

THE STUDY OF SUFISM IN THE WEST

Rukiya Xusanova

a Senior teacher at Karshi State University,

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Introduction. The English word for mystical interpretations and applications of the Islamic faith is "sufism." The Arabic phrase for this mystical thread is tasawwuf, and the Persian term for it is irfan (gnosis). Sufis believe that the religion is inescapably derived from the teachings of the Qur'an about an omnipresent god that is "closer than the jugular vein" and whose "signs are on the horizons and in your selves." Sufis believe that the Prophet Muhammad's mystical and religious experiences, like his Night Journey (Miraj), set the stage for his disciples to follow in their pursuit of mystical practice. The argument put forth by opponents is that Sufism heavily combined pre- and non-Islamic elements, and that the name "Sufism" (tasawwuf) was neither used by the Prophet nor in the Qur'an.

Main body. Many orientalist writers offer useful discussions of the early Western interactions and studies of Sufism. Some of the earliest European literature on Sufism were influenced by European colonial activity in Muslim territories. The study of Sufism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries developed alongside the emerging discipline of religious studies, or "science," and both were preoccupied with issues like the quest for origins. Much of the mid-20th century literature on Sufism was influenced by modern trends in the study of religion, such as Carl Jung's psychology and other efforts to recover universal aspects of human religiosity. Perennialism, also known as traditionalism, was a significant school of interpretation that drew inspiration from non-academic Sufi convert intellectuals like Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) and Rene Guenon (1886–1951). Scholarly proponents of these interpretations of religion, Islam, and Sufism include the 1933-born Iranian émigré Seyyed Hossein Nasr, whose students frequently focus on the study of Sufi doctrines, especially the ideas of Ibn al-ʿArabi (see Nasr 1999, Nasr 2007). Nowadays, the majority of academic research on Sufism is either doctrinal/philosophical - requiring philological knowledge and interpretive exegesis of classic Sufi texts - or ethnographic, particularly in light of the rise of area studies and foreign language instruction during the Cold War era.

Nicholson's 1914 assessment was the first in English on Sufism. Annemarie Schimmel released *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* almost sixty years later (see General Overviews). This shows how much the field had advanced by then in terms of the availability of critical editions, translations, and studies of specific mystics and local mystical subcultures, allowing for a far more thorough depiction of the history of Sufism. Ernst 1997 (included under General Overviews) emphasizes themes and religious and cultural theory, whereas Knysh and Sedgwick portray Sufism through historical perspectives.

Chittick 2000 and Chittick and Sachiko 1994 adopt a more philosophical stance and make an effort to provide an insider's viewpoint.

British Orientalist and translator Arberry, A. J. translated Sufi texts from Arabic and Persian in his *Introduction to the History of Sufism*. (London: Longmans, Green, 1943).

A historical overview in which Baldick, Julian argues against Sufism being derived from the Qur'an and stresses its links to Eastern Christianity in his *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism*. (2d rev. ed. London: I. B. Tauris, 2000).

Cornell, Vincent J. also illustrated the importance of Sufism in the Islamic tradition in "Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: The Relationship between Faith and Practice in Islam" and in *The Oxford History of Islam*".

Ernst, Carl W. takes up where Schimmel left off and expands more critically on themes in the study of Sufism, including sources, sainthood, practices, orders, poetry, music, and contemporary developments such as the role of the state, media, and new styles of Sufi leadership. Includes a chapter reviewing the history of the academic study of Sufism in the West in *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*. (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1997).

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein illustrated a contemporary examination of classical Sufi topics like spiritual states and the Sufi master in *Sufi Essays*. (3d ed. Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1999) and in *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition*. (New York: Harper One, 2007).

Chittick, William clearly explained an overview that is philosophically and doctrinally, rather than historically, oriented with important technical terms in his *Sufism: A Short Introduction*. (Oxford: One world, 2000). In addition, Chittick, William, and Sachiko Murata wrote a textbook on Islam written from a "traditionalist" Sufi perspective, focusing on central philosophical or theological doctrines and their existential implications rather than historical events and the activities of prominent individuals within the religious tradition. (*The Vision of Islam*. New York: Paragon House, 1994).

Knysh, Alexander's book *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 2000) is not, in fact short, at more than three hundred pages, but rather a work full of historical detail and insights largely focused on Middle Eastern developments.

Reynold A. Nicholson's *The Mystics of Islam* (London: G. Bell, 1914) include major Sufi texts and poetry. Explores themes such as the path, ecstasy, gnosis, love, mystical union, and the Sufi saints. (Reprinted in 1975 London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).

The most complete and comprehensive survey of Sufi history, doctrines, practices, and academic studies in the field up to the mid-1970s are illustrated in Schimmel, Annemarie's book *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

Despite being a significant influence on Sufi thought, Ibn Arabi's writings faced harsh criticism and occasionally prohibition due to heresy. For those who are just starting to study Ibn Arabi, it is recommended to combine readings from his autobiography (Ibn al-'Arabi 1981), his gentle guidance for a newcomer to the path (Ibn al-'Arabi 1997), and his metaphysical works, such as *The Bezels of Wisdom* (Ibn al-'Arabi 1980) and *The Meccan Revelations* (Ibn al-'Arabi 2002–2004). A set of original translations of Sufi texts from the 10th century to the contemporary period, topically arranged on mystical Qur'an interpretation, the Prophet, spiritual practice, music, the master-disciple relationship, and so on. Designed to accompany Ernst's *Shambhala Guide*.

Persian poet and mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273) has drawn a great deal of interest from both academics and the general public. His most important contribution is regarded as the *Mathnawi* (or *Mathnavi*), which R. Nicholson first translated into English (Rumi 1925). Updated translations of some of Rumi's writings have been made; American poet Coleman Barks's interpretations of Rumi's poetry have been the most well-liked. Lewis's 2000 comprehensive study has emerged as the gold standard for Rumi research. Rumi is approached by Schimmel 1980 and Chittick 1983 using contrasting themes that appear in all of his works. Academic literature discusses Rumi's ideas and writing style in addition to debating the reliability of textual transmission and the faithfulness of translations to the original.

Conclusion.The history of Sufism, its tenets and practices, the formation of Sufi organizations, particularly the Sufi Orders, and the ways in which Sufism has adapted to aspects of modernity are some of the central questions in Sufi studies. After being ignored for a long time, researchers are now paying more attention to the interactions between Sufism and the state as well as Sufism and society in certain historical contexts than they do to Sufism's core teachings and notable leaders.

Literatures:

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4. Sedgwick, Mark J. *Sufism: the Essentials*. Cairo, Egypt: American University in Cairo Press, 2000.