

## Reviews

---



## General

---

**Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst and Brannon M. Wheeler, eds.**

***Words of Experience: Translating Islam with Carl W. Ernst***

Sheffield: Equinox, 2021. 308 pages, 3 figures. Hardcover, \$100.00; ebook, \$100.00. ISBN 9781781799109 (hardcover), 9781781799116 (ebook).

This edited volume is a Festschrift for the noted American scholar of Islam Carl Ernst, derived from a 2017 conference convened in his honor. In developing a work of this sort there are always challenges of coherence and selecting contributors. In this case, the writers are primarily, but not exclusively, students of Ernst associated with the University of North Carolina and Duke University. Their assignment here was to engage his work in chapters across broad themes, which preface-writer and Ernst's long-term colleague Bruce Lawrence notes, draw on Ernst's contributions across the academic career spectrum of research, teaching, and service. The material therefore encompasses not only Ernst's exemplary scholarship, leadership at his institution, and professional service, but also his public role, since Ernst is both a scholar of Islam and a public intellectual, translating the contested topics of Islam and religion to an increasingly broad, and an increasingly polarized, public.

An underlying cohesive theme of the book is the concept of "translating," often conducted methodologically through establishing parameters of the semantic field of an established term or concept, such as "religion" or "syncretism," and then tracing its transformations through time so as to complicate, situate, and deconstruct essentialist assumptions. While this harkens back to the approach of one of Ernst's Harvard mentors, the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith, it also reflects the trajectory of a rich and varied scholarly career in Islamic studies that emerged alongside the watershed events of Edward Said's postcolonial critique of Orientalism and the Iranian Revolution, and then, post-millennium, was called to respond to the 9/11 attacks and rising Islamophobia, both in the West and India.

The volume's thirteen chapters are somewhat loosely grouped into two parts: those grappling with a more narrow or specific theme derived from Ernst's broad corpus of books and articles, and those that confront broader issues or challenges within the academic study of religion. The chapters therefore primarily engage South Asian Sufism, Sufi studies in other contexts, the academic study of religion, and the field of Islamic studies, along with contemporary issues such as Islamophobia.

As the author of the introduction, Bruce Lawrence, points out, the essays in part 1 are variously inspired by books, essays, or unique insights of Ernst that are then engaged by the authors in stimulating and productive ways. For example, chapter 1, "Is Islam a 'Religion?'" by Brannon Ingram, explores the term "religion" (Arabic, *dīn*) across a range of contemporary Muslim sources and academic usages.

Among the volume's "case study" chapters is one by Michael Muhammad Knight, who situates an articulation of Sufism in a particular local context, that of the African American movement, the Ansar Allah/Nubian Islamic Hebrews of the 1970s and 1980s. The sheer scope and richness of the material highlights the author's observation regarding how African American trends have been thus far largely neglected among studies of Western Sufism, despite both actual impact and their intrinsically fascinating elements for the study of religion.

The chapter by Samah Choudry, focusing on the post-9/11 American Muslim play *Disgraced*, is related to Ernst's more recent publications that critique colonialism and Islamophobia, as well as to more broad themes of public and artistic expression of religion. Those interested in textual analysis as skillfully employed by Ernst from the time of his first study on ecstatic mystical utterances can find this strand developed in Frederick S. Colby's essay on visionary rhetoric in Sufi ascension narratives.

Translation can also encompass the trenchant critique of terms too facilely bandied about such as "influence" and "syncretism," which of course may be politically and culturally loaded, if not pejorative, as noted in the chapter by Joy Laine and James W. Laine, a chapter that picks up on another of Ernst's interests, Sufism and yoga. Coeditor Brannon Wheeler also explores some of the methodological challenges of religious comparison in terms of what "syncretism" can imply, distort, or illuminate in his essay in part 2 of the volume.

Part 2 addresses disparate themes across seven chapters, only a few of which I can touch upon here, for example, the evolving impact of the "public" on both the scholarly career and interests, and through the impact of the internet and social media on academics and the material they study.

Katherine Pratt Ewing, a senior colleague of Ernst, sensitizes us to some of the more recent political currents across scholarship and public discourses around Sufism. This includes the colonial invention of the term "Sufism," more recent "Sufiphobia" among Salafis and Islamists, and instances of governments and rulers promoting Sufism as a strategy to combat radicalism, thus pointing to the challenges of defining and understanding this complex topic.

A further essay focusing on a specifically American manifestation of local Sufism and media outreach is Robert Rozehnal's chapter on the Inayatiyya Order and its recent initiatives over the internet, a subject that Rozehnal treated at length in his monograph *Cyber Sufis: Virtual Expressions of the American Muslim Experience* (2019).

Insights into Ernst's leadership in the profession and at his home institution come from Candace Mixon's review of the impact of networking and state funding on academic careers. In addition to these efforts, she highlights Ernst's involvement in expanding academic analysis to incorporate expressions through the arts and material culture. Volume coeditor Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst further reviews the more public-facing contributions made by Ernst in his studies *Following Muhammad* (2003) and *How to Read the Qur'an* (2011). The former could be seen as a response to 9/11 and the latter to an unfortunate 2002 incident in which conservative forces in North Carolina attempted to

repress the assignment of readings from the Qur'an as an exercise for incoming students. From a related angle, Katie Merriman not only addresses Ernst's oeuvre but also his paradigmatic efforts in scholarly collaboration, promoting international exchanges, and institution building.

On the whole, celebrations of influential scholars and their impact over time on students, colleagues, and broader fields of knowledge may be both inspiring and informative. They situate for us a field and its pursuit, and may, in fact, humanize our intellectual endeavors. Perhaps a concluding epigraph could be derived from the title of Ernst's own (2018) collection of articles: "It's not just academic!"

---

#### REFERENCES

- Ernst, Carl W. 2003. *Following Muhammad*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- . 2011. *How to Read the Qur'an: A New Guide with Select Translations*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- . 2018. *It's Not Just Academic: Essays on Sufism and Islamic Studies*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- Rozeahnal, Robert. 2019. *Cyber Sufis: Virtual Expressions of the American Muslim Experience*. Oxford: Oneworld.

Marcia Hermansen  
*Loyola University Chicago*