thesis.¹⁰ The new forms of religious expression in Britain included groups which sociologists describe as NRMs.¹¹ NRMs are groups that are religious (insofar as they offer an answer to some of the ultimate questions traditionally addressed by religions), and that have been founded in their present form and cultural environment since 1945.¹² The counterculture served as a significant catalyst in the emergence of NRMs, and furnished an important recruitment base: thus many came to prominence during the sixties. Dubbed 'neo-Oriental' NRMs,¹³ a good number of them specifically answered to the countercultural 'turn East'.¹⁴

In the wider society, interest in the phenomenon of NRMs was mostly framed at first in terms of social deviance, when some groups emerged as a social problem.¹⁵ Sociologists have largely driven the academic study of NRMs since: combined with psychologists and scholars of religious studies, they have mapped the field through a voluminous literature.¹⁶ This literature elucidates the profiles and motives of NRM-joiners from the baby-boomer generation (born just after the end of World War II and forming the young adults of the counterculture), and later generations. A typical joiner has been young (often in their twenties), white, better educated, from a middle- to upper middle-class household, and equally likely to be female as male.¹⁷ A major attraction for joiners has been the emphasis in many NRMs of a specifically experiential religiosity, striking a chord with a search for 'an intense experience of the self' and a direct, personal encounter with the transformative sacred.¹⁸ It has typically taken the form of a mystical monism based on the notion that the divine can be found within, a principle found in the mystical traditions of all major religions (but often conflated with Indian traditions). This emphasis is coupled with practices that lead to an experience of union with the sacred/ultimate reality, during which the 'ordinary' self is transcended. It should be clear from this that many NRMs offered joiners 'spirituality' as opposed to 'religion'. The distinction between the spheres denoted by these terms had been long in the making, but it came into particularly sharp focus during the sixties (and has gained further prominence since).¹⁹ Alongside these spiritual offerings, the leader/teacher/guru institution proved an important pull factor for many joiners. It not only responded to their search for leaders with authentic charisma,²⁰ but also to their implicit yearning for representations of authority in a culture marked by growing uncertainty.²¹ The fellowship and supportive community provided by NRMs also had evident appeal for the 'homeless minds' generated by modernity.²²

Sociologists of religion disagree on the cultural significance of NRMs for Western societies. Their interpretations tend to coincide with the broad lines of the debate on the secularisation thesis. Based on a projection of

secularisation as 'a self-limiting process that gives rise to religious revivals',²³ some see these groups as 'the vanguard of a revival of the sacred in the modern world', pushing back the frontiers of secularisation. Others see them as 'epiphenomenal symptoms' of a further stage in the ongoing secularisation/privatisation of religion in the societies of Western Europe and the USA, positing them as evidence of the continuing decline in religious vitality and influence there.²⁴ Yet others see them as symptomatic of significant shifts in religious sensibilities and orientations in the West.²⁵ Taking the case of the USA since the 1960s, Wuthnow has demonstrated that Americans increasingly turned from a religious life marked by a spirituality of 'dwelling' (based on identification with a geographically fixed community), to one of 'seeking', liberated from many traditional constraints and reflecting a new understanding of freedom partly shaped by the civil rights movement.²⁶ A new religious environment was taking shape at this time, marked by a historically unique emphasis on freedom of choice, which fuelled the spiritual quest and encouraged seekers to make up their own minds in the marketplace of ideas and lifestyles, paying attention to their inner feelings. The upsurge of interest in spirituality among Americans during the late 1960s was further informed by a positive regard for diversity and personal exploration, such that people could move freely among different lifestyles and worldviews. The success of NRMs in the USA at this time, beneficiaries of these changes in the country's religious culture, served as an important indicator of underlying trends that would gain in scope as the twentieth century progressed.²⁷

The emergence of the sixties' counterculture in the USA and Western Europe not only fuelled the development of NRMs, but also saw the expansion of the New Age. Those who have studied it have pointed to the difficulty in identifying, describing and delimiting this phenomenon, which seems to elude any universally accepted definition.²⁸ For the purposes of our historical discussion, it is necessary first to distinguish between the sixties, or counterculture, New Age, and what has been described as the New Age Movement (NAM). The latter term designates specifically a recognisable 'movement' into which the counterculture New Age (and its antecedents) crystallised during the 1980s.²⁹ Recent analyses of this movement from the 1980s onwards (better informed by virtue of their vantage point) can illuminate the sixties New Age, given important continuities in content and orientation (notwithstanding certain differences that emerged during the 1970s).³⁰ There are in fact still relatively few scholarly studies of the NAM from a detached viewpoint.³¹ At the same time, the eclectic diversity that comprises it presents a challenge to discerning a single worldview or underlying vision.³² Heelas' 1996 study advances one understanding of this vision, and the characteristic themes and attitudes that flow from it. The basic working concept of the New Age adopted in the present volume, whether in the context of the sixties or beyond, has been influenced by this.³³ It is important to bear in mind that not all the emphases identified by Heelas (and others who have studied the New Age) are necessarily present, or manifest to the same degree, in every New

Ager/New Age group. Where present, they are also subject to considerable variation. Defining New Age themes are set out in what follows, using italics to highlight key concepts.

The most pervasive and significant motif of the New Age, according to Heelas,³⁴ is the notion that the person is, in essence, spiritual, based on the monistic assumption that 'the Self is sacred' and producing a characteristic '*Self-spirituality*', the capital S indicating the true, 'higher' self. Positing inner spirituality as the key to moving from everything that is wrong with life to all that is right, New Agers consider it essential for the individual to move beyond the socialised self (the 'ego', 'lower self', 'intellect' or 'mind'). This enables a shift to a new realm of being which constitutes the authentic self and human nature, and represents perfection (as well as helping to change the world into a better place). New Age spiritual disciplines and practices furnish paths to the ultimate within, and by applying these New Agers become aware of what they are (the essential), and what they are not (that part of them which belongs to the artifices of society and culture).³⁵

Flowing from this '*Self-spirituality*', there is a strong tendency for New Agers to be 'epistemological individualists'³⁶ who insist that, first and foremost, truths come by way of personal experience.³⁷ Accordingly, all voices of authority other than the self must ultimately be mediated by way of inner experience. The New Age is thus in large part quite radically *detraditionalised* or in other ways *anti-authoritarian*.³⁸ Voices of authority rejected include those associated with established traditions and orders: this extends even to a rejection of 'beliefs' as such. Significant consequences arise for attitudes towards religion. In the New Age, it is effectively replaced by teachers 'whose primary job is to set up "contexts" to enable participants to experience their [own] spirituality and authority.'³⁹ Religion is associated for New Agers with 'the traditional; the dead; the misleading, the exclusivistic.'⁴⁰

The *radical, unmediated individualism* of the New Age manifests in the notion that the individual serves as his or her own guide, in place of tradition and beliefs. The self thus represents an internalised locus of authority, producing a characteristic New Age '*Self-ethic*.'⁴¹ This emphasis goes hand in hand with the fact that freedom is a cardinal New Age value, involving liberation from the past, the traditional and the 'ego', but also freedom to live a life expressing all that it is to be 'truly human.'⁴² By linking the self directly with the cosmos (and thus tending to bypass society and history), its acute individualism leads the New Age ultimately to employ the cosmic scenario, as Campbell puts it, 'purely as a backcloth or setting for the personal drama of the self.'⁴³ The individual self thus emerges as 'the very centre and hub of the New Age world-view.'⁴⁴

New Agers are *perennialists*. As the external realm of traditional belief instils little or no faith in them, they can dismiss apparently significant differences between religious traditions as the result of ego-operations and historical-cultural contingencies. What matters instead is the inner reality at the heart of the religious domain as a whole. New Agers go beyond traditions as

normally conceived 'to find – by way of experience – the inner, esoteric core'. Hence they can and do draw on traditions, discerning their gnosis or experiential knowledge in detraditionalised fashion, while 'bypassing their explicit authoritative doctrines, dogmas and moral codes'.⁴⁵

A fundamental *holism* and the interconnectedness of all things is a central New Age theme,⁴⁶ flowing from the assumption that *reality is monistic in nature*.⁴⁷ Accordingly, the divine, humankind, nature, spirit, mind and body are held to be ultimately and in their deepest essence one (hence the notion of the 'sacred Self'). Ultimate reality is itself spiritual: there is a single universal immanent divine presence, often envisaged as a form of consciousness, energy or intellect, and the ubiquitous spiritual is believed to have a controlling function within all life. Such holistic concepts are presented as alternatives to the dualism and reductionism that are perceived to dominate modern Western society,⁴⁸ illustrating the basis of the New Age, as Hanegraaff suggests, as cultural criticism directed against the dominant values of the modern West.⁴⁹ Holism leads to a general prevalence of unity over diversity in the New Age perspective. Perceptions of the essential unity of humanity are especially common, often expressed in contempt for nationally and ethnically differentiated modes of being.⁵⁰

Two final characteristics must be mentioned. First, New Agers believe that their alternative spiritual worldview is supported, even confirmed, by *the newest results of scientific research*.⁵¹ Second, they presume *the reality of spiritual evolution* (this presumption lay behind the original proclamation of a New Age), issuing in a highly optimistic worldview based on perceptions of the present age as a time of cosmic spiritual awakening and advancing enlightenment.⁵²

To return to the sixties, it has been suggested that this period witnessed 'the most significant turn to inner spirituality to have taken place during modernity',⁵³ bound up with the basic assumption of the developing counterculture that people should be free to express their 'authentic nature'. The youth often used ad hoc resources in their pursuit of Self-spirituality at this time,⁵⁴ but their search also found growing expression in newly emerging communities, centres and neo-Oriental NRMs.⁵⁵ Fascination with Eastern spirituality came to the fore in Britain with accounts of The Beatles and some of The Rolling Stones visiting the Mahareshi Mahesh Yogi of Transcendental Meditation fame in India in 1968.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, through its theme song *Aquarius*, the most well-known lines of which are cited above, the hit London musical *Hair* famously proclaimed that the New Age was dawning.⁵⁷ Here as elsewhere, the New Age was widely conceptualised in terms of the Age of Aquarius, destined to supplant the Age of Pisces.⁵⁸ Perceiving the particular qualities of the zodiacal Aquarius gradually emerging around them, many counterculture New Agers felt vindicated in their convictions.⁵⁹ A general sense of inexorable change predominated with a feeling that, though the outcome was yet unclear, a better way of life was dawning, reflecting a fundamental reorientation of human self-understanding and values.⁶⁰

Sufism and sufi spirituality in the modern West

[For pre-modern Muslim societies] the multifarious activities that we subsume under the terms *Sufism* and *Islam* were not spheres of existence separate or separable from religious life in general. It would not have been possible to formulate the statement 'Sufism has nothing to do with Islam' prior to the nineteenth century.

Carl Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, p. xv

[T]he lecture hall was almost empty. A few loyal souls had shown up ... But the vast majority of the seats were unclaimed. Esfandi had for some reason entitled his lecture 'Fire and Surrender in the Islamic Way', as if not remembering, or even caring, that Islam was hardly a popular subject around here [Santa Barbara, CA]. If he'd substituted the word 'Sufi', there'd have been blondes in the back row.

Pico Iyer, p. 218

Defining sufism is not easy.⁶¹ The term and the concept it is used to designate are highly contested, and insiders and outsiders disagree among themselves and with each other as to what it is.⁶² It is a reasonable claim that most of those involved in sufism today (and those who study it) understand it as an intrinsic part of the Islamic religious tradition, reflecting continuity with historical realities. Many Western scholars have narrowly equated it with the 'esoteric' or 'mystical' core of Islam, existing parallel with its 'exoteric' aspect, which is upheld through observance of the revealed law (sharia).⁶³ However, it can legitimately be projected more simply as 'the interiorization and intensification of Islamic faith and practice.'⁶⁴ As such, and as it has been projected by the great historical sufi theoreticians themselves, it is the beating heart of traditional Islamic religion and piety, from which it cannot be separated.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, many Muslims today consider sufism the chief internal threat to Islam, and their polemics aim precisely to separate it from the religion. These efforts represent a recapitulation of attempts by its opponents at different points in Islamic history to denounce certain sufi forms, teachings and practices as illegitimate, and extrinsic to the tradition.⁶⁶

The same insistence that it had 'no intrinsic' relation to Islam (or only the most tangential one) was a central characteristic of sufism as 'discovered' two hundred years ago by orientalists. They presented it as an abstract mystical philosophy of possibly external origin, disconnected from Islamic scripture, law and ritual and detached from its profoundly important social context.⁶⁷ Many of the assumptions underlying this orientalist image of sufism survive in the West today. This is the case in scholarship and popular perceptions, and among those who have adopted sufi resources as the matrix of their spiritual quest, or a source of inspiration in this. At the same time, other scholars and practitioners of sufism in the contemporary West underline its Islamic context in doctrinal, legal, ritual and sociohistorical terms.

Alongside Indian traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism,⁶⁸ from the late nineteenth century the tradition of sufism attracted the attention of Western

intellectuals interested in Eastern spirituality. During the twentieth century it gained appeal, and established a presence in the Western arena of alternative religions and spirituality. In recent years, sufism has increasingly caught the popular Western imagination, as suggested by the observation, cited above, made by a character in a novel by Pico Iyer.⁶⁹ Expressions of sufism in the West have received relatively little scholarly attention, when compared with other dimensions of the Islamic experience.⁷⁰ There have been some recent attempts to bring coherence to study of the field by tracing the history of sufism in the West and developing ways of understanding its great diversity there.⁷¹ Studies tend to converge upon a twofold typology differentiating between expressions that consider sufism an integral part of the Islamic religion and those that do not.⁷² Those in the first category may make concessions to the Western context, perhaps through a gradualist approach to their followers' practice of the Islamic ritual prescriptions. They may also focus more on their specifically sufi identity and teaching, rather than the associated Islamic ones. Nevertheless, they can be located squarely within the sphere of mainstream Islamic belief and practice.⁷³ In contrast, elements of the second type de-emphasise the Islamic source and content of their sufi identity and teaching. They tend to favour a perennialist outlook based on the belief that there is a universal, eternal truth underlying all religions, located in their mystical core, which ultimately renders the external shell unimportant. Accordingly, they do not stress (or even require) the embrace and practice of Islam by their followers.⁷⁴

In order to reflect their respective emphases and for the sake of simplicity, these two types of sufism in the West are described in this volume as 'Islamic' and 'universal',⁷⁵ while keeping in mind that the boundaries between them can be blurred. Some Islamic sufi groups have thus evinced a context-driven elasticity that can appear to propel them into the other category, while questions remain as to whether some universal sufi groups harbour the embrace of Islam by their followers as a long-term goal.⁷⁶ Mutual perceptions and relations among practitioners of these two forms of sufism are often problematic. Some Islamic sufis denounce universal sufis for practising 'pseudo-sufism', denying that a wholesome spiritual path is possible in the absence of Islam.⁷⁷ For their part, the implicit claim of universal sufis to return to the 'essence' of sufism suggests that other forms (read 'Islamic') entail effort wasted on inessentials.⁷⁸

Building on a dichotomy thus evident on the ground, a straightforward typology of Islamic and universal sufi figures in the West that also takes into account their religious and cultural provenance is provided in Appendix 1, as a basis for the proper situating of our subject. With regard to Islamic sufism, recent scholarship has developed more nuanced approaches to understanding the differences that mark its various expressions from each other.⁷⁹ Described by one scholar as an area that is 'something of a backwater',⁸⁰ universal sufism has generally not attracted the same scholarly attention.⁸¹ As its prominence in the West is increasingly recognised, it is gradually becoming established as a serious subject of study.

It remains to point out that the term ‘sufism/sufi’ is used in this volume to designate all figures and trends that self-describe thus, be these universal, Islamic, contemporary or historical.⁸² This is irrespective of whether other sufis, non-sufi Muslims, opponents of sufism and scholars would agree with this self-description. The term is also applied to those figures and trends that draw substantially on sufi resources without self-describing in terms of sufism. In such cases, and in discussing different forms of sufism in diverse cultural contexts, it seems more appropriate at times to use the term ‘sufi spirituality’, hinting at a distancing from traditional Muslim forms of sufism in doctrinal and organisational spheres.

Beshara as a movement of sufi spirituality

Introducing the Beshara movement

The physical focus of Beshara is its School of Intensive Esoteric Education located near Hawick in the Scottish Borders. Buried in the grounds is its guiding figure, Bulent Rauf (1911–87). Rauf’s lasting contribution was to recruit the legacy of Ibn ‘Arabi by way of response to the spiritual search of counterculture youth he encountered in England from the late 1960s. Since 1975, the School has offered extended residential courses centring on study, work, meditation and spiritual practice. The teaching of Ibn ‘Arabi forms the heart of the study curriculum, and spiritual practices prescribed derive from the Islamic–sufi tradition. The aim is to enable students to realise their potential for perfectibility through existential self-knowledge based on the notion of the ‘Oneness of Being’. Individual self-realisation is situated within a vision of the global unfolding of a new era reflecting a fundamental reorientation of perspective based on universality and unity.

Most of those who have studied at the School establish a relationship with it and join the network of others who have studied there. Returning to society, they nurture and apply the awareness awakened at the School, endeavouring at the same time to serve the ultimate aim of global reorientation through their individual contexts. The wider community that surrounds the School enjoys a distinct internal culture, evincing features that create insider cohesion and support. For example, those who participate in it use internally designated names among themselves. They meet regularly to study together and again on specific dates to join in collective spiritual practice. Many return to the School for intensive ‘refresher’ study. They give financial donations to the School according to their means, and some have bequeathed funds to it by will. Where possible, they publicise its work and introduce interested individuals to it. They have a common worldview, creating shared responses, values and priorities, in spite of different life circumstances. The perspective that underpins Beshara shapes their self-perception and understanding of the world, and they often pass this on to their children, who as young adults might

also attend the School, producing a degree of intergenerational continuity of involvement.

While the School is effectively its pivot, a distinct movement thus emanates from and supports this central institution. We designate it the 'Beshara movement'. For reasons that will become clear later, we eschew the term 'membership/member' in favour of the looser term 'association/associate' to describe participation in it. As used here, the term associate designates an individual who has typically (but not always) completed a Beshara course and remains active in the movement, in the sense of continuing to believe in and support its worldview and goals. They may spend spells at the School, serve full-time as staff for specific periods there, attend study groups at home, or participate in the coordination of relevant activities.⁸³

Key questions; scope of this volume

Beshara has not been subjected to significant independent analysis,⁸⁴ although both the movement and Rauf have been referred to in passing in some of the literature on sufism in the West.⁸⁵ Rauf is typically introduced in the context of discussions of an early associate of his by the name of Tim (Reshad) Feild, as the latter's 'teacher', and most treatments highlight the perceived Mevlevi connections of Feild, Rauf and Beshara.⁸⁶ Some mention the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society (MIAS), established under the auspices of Beshara, as an example of organisations in the West that disseminate information relating to sufism, but they do not always register the connection between it and Beshara.⁸⁷ Literature on NRMs in the West generally fails to mention the movement, or mentions it only in passing.⁸⁸

This volume provides a detailed description of Beshara. It adds an original case study to the relatively limited literature on sufism/sufi spirituality in the modern West, and to the few studies of NRMs there that draw on the Islamic–sufi tradition. Given the insatiable interest in anything to do with the contemporary Islamic–Western encounter, it is a timely contribution. However, its relevance extends beyond the specific fields of Islamic and sufism studies, and relations between Islam and the West. The emergence and continued existence of the subject of this volume thus point to broad religious, cultural and sociological issues in contemporary Western societies that continue to provoke lively debate. At the same time, it throws into sharp relief the interface between religion and modern cultural transformations in a global perspective. For example, Beshara's success in one majority Muslim arena exposes the impact of changes brought by modernisation and globalisation on religious life in these contexts. Such wider themes form the large backdrop to the volume.

By studying Beshara, it is possible to reflect on approaches to the study of sufism in the modern West more generally. For example, a recent conference asked: 'Are insights on "NRM"s/"New Age" movements relevant to an understanding of contemporary Sufism? Or is there a significant difference

between both types of movement?⁸⁹ It concluded that no strict boundary operates between sufi groups and 'New Age-type movements,' pointing to 'questions of conceptualisation as well as sociological explanation.'⁹⁰ By way of contribution to this debate we ask whether, as a NRM, Beshara can be seen as a part of the New Age. Quantities of literature on sufism and translations of sufi texts stocked by New Age booksellers point to a substantial interest among their customers. At the same time, certain sufis in the West have been willing to cooperate and join in activities with New Agers.⁹¹ Some scholars assume the existence of a relationship between certain expressions of sufism in the West and the New Age, but this has not been investigated systematically or in detail.⁹² We explore this sufi–New Age nexus through a case study spanning over three and a half decades. We examine conceptual and operational affinities, and investigate the approach that shapes New Age appropriations of sufi resources.⁹³ We also explore the potential implications of this nexus for contemporary Western attitudes towards sufism and Islam as its tradition of origin.

The primary interest of this volume is in the realm of tradition and its cultural transmission, adaptation and application in modern contexts. In specific terms, it is in the recruitment of teachings, texts and practices associated with the pre-modern Islamic sufi tradition by elements of the counter-culture in sixties Britain, through the intervention of a Muslim descendant of the Ottoman elite. Investigation of this theme through Beshara is certainly sustainable intellectually. Nonetheless, some associates may take issue with the assumption that the 'Islamic–sufi' dimension is sufficiently defining of their movement's character/worldview to justify this focus. We anticipate and acknowledge their potential objections to this primary aspect in our framing of the subject, which we partly reflect in the volume title. Building on it, we consider how Beshara illuminates the trend of Western sufism it reflects, and explore its possible future prospects.

The internally contested Islamic–sufi dimension of Beshara yields various more detailed research questions.⁹⁴ How do its teachings and approach to spirituality relate to those of traditional sufi thought, and of Ibn 'Arabi, whose school the movement implicitly claims as its spiritual lineage? Which aspects of doctrine and practice associated with Ibn 'Arabi does Beshara perpetuate? How does the movement relate to the defining tradition of Ibn 'Arabi's worldview? In what ways does it perpetuate this tradition, and how does it utilise its major textual sources? To what extent does it depart from the characteristic values and sociocultural attitudes of this tradition? How (if at all) did Rauf's function in Beshara reflect the role of the traditional sufi teacher/guide? How have the various aspects of his function been undertaken since his death? How does the adopted approach compare with traditional sufi approaches to achieving continuity? Through what imagery, style and language is the Beshara vision conveyed? How does this reflect Rauf's own historical–cultural background, and to what extent does it represent a response to the contemporary Western milieu? What, then, is the matrix of cultural forms

through which spiritual teaching and practice take place in Beshara? To what extent and in what ways does Beshara practice reflect traditional elements of Islamic and sufi practice? How do the genres of discourse and methods of communication used by Rauf and Beshara relate to those of traditional sufi spirituality? Are traditional Islamic and sufi understandings of sacred space and its use evident in Beshara? Are the arts and aesthetics used to convey or nurture a sense of the sacred in Beshara, and if so, how does their use relate to traditional Islamic and sufi approaches?

The following chapters reflect on some of these specific lines of investigation. The volume as a whole responds to the key question concerning Beshara and the New Age by elaborating the movement's main features in terms of the context of its formation. Chapter 2 traces its emergence and history, closely following the movement's internal collective memory. Beshara arose out of a syncretic multi-faith centre directed by an English sufi who had encountered Rauf. We map the confluence of trends that led to the centre's formation, exposing the spiritual genealogy of the major figures involved and tracing the gradual crystallisation and preponderance within it of the approach that would characterise Beshara. We examine the consolidation and institutionalisation of the emergent movement, achieved especially through the creation of dedicated schools and an academic society. The distinctive Beshara approach to spiritual education forms the subject of Chapter 3. Here, we examine major study texts prepared for internal use based on Ibn 'Arabi's teaching. We describe residential courses as an integrated framework for spiritual education and explore the School as a purpose-designed facilitating environment. The focus of Chapter 4 is Beshara's guiding figure. We explore Rauf's origins, his family background, formative and possible later influences on him, and his spiritual associations. We characterise his approach as adviser and guide, and evaluate his legacy for the movement.

Chapter 5 sets out the Beshara perspective, and elaborates Rauf's distinctive application of Ibn 'Arabi's teaching in its construction. We consider the movement's perception of the present times, its understanding of its own role in preparing for a new era and its vision of that era. In Chapter 6, we examine the Beshara conceptualisation and practice of the spiritual life, emphasising its perception of the religions and its distinctive spiritual culture, including the relation of the latter to the Islamic-sufi resources on which Rauf drew. Chapter 7 explores the Beshara projection of Ibn 'Arabi. We consider the channels through which the movement brings his teaching (as appropriated by it) to a broader audience, exploring among others the case of the MIAS. We interrogate the characteristic emphases of the image of Ibn 'Arabi projected by Beshara in light of competing projections.

In Chapter 8, we situate Beshara in relation to key themes and questions. We then use the specific case study to explore the possible future of sufism in Western and Muslim arenas. Possible trajectories of universal and Islamic sufism in contemporary Western societies experiencing significant shifts in religiosity are mapped. We turn then to the fate of sufism among certain

sectors of Muslim populations, considering the impacts of modernisation and globalisation in shaping constituencies for a reconstituted sufi spirituality that evinces affinities with motifs and approaches widespread in contemporary Western arenas. Finally, we reflect in an Epilogue on some of the volume's findings and methodological implications.