

Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism

Alexander Knysh

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Alexander Knysh's *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* provides a thorough understanding of Sufism. His detailed chapters break down the different elements of Sufism, from how the term and practice emerged to the specific traditions carried out by Sufis.

The first chapter, "How and Why Sufism Came to Be," contrasts Sufi Muslims who believe they are supposed to live a frugal lifestyle with other Muslims who believe they should enjoy all they have in life while remaining pious. Knysh focuses heavily on American scholar Marshall Hodgson and his argument of "temperament", and Russian Ukrainian scholar Agafangel Krymskii and his contention that the Sufi sect is a result of socio-economic conditions. Hodgson claims that Sufism was developed in order that people practice the piety which complements their temperament. Krymskii claims that an ascetic-mystical Sufism helped underprivileged people cope with the historical conditions of the Arab conquests.

Knysh then considers the various definitions of Sufism in the chapter, "What's in a Name?" Sufis in Iran experience hostility from Shiites because of the latter's belief that Sufism is related to Sunnism. Meanwhile, Western perceptions of Sufism are of a sophisticated and enchanting sect of Islam.

This description creates an allure but “up-close-and-personal observation, if conducted in a noncommittal and unprejudiced manner, often results in stripping Sufism of its aura of mystery and exoticism” (40).

Kynsh then explains Sufi practices and rules (“discourse”). Texts from the Qur’an and the sayings of the prophet Muhammad are interpreted to yield Sufi beliefs and cosmology. The Qur’an is considered the “heart” of this mystical world’s values, traditions, and discourses.

The fourth chapter, “Sufism in Comparison,” builds on the previous discussion. One of the many examples of Sufism’s similarity to other religions lies in the shared idea that every “human individual is but a microcosm, a universe in miniature” (125). Kynsh explains that many Jews, Christians, and Muslims found the ideas of Plato and Plotinus to resonate with their beliefs.

Kynsh describes Sufism as having two main categories: how one should behave towards God, and how one should deal with people (whether Muslim or otherwise). Sufi teachers stress a need for the components of the religion to be internalized before one can project unity between external and internal attitudes. Sufi masters trained students who then spread these ideas and beliefs to others in their own villages. Kynsh discusses the formation of Sufi authority through the notion of *shaykhs* and *awliyā’* (Sufi masters and saints).

The sixth and final chapter focuses on Sufism in the modern era. He considers ‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi, who permitted both men and women to participate in entertainment activities that would otherwise seem to contravene traditional Islamic norms. Kynsh explains a conflict between the more modern Sufism and traditional Islam through the case of tensions in the Northern Caucasus (where critics of Sufism deem it to contravene traditional Islamic practices and values) and South Yemen (a wartorn region where radical ideas lead people away from Sufism, toward Salafism).

Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism provides the reader with a comprehensive understanding of Sufism through a helpful historical perspective. Kynsh presents topics in a detailed, sometimes technical manner, while maintaining clarity for the reader. The book would be recommended for students with a specific interest in Islam and a focus on Sufism.

Logan Welch
Allegheny College