Arith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) in the past has been characterized as a sufi mystic and theologian—two vocations seemingly at odds with conservation and traditionalism. But in fact he was swayed by the authority in prophetic example and eager to have right practice and pure intention established in the Muslim community. Al-Muḥāsibī’s sufism is no more than a deep-seated religiosity and piety. And his traditionalism is not a mark of narrowmindedness, but a sign of his deep-felt concern to conserve the materials most capable of assuring proper practice and providing authority for the Muslim community. He accepted the divine knowledge present in the Qur’ān. But he also recognized that a common pattern of good practices linked Muslims into a community. Knowledge of any kind was of little use if not joined with the authority derived from practice. So also the Qur’ān needed the prophetic sunnah.

Al-Muḥāsibī contributed to the highly productive effort of conservation in Islam that established an acceptable pattern of behaviour for Muslims appropriate to their goals and dreams. Though there are numerous works to chose from, we have selected the Kitāb al-‘Ilm of al-Muḥāsibī, previously unedited, to exemplify his contribution to Islam as a conservationist. Al-Muḥāsibī spent most of his life in the cities of Baghdad, Basra and Kufa at a time when these centers were most influential. He suffered because of Ḥanbalī hostility for his theological views, but for him theology was not of more consequence than the practical considerations of how to act as a good Muslim. Josef Van Ess has characterized al-Muḥāsibī as follows:

Sein anliegen ist vor allem die Paränese und die Verwirklichung eines sunnagetreuen Lebens ... [Er bekehrte sich] zu jenen pietistischen Kreisen des muḥaddīfūn ... ¹

¹ Die Gedankenwelt des Hārit al-Muḥāsibī (Bonn, 1961), 6-7.

Arabica, Tome xxx, Fascicule 2
In this al-Muḥāsibiy prefigures even men such as al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (392/1002-463/1071). His scholarly output was to assist the student of Hadith in conserving the prophetic materials and understanding them. Without such an effort he believed the law itself would be ruined. His belief is typical of the Piety-minded majority of Marshall G. S. Hodgson, the «Hadith folk», who in their devotion to the practices of the prophet promoted the law and the practice it enacted to a central place for the community. The Khaṭīb himself writes:

If it were not for the concern of the proponents of Hadith to preserve the sunnah and compile them, to trace them from their sources and inspect their routes, then the Shari'ah would have fallen into disuse and its principles would have become inoperative.

The Khaṭīb pursues the work of a Hadith specialist, treating knowledge as Hadith and urging action in accord with it to be truly learned. This is the paraenesis or tarqīb fi al-ʿamal John Wansbrough speaks of so often in his chapter, «Authority». The same holds true in al-Muḥāsibiy's essay, where moral virtue—patterned on the prophet's sunnah—performed without hypocrisy is more central than knowledge. Both thinkers want to urge the reader to good practice modelled on the prophet's.

The subject of knowledge and practice appears repeatedly in Muslim scholarly writing. How the two are related is a matter of frequent debate. Within the mainstream of Muslim thought, scholars tend to an assessment that permitted practice the greater importance. This is confirmed in the work of al-Muḥāsibiy.

ʿIlm and ʿamal are essential and major themes in the early days of Islam, influencing its development and formation. From the start two important questions arose, asking what is knowledge for the Muslim and what shall a Muslim do. The religiously minded may have accepted the divine character of the Qurʾān from the earliest days, but there was much argument about the meaning of this belief. The exact nature of the Qurʾān and of its knowledge was only gradually fixed in the minds of Muslims generally. Both the literal character of the Qurʾān's message and

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2 Kifāyah fi ʿIlm al-Riwayah (Cairo, 1972), 37.
3 The Venture of Islam (Chicago, 1974), I, 386.
4 Kifāyah, 35.