

A Methodological Analysis of Chittick's Scholarly Tradition

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Introduction

Islamic mysticism and Sufism represent fields that, due to their multilayered and complex nature, have consistently been subject to a wide diversity of definitions, interpretations, and analytical models. This diversity is evident not only among mystics themselves but also among contemporary scholars of mysticism, particularly Orientalists. One of the fundamental factors contributing to this plurality is the diversity of scholarly approaches—an issue that has often been overlooked or insufficiently distinguished from *method* in mystical studies.

Neglecting approach-oriented analysis, especially in the humanities, has resulted in serious methodological problems, including conceptual conflation, unwarranted generalization, and interpretations that remain incongruent with the internal logic of the texts. In reality, mysticism is neither a singular nor a one-dimensional phenomenon; rather, it is a multidimensional reality that may be examined from various perspectives, such as experience, knowledge, language, spiritual practice, doctrine, and symbolic structure. Each of these dimensions becomes foregrounded within the framework of a particular scholarly approach. Accordingly, the multiplicity of mystical studies is largely the product of divergent approaches.

Identifying a researcher's approach requires close attention to the components, propositions, and presuppositions that shape their analytical framework, whether consciously or unconsciously. With particular emphasis on this methodological gap, the present article undertakes an analysis of William Chittick's scholarly tradition. What distinguishes this study from previous research on Chittick is its explicit and systematic focus on *approach-oriented analysis*, rather than a mere thematic or

content-based review of his ideas. By distinguishing among concepts such as method, approach, conception, and intellectual orientation, this article demonstrates that Chittick, through the adoption of an author-centered hermeneutical approach, examines mystical texts not as historical artifacts or philosophical data, but as expressions of a living and meaningful spiritual tradition. This approach illuminates his engagement with concepts such as mysticism, mystical experience, mystical language, and the relationship between religion and Sufism.

Research Findings

The findings of this study indicate that Chittick's approach may be classified as *author-centered hermeneutics*, an interpretive framework that prioritizes understanding the author's intention within its historical, religious, and spiritual context. Chittick maintains that mystical texts can be properly understood only when the interpreter refrains from imposing modern theoretical constructs and instead approaches the text from within the author's own intellectual and spiritual horizon. Accordingly, he affirms the possibility of accessing authorial intention and regards direct and attentive engagement with the text as the most reliable means of entering the mystic's world of meaning.

Within this framework, the *imaginal world* emerges as one of the most fundamental components of Chittick's approach. The imaginal world is an intermediate ontological realm situated between the sensible and the intelligible, wherein mystical unveiling and visionary experience occur. Chittick argues that neglecting this realm leads to a fundamental misunderstanding of mystical language and reduces it to mere literary metaphor or poetic imagination. From his perspective, mystical language reflects experiences of the imaginal realm rather than rhetorical embellishment or symbolic fiction.

Another central component of Chittick's approach is the concept of the *Perfect Human*. In his view, the Perfect Human functions as the complete mirror of the Divine Names and Attributes and serves as an intermediary between the Divine and creation. The cosmos itself likewise possesses a mirror-like quality, functioning as a locus for divine self-disclosure. This mirroring relationship, manifested both in the Perfect Human and in the created order, attains its full significance through its intrinsic connection with the imaginal world.

At defining mysticism, Chittick does not regard it as separate from religion; rather, he conceives of mysticism as the inner dimension of the Sharī'a and the realization of *iḥsān*. Consequently, mystical experience, mystical language, and even the distinction between Sufi and non-Sufi Islam are interpreted within his framework through fidelity to the Qur'an, the Prophetic tradition, and revelatory foundations. Knowledge and love constitute the two essential pillars of the mystical path, which Chittick—drawing on the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī and Rumi—identifies as the primary means of entry into the realm of mysticism.

Conclusion

The diversity and divergence of results in mystical studies reflect the differing approaches adopted by researchers in this field. Identifying a scholar's approach constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for sound research, as it clarifies the

conceptual boundaries, propositions, and key components emphasized by the researcher. William Chittick stands among the most prominent Orientalists in the field of mystical studies, engaging mystical thought through an author-centered hermeneutical approach. This framework operates alongside other interpretive approaches, such as phenomenological, psychological, and mythological models. Chittick's definition of mysticism, his emphasis on the imaginal world, and his articulation of the mirror-like nature of the Perfect Human constitute the core components of his mystical investigations and distinguish his scholarship from that of other researchers. In Chittick's view, Sufism represents sustained attention to the inner dimension of religion. By distinguishing between Sufi Islam and non-Sufi Islam, he attributes their divergence to differing interpretations of the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition.

His insistence on acknowledging the ontological reality of the imaginal world constitutes a crucial methodological principle through which other dimensions of mysticism may be meaningfully examined. Indeed, the imaginal world renders Sufi beliefs and teachings intelligible and provides the necessary framework for analyzing mystical language and related concepts. To such an extent, the neglect of this realm by certain Orientalists has prompted Chittick's critical engagement with their interpretations.

Keywords: William Chittick; Islamic Mysticism and Sufism; Approach; Imaginal World; Perfect Human.