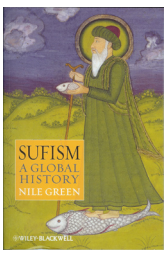
Reviews

General



Nile Green. ***Sufism: A Global History***

Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. xxi + 263 pages. 20 illustrations, preface, 4 maps, glossary, further reading, index. Hardcover, £55.00/€63.40; paperback, £19.90/€23.00; ISBN 978-1-4051-5761-2 (hardcover); 978-1-4051-5765-0 (paperback).

Few aspects of the history of Islam and Muslim societies have attracted so much attention and yet proven so difficult to grasp as that complex of ideas and practices denoted by the term "Sufism." Sufism has been conceived of simultaneously as a set of theories and practices concerned with the relationship between humanity and God, the institutions in which these theories and practices are performed, and the relationship of Sufi practitioners and institutions to the wider society. Besides innumerable studies of one or the other aspect of this wide field of scholarship, a fair number of scholarly books attempt to provide introductions and overviews to the topic of Sufism as a whole. Anyone proposing yet another overview of the subject is therefore faced with the difficulty not only of retaining a grasp of the ever-increasing literature of the subject, but also of developing a unique angle from which to present Sufism in contradistinction to the introductory works already available.

Nile Green attempts to tread new ground in approaching the topic of Sufism as a whole in at least three novel ways, all connected to his rejection of labelling Sufism as a type of "mysticism." First, the notion of "mysticism," which according to Green is grounded in "a culturally Protestant, temporally modernist and intellectually cosmopolitan construction of religion" (2), constructs Sufism as being primarily the spiritual notions and practices that concern an individual's encounter with the Divine. This has led, in Green's opinion, to a tendency to ignore the collective aspects of Sufi thought and practice and the social and physical contexts in which they are located. In contrast, Green firstly stresses the idea of Sufism as a "tradition" as being grounded not only in an existing community but also in its awareness of being rooted in the teachings of past masters and, ultimately, the Prophet himself.

As a consequence, Green devotes as much attention to the institutional and social aspects of Sufism as to the development of its theoretical notions and practices.

Second, the tendency to perceive Sufism as an individual spiritual experience rather than a socially and temporally collective discipline has led to a tendency among scholars to judge the authenticity of particular historical Sufi traditions by comparing them to an idealized, mystically oriented formation. In the most extreme cases, this has led to the notion of a "Golden Age of Sufism" in the Middle East and a narrative of its subsequent decline. Rejecting the prescriptive definition of Sufism as mysticism, Green attempts to give equal coverage not only to all periods of the history of Sufism, but to the whole geographic expanse of its spread as well, aiming to write a "global" history of Sufism in both temporal and spatial terms. Yet perhaps the most important shift in Green's work lies in redefining Sufism's social location. Whereas the mysticism model tended to construct Sufism as socially marginal, either as the individualistic expression of a tiny spiritual elite or the debased practices of unlettered masses, Green stresses that more often than not Sufism was deeply connected to power, and Sufis were part of the political and economic establishment of many Muslim societies. Indeed, he points out that "for many millions of Muslims Islam appeared to be inseparable from Sufism" (8), something that might actually make it better to speak about "Sufi Islam" rather than Sufism.

The main body of the book is comprised of four chapters of roughly equal length, dividing the narrative into four periods: 850–1100, 1100–1400, 1400–1800, and 1800–2000. The internal division of the chapters is different in each case, depending on the topics Green considers, but each chapter ends with a short summary and copious endnotes. The first chapter addresses the question of the origins of Sufism and discusses the early centers of Sufi discourse in Iraq and Khurasan. More than the other chapters, this chapter focuses on the life and teachings of individuals, especially the early Sufi masters of Iraq, whose thought and actions became part of the memory and future development of the Sufi tradition. The second chapter deals with the diversification of Sufi traditions, their institutionalization, the development of discourses about sainthood and sanctity, and the vernacularization of Sufism. The overarching theme of the third chapter is the relationship of Sufi traditions to the kingdoms and empires of the Muslim World in this period. In this chapter, Green distinguishes two sub-periods: first, between approximately 1400–1600, Sufis and Sufism attained a position of dominance in Muslim states. The second sub-period, from about 1600–1800, was notable for what Green dubs a "crisis of conscience" (154), as the close connections between Sufi traditions and political power came under criticism from more legalistically-minded groups (although this criticism usually arose from within Sufi traditions and was not directed at Sufism tout court). The final chapter deals with challenges faced by Sufism in the wake of the colonization, decolonization, and "modernization" of the Muslim world. Green begins this chapter by considering the role of Sufism in societies under the direct control of European colonial powers, and he then turns to those Muslim countries which remained at least nominally independent. Finally, he examines developments in the postcolonial world, including changes in long-

standing Muslim societies and the introduction of Sufism to the West through migration and conversion.

Given the vast scope of writing a "global" history of Sufism, Green succeeds admirably in narrating the development of Sufi traditions as a social factor in the history of Muslim societies. The strength of his narrative is that he not only avoids condemning the involvement of Sufis and Sufi institutions in power politics and the spread of belief in the miracle-working capacities of Sufis and their tombs as debasements of an originally "pure" mystical spirituality, but actually demonstrates these to be fundamental to the history of Sufi traditions and thought. Quite unlike the popular images of free-thinking, antinomian dervishes, the Sufism that Green describes was deeply conservative and not infrequently authoritarian. Sufi traditions had suffused Muslim societies so thoroughly by the eighteenth century that, in many cases, they became inseparable from Islam. The recognition of the deep involvement of Sufism and power in Muslim societies also throws a very different light onto the rise of anti-Sufi discourses in the Muslim World in the last two hundred years by revealing how socially radical these discourses were—they were pitted against Sufi traditions that were not confined to elite libertines and the ignorant masses, but were at the very center of political power in Muslim societies.

Green's book is also commendable for attempting to cover as much of the Muslim world as possible. While the geographical focus of the first two chapters is necessarily on those regions of the Middle East in which Sufism first developed, Green strives in the later two chapters to regard regions such as West Africa or the Malay world as on a par with the conventionally supposed "heartlands" of Islam. Unfortunately, the size of the volume often allows him only a paragraph or a few lines to deal with topics that would have deserved more extensive treatment. His footnotes usually compensate for this by directing the reader to more detailed monographs and articles. Even so, the treatment is at times uneven. Green's decision to discuss only the British, French, and Russian colonial empires in his fourth chapter led to the regrettable omission of Dutch Indonesia from the discussion. Similarly, in the important third chapter, one sometimes gets the feeling that Green's focus on Sufis as part of the elites of Muslim states leads him to some unfortunate oversights. He discusses Sufis primarily among administrative and land-owning elites rather than, for example, mercantile elites, and he ignores the role of Sufis among Muslim elites in predominantly non-Muslim societies—the exception being a paragraph on China (163). To be fair, however, an overview of the scope attempted by Green can hardly be expected to treat all topics and areas in a perfectly even manner.

No doubt there will be readers who will disagree with one or the other aspect of Green's narrative. To take one example, he contends that the rise of vernacular Sufi literature contributed to the spread of Sufism, as Sufi ideas became available in the languages of common Muslims outside the Arabic-speaking regions (103–12). He consequently considers vernacularization more thoroughly in Chapter 2, among other aspects of the institutionalization of Sufism. I think this may be backwards, and the vernacularization of Sufism was a result, not a cause, of its success. The majority of vernacular Sufi literatures developed only from the sixteenth century onwards, after Sufism was already well established in most Muslim societies, and

many vernacular Sufi texts seem to be written in elite contexts (dubbed by Green as "courtly" and "scholarly," 104) for audiences who were already familiar with Sufism. But this disagreement in no way diminishes the fact that this book presents an excellent introduction to the history of Sufism as a social force and not merely a set of ideas and practices. Its fresh perspective, wide scope, and engaging style will make it a useful textbook in the classroom, as well as a handy reference work for historians, social scientists, and scholars of religion interested in gaining a more global understanding of the importance of Sufism in the history of Muslim societies.

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