

BOOK REVIEW

Sufism and Society: Arrangements of the Mystical in the Muslim World, 1200–1800

Edited by JOHN J. CURRY and ERIK S. OHLANDER (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 281 pp. Price HB £75.00. EAN 978–0415782234.

This collection of studies on Sufism and Muslim societies in the later medieval and early modern eras adds to the growing body of research aimed at situating the Sufi tradition within a wider socio-historical context. It originated in a roundtable discussion at the Middle Eastern Studies Association (MESA) conference held in Boston in 2006. Naturally, as an edited volume of conference proceedings, the range of individual studies presented is quite broad. The stated aim of the book is to explore the nexus between Sufism and Muslim societies over six centuries. By ‘uncovering and re-imagining new trajectories’, the book also aims to tackle the tendency to ‘over-essentialize’ Sufism, thereby taking it out of its more specific socio-historical contexts.

As one would expect from an edited volume, particularly one with a clear mission to counter the prevalence of academic approaches to Sufism that treat it as a monolithic tradition, the focus is on complexity and diversity rather than uniformity. There is quite a lot of variety from one chapter to the next, covering a wide range of interests and reflecting a broad selection of research methodologies. For the most part, the studies in the volume tend to be focused explorations of specific individuals or settings. Some studies are minor updates on existing research already published elsewhere, while others provide substantial contributions to already established discussions. Most of the papers on aspects of Sufism in the predominantly Turkish-speaking parts of the Ottoman Empire fall into the latter category, a sure sign of the vitality of this field of study. Most noteworthy are the pioneering papers that break new ground by exploring areas that have so far been neglected by researchers: Rıza Yıldırım’s ‘Inventing a Sufi tradition’ demonstrates the direct influence of earlier *futuwwa* practice on the Qizilbash *djem* ritual (ch. 8); Matthew B. Ingalls, ‘Between center and periphery’ (ch. 7) covers an astounding amount of ground in order to demonstrate how different aspects of Sufism were discussed in legal fatwā collections of late-medieval Egypt.

Considering how hard it is to isolate a number of key themes emerging from a collection of varied conference papers, the editors have sensibly kept the title and introduction fairly broad (although the focus of Sean Foley’s chapter on the Naqshbandiyya-Khālidiyya actually extends mostly beyond 1800, into events during the nineteenth century CE). However, this decision has been made at the cost of

clarity, and readers might find it difficult to navigate the book based on the titles given to different sections of the book: 'Historiography', 'Landscapes', 'Doctrine and praxis', 'Negotiations'. While these labels are explained in the introduction, one wonders whether it would have been better to abandon what presumably were the original titles of the panel discussion, replacing them with common threads that emerged out of the discussion. Most of the papers were as much about court power and authority as they were about the society, to the degree that there might have been some justification for the alternative title 'Sufis and Sultans'. One point that echoed throughout the book was that court historiography and Sufi hagiography were often intertwined in this period. In other words, the invisible hierarchy of Sufi saints was often seen as a mirror image of the worldly hierarchy.

Therefore, due to their highly focused nature, most of the chapters in this volume would be of use to specialists in relevant fields, but might be less accessible to readers less familiar with Sufism or Islamic history. Two exceptions to this are Zeynep Yürekli's 'Writing down the feats and setting up the scene: hagiographers and architectural patrons of the Age of Empires' (ch. 5) and Ovamir Anjum's 'Mystical authority and governmentality in medieval Islam' (ch. 4). By presenting a useful overview and comparison of different Sufi cults of saints under the three great 'Gunpowder Empires' of the early modern age, Yürekli's paper is particularly useful for those new to the subject, or looking for a fresh overview before proceeding to the other more specialized studies of the collection. As she demonstrates, not only were there differences in the ways the Safavid, Mughal and Ottoman states patronized Sufi institutions, but also substantial differences in the way the cults of living and dead saints were treated in these contexts. Anjum's chapter, on the other hand, looks at the relationship between medieval Sufism and power from a different angle, namely later medieval Sufism's most famous critic, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328). Drawing as much on Foucault as the Ḥanbalī *shaykh al-islām*, he argues persuasively that there was an anti-elitist drive behind Ibn Taymiyya's attack on later medieval Sufis, while also highlighting the dangers of simply defining Sufism as 'Islamic mysticism' (p. 90 n. 30). In a volume of studies focusing on more localized, contextual approaches, this chapter seems to go against the grain by arguing for a slightly different approach—one which strikes a balance between over-essentializing Sufism and abandoning the idea of a unified tradition altogether. His solution is to approach Sufism as a diverse, but united discourse tying together agents across time and space (p. 76). While his highly original analysis provides much food for thought, it could be argued that his tendency to read the Sufi tradition mainly through a Taymiyyan lens recreates an alternative form of essentialization, only this time from the viewpoint of its critics. Additionally, although one cannot deny that the Sufi teachings on the saintly friends of God could often be abused to justify a stratified and elitist view of Muslim society, it does not account for the popular appeal of Sufism throughout this period and the presence of Sufis on the lower as well as higher fault-lines of social hierarchy. As Side Emre's discussion (ch. 10) of the Halveti Sufi İbrāhīm-i Gülşeni's relationship with the late Mamluk rulers shows, the Sufi *shaykh* and saint could just as often be points of resistance as well as channels for state power. The following chapter

by John Curry (' "The meeting of the two sultans": three Sufi mystics negotiate with the court of Murād III') also demonstrates that the relationship between Sufis and court is not often as straightforward as the conventional theoretical models suggest (his summary of these different models on pp. 223–5 is particularly useful).

Although this could be said about almost any era in pre-modern Islamic history, the editors are justified in identifying as 'understudied' (p. 2) the period between the consolidation of the Sufi tradition in the thirteenth century and the dawn of the modern age in the Muslim world. The state of research on Sufism in the later medieval/early modern age seems almost inexcusable when we consider how better documented it is when compared with the classical period up to the lifetimes of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240). By this period, Islam had reached wide stretches of the globe, and Sufis and Sufi institutions had a pervasive presence in almost every Muslim society. Therefore, it goes without saying that one volume could not comprehensively cover the range of Sufi-related social phenomena (for example, the role of Sufism in Muslim societies 'from the edge' in regions such as Western Africa and Southeast Asia). However, by showcasing of some of the best research in this emerging field, the book has successfully highlighted its importance for future scholarship. Essentially, it has now brought the discussion to the table, hopefully, bringing promise of a lush banquet to come.

Harith bin Ramli
Cambridge Muslim College
E-mail: harithbr@gmail.com
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