Sixteenth century Spain is the golden age of mysticism. During this century dozens of Christian authors took pen in hand to express the highest mystical sentiments, the most important, of course, being Saint Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. But this was not the only century of mysticism in Spain, for when that country had first been occupied by the Muslims in the eighth century, a significant number of Islamic mystics, called Sufis, appeared. Ibn al-'Arabi represents one of the most important personalities of this earlier development.

Mysticism was a part of Christianity from the very beginning—one has only to think of the book of Revelations and numerous passages from St. Paul. In Islam, the mystic tradition does not appear at once. The God of Muhammad was known more for his transcendent majesty and dominion, but careful readers of the Koran were quick to see that this same God also inspired passages in the Sacred Book which stated that He “was closer to man than the vein of his neck.” 1) This opened the door to a mystical movement within Islam which flowered into Sufism. (The name came from the word for wool, suf, the cloth used for the garments of the Muslim mystic.)

There is no general agreement as to the influences which brought about such a strong mystical tendency within Islam. Some authors believe Iranian ideas are dominant, others look to India or to the Gnosticism of the Hellenized East; nearly everyone admits that Neo-Platonic philosophy provided a context and Christian monasticism, especially as found in Syria, furnished a pattern for Sufi development. 2) The

1) Koran, 50:15.
blending of these various doctrines along with speculation and meditation on the Koran and Hadith, and the Muslim oral traditions within the community itself can all be admitted as playing a significant role. In many ways the multiple origins of Islamic mysticism help explain the diversity found within Sufism.

The Sufi had as his ideal to follow a path (tariqat) which would, through a series of definite stages, bring him to an existential union with God. To learn what he must do required that he place himself in the hands of a master who knew the way himself, a shaikh. Usually starting with exercises which developed from severe ascetic practices, the Sufi was led to a state of recollection where he completely abandoned his will for the sake of God. His life was then to be fused with God's, his consciousness lost in the profundity of Allah. The Sufi doctors taught that the disciple must first go through the experience of "passing away" (fana) before the goal of union with God might be attained. In reaching the state of fana "...the soul is stripped of all its desires, affections and interests, so that in ceasing to will for itself it becomes an object of the Divine Will, that is, the beloved of God." 3)

Once fana had been attained, the soul was rapt in the ecstatic vision of God. All consciousness of the individual personality was dissolved into the reality of God's oneness. In such a state, the Persian mystic Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi could say:

I am not of the East, nor of the West, nor of the land, nor of the sea,
I am not of Nature's mint, nor of the circling heavens.
I am not of earth, nor of water, nor of air, nor of fire,
I am not of the empyrean, nor of the dust, nor of existence, nor of entity...
One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call
He is the first, He is the Last, He is the outward, He is the inward. 4)

The most famous of the sufiis, Husayn al-Hallāj is well remembered for the statement in which he identified himself with God and was crucified for what his orthodox listeners could only believe to the height of blasphemy. In his Ṭawāsīn he had already expressed his feelings on his unity with God, which was the goal of every Sufi,