Sufism – What Is It Exactly?

Paul L. Heck*
Georgetown University

Abstract

Sufism is commonly called mysticism, the mysticism of Islam, but is it mysticism and what is its relation to Islam? Despite diverse expressions and modernist and reformist attempts to disassociate it from Islam, Sufism is the spirituality of Islam. Sometimes saint based, sometimes text based, it aims to bring the soul into relation with the sanctity of the other world, thus orienting it to divine truth. Sufism thus sees itself as the completion of Islam, its living embodiment, in contrast to legal formalism and theological scholasticism, but not in opposition to Muslim laws and doctrines. Its goal is sanctity, embodiment of the godly holiness described by the Qur’an. It is thus a path to saintliness not as perfection of human virtue but as extension of the prophecy of Islam, standing in an integral relation to the ethical and theological outlook of Islam, with which, this article argues, Sufism is finely interwoven.

Sufism is commonly referred to as mysticism, the mysticism of Islam, but is it mysticism and what is its relation to Islam? It is not right to call all Sufism mysticism, although the mystical experience constitutes one important aspect of Sufism.1 It has been described by its practitioners, often themselves trained in shari‘a, as the perfection of Islam. Sufism has been part and parcel of the Islamic heritage, still today an essential reference point in Muslim discussions about the nature of Islam. So, what is it?

It is first of all worth explaining the tendency to disassociate Sufism from Islam. Modernist approaches to knowledge, disdainful of what could not be scientifically explained and thus controlled, tended to dismiss Sufism as medieval, the work of charlatans out to exploit the unenlightened or, at best, lingering superstitions of rural life.2 Such backwardness would surely disappear with the spread of European civilization.3 Moreover, the fact that resistance to colonial advances was often led by Sufi figures made it urgent to label Sufism as a den of fanaticism,4 entirely foreign to all that reasonable gentlemen were agreed upon as religion.

This disparagement was compounded by reformist currents within Islam, notably in the eighteenth century, calling for a return to the original sources of revelation (i.e., the Book of God and Sunna of the prophet Muhammad). Aspects of Sufism were judged to be unwholesome accretions to the pristine beliefs of the first Muslims. Prior to contact with European thought, this
reformism included Sufi figures, but is remembered today as the start of Wahhabism, violently intolerant of practices deemed inconsistent with perfect monotheism, such as Sufism’s promotion of visitations to the shrines of saints. The reformist impulse, which quickened in the face of colonial expansion, fell under the influence of Enlightenment categories of true and false religion. Sufism was placed in the latter category, making its extirpation from Islam imperative if Muslims were to revive true religion, recover divine favor, and thus recoup their former glory and power. When it came to explaining Muslim weaknesses, fingers pointed at Sufism.

Sufism had never been a stranger to controversy. The claim to union with God led some Sufi figures to transgress social and religious norms. This intoxicated, as opposed to sober, brand of Sufism was characteristic of wandering dervishes. For them, extreme asceticism, including bodily mutilation, and disregard for all convention represented the height of sanctity (i.e., discounting the ways of this world as fulfillment of the Qur’anic disclosure of the other world). Unkempt, scantily dressed if clothed at all, dismissive of employment and marriage, enhancing mystical experience with hallucinogenic substances, living off what they could extract from local populaces through the performance of miracles or simple intimidation, these examples of antinomian Sufism pushed the interpretive limits of the message of God as conveyed to and by the prophet Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia.

There were, however, orientalists who did not discount the Islamic character of even the odder versions of Sufism. Notable was the research of Louis Massignon (d. 1962), which focused on the figure of al-Hallāj (d. 922), controversial in his own day for activity deemed subversive to both the religious and political order and ultimately condemned to death by crucifixion for claiming to have manifested divine truth in his own person. Massignon showed that there was a distinctly Islamic framework to al-Hallāj’s thinking and, moreover, that later generations of Muslims had held him in esteem. Massignon also demonstrated that the concepts and terminology of Sufism had Qur’anic origins. The stage was thus set for the field, once relieved of its modernist anxieties, to explore more fully the connection between Sufism and Islam.

Sufism concerns itself with the relation of the soul to the other (i.e., nonmaterial) world. As such, it is the spirituality of Islam, but spirituality can be mediated through multiple channels; for example (1) through saints and devotion to saints, living and deceased, a means of spiritual communion and regeneration still popular today as witnessed in the national pilgrimages to the tombs of Sufi masters, e.g., in Touba, Senegal (to the shrine of Amadou Bamba, d. 1927) and Tanta, Egypt (to the shrine of Ahmad al-Badawi, d. 1276), rivaling in number the pilgrimage to Mecca; and (2) through texts and the communal study of texts. The last century saw the rise of large-scale movements with a text-based rather than saint-based spirituality. These groups, such as the Nurcu and Tablígh, shedding the hierarchy implicit in
a saint-based spirituality, do not go by the name of Sufism. Although
distancing themselves from structures and practices of Sufism that many
contemporary Muslims find atavistic, these groups do overlap in fundamental
ways with the theological and ethical outlook of Sufism,9 even if now
expressing a spiritual collectivity not through visitation of saintly shrines but
contemplative reading of common texts.10

It is also important to guard against dividing Sufism into categories of
traditional and modern.11 There is simply too much continuity even amidst
varied emphasis. In times past and present, one can find both devotion to
saints and criticism of the practice. Likewise, then and now, texts, in addition
to the oral instructions of spiritual masters, have acted as important means
for initiating new members into the spiritual and ethical life of the
community – manuals, hagiographies, guidebooks for shrine pilgrimage,
etc. Sufism has undergone so many transformations that it is shortsighted to
limit it to a form alleged to be “traditional” but which is in fact only one
stage in a still unfolding trajectory.12 The bad name inflicted upon Sufism
by reform-minded Muslims of both the rationalist and fundamentalist type
has led some Muslims to use new terminology to describe their spiritual
endeavors – e.g., “refinement of the soul” instead of Sufism. Adepts of
Sufism would themselves agree that the goal of Sufism lies not in its name,
but its benefits – insight into ultimate truth and an ethics of kindness to all
one meets.13 A more legitimate controversy than the decline of traditional
Sufism is its de-Islamation by new-age currents in Europe and North
America. Here, finally, is a Sufism without Islam, which – its own complex
history notwithstanding – represents itself as a perennial philosophy (i.e.,
spirituality without religious particularity).14

There are so many sides to Sufism that it is difficult to get a handle on it
all. For example, although focused on other-worldly sanctity, Sufism has
had important socio-political dimensions.15 The saints of Islam have been
both counselors and challengers of sultans, at times extending their blessing
to legitimate rule and at other times asserting their spiritual authority over
the temporal powers of the day. In tribal society, as personages standing
above clan interests, they have proven effective mediators of conflict, whereas
in villages and cities, they are moral figures whose distance from corrupt
politics earns them the trust of the people, allowing them to act as a
facilitating link between society and government (thus making sense of the
state to the local populace).16 A saint’s followers can function as a realm of
their own and thus a force with which other groups, governmental and
nongovernmental alike, have to contend in negotiating interests, values, and
balance in society. It is also true that Sufism has been a very effective agent
for religious renewal of Muslim society, a topic still to be fully considere
This may be especially true in predominantly illiterate societies where the
work of reacquainting the faithful with the ways of God cannot be achieved
through the dissemination of texts, but through saintly figures embodying
godliness in their own person, in their sayings and actions, for all to see,
even the most unlearned. The role of Sufism in reinvigorating Muslim society with the values of Islam and spirit of the prophecy as borne by the saint is not limited to any period of Islam, but the widespread nature of the phenomenon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has attracted considerable interest in recent years and yielded much scholarly fruit. The endless dimensions of Sufism notwithstanding, our goal in what follows is not to review recent scholarship on Sufism, but to illustrate its insights by outlining the ways in which Sufism is intimately connected to the theological and ethical outlook of Islam.

The Qur’an speaks not only of prophets (anbiyā’, sing. nabi), but also of saints (awliyā’, sing. walī), the latter often referred to as the friends or allies of God. The question of prophethood was largely settled with Muhammad as the seal (i.e., last) of the prophets, but the nature and purpose of sainthood were not. The discussion began at a very early stage, from at least the ninth century, and reached its most elaborate formulation in the work of the philosophically minded mystic, the celebrated Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240). If Sufism has any essence, it is realization of a life of sanctity as climax of the spiritual journey inaugurated by the Qur’an, placing the idea of sainthood (i.e., closeness to God) at the heart of Sufism.

Sainthood was not singular, but embraced diverse types of holiness as described in hagiographical literature (manāqib), encountered in shrine visitations (ziyārāt), and celebrated in song and procession on feast days (mawālid). Some saints were commemorated for their erudition, others for their asceticism, still others for their skills in counseling, mediating conflict, and making peace; there were mendicant saints, wonder-working saints, and even warrior saints. Who were these figures understood to have perfected Islam? How had they managed to come so close to God as to enjoy ceaseless communion with Him and personal embodiment of His attributes? What did the godly, even theophanic, character of their lives say about their status vis-à-vis prophets? Finally, what function did saints play in the lives of devotees, not to mention the cosmos entire? Was it not enough to perform prescribed prayers, fast during Ramadan, give alms to the needy, undertake pilgrimage to Mecca, and so earn salvation? Was there a need for something else, something extra, something called Sufism?

The early architects of Sufism emphasized that it was not enough to perform actions commanded by God, as they could be undertaken hypocritically, not for the sake of God, but to win communal approval. Also, religion could easily become a commercial exchange in which one expected reward in the next life for keeping God’s commands and punishment for neglecting them. Sufism stood against both the hypocritical performance of religion and its commercialization. Rābi’ā, a female mystic of the eighth century, spoke of God not as dispenser of reward and punishment, but as object of love, and ʻAttar, poet of the twelfth century, insisted that heaven and hell were but a ruse meant to distract one from the true goal – complete identification with God.
It was therefore necessary to combine adherence to the norms of Islam – ritual and moral action – with examination of the soul. A scholar of the ninth century, al-Muhāsabī, was suspicious of the moral worth of action that was not based on godly motivation, which, he argued, was possible only in a soul fully detached from all worldly interest and ambition and focused entirely on the world to come. In other words, it was an advanced realization of death that purified one’s interior, purged it of selfish inclinations, not to mention devilish enticements, since such things had no hold in death, even a death that was not yet actual but only anticipated. Sufism thus arose not as a critique of the legal norms of Islam, but as a way by which to perform them sincerely; it is no surprise that the most legally minded of Muslims took to Sufism.22 Some, to be sure, claimed that their spiritual practices, climaxing in identification of their souls with God, supersede shari’a norms. However, a spirituality resulting in antinomian conclusions has been generally dismissed as spiritual self-centeredness – union with God without regard for worldly reality – and thus antithetical to Sufism. Sufism, as a path to religious perfection, aims not to do away with the morality of Islam, but to save it from ethical bankruptcy.23

The exact origins of Sufism remain elusive.24 Its association with the Arabic word for wool (ṣūf) suggests that its earliest practitioners were identified with the lifestyle of the monks who in the eastern Christianity of the day had the habit of wearing wool as a sign of world renunciation. This is not to suggest extra-Islamic sources for Sufism, as was once common. Even if adept at assimilating ideas and practices not explicitly Islamic, Sufism is not syncretistic. It does not refer to anything other than Islam in its self-explanation, and today scholars have come to understand it not as height of universally practiced human virtues but as extension of the prophecy of Islam – an extension, sometimes quite elaborate, of the spiritual implications of Qur’an and Sunna, as shari’a is an extension, sometimes quite elaborate, of the legal implications of Qur’an and Sunna.

Two currents came together in early Sufism: asceticism and mysticism.25 Ascetical withdrawal from the world and its ways was commended because it was felt that too close an association with the world ran counter to the spiritual goal of orienting oneself totally to the other world, where, as the Qur’an had declared, the final prize was to be won. The world was thus seen as a threat to one’s salvation, making it necessary to renounce it as an abode of temptations. The Qur’an, however, also noted that the human being had been created weak and possessed a soul inclined to evil (i.e., susceptible to the temptations of the devil). Detachment from the world, then, was not enough. It was equally important to cultivate detachment from oneself. This was conceived as annihilation of the self in God, a task that began as spiritual warfare, jihad against the evil (i.e., ungodly inclinations of the soul) and ended in the soul’s total identification with God. Only when the self was no more and God alone remained in the inner recesses of the heart, could one be certain of undertaking action that was devoid of
self-regard. The mystical absorption of the soul in God, communicated via ecstatic utterances as a loving intimacy with the divine,\textsuperscript{26} was brought about by spiritual practices, for example, ceaseless recitation (\textit{dhikr}) of the names of God as found in the Qur’an, until they became inscribed on one’s soul, training the soul – in accordance with a canonical hadith – to concentrate only on God, to see only God at all times or, if one could not attain such an advanced state, to realize that God sees one’s soul at all times.

Of primacy for all Muslims is reception of the speech of God (\textit{kalām allāh}) as departure point for the venture of Islam, but what was the nature of the venture that this revealed speech, the Qur’an, intended to initiate? Was it a command, an instrument for the regulation of human behavior in accordance with the divine will? Or was it an invitation to commune with the divine reality announced and mediated by the language of Qur’an? The messenger of God, Muhammad, was a giver of laws which were attributed to a divine source and which he himself followed, but he was also known to pass his nights in prayerful vigil (\textit{tahajjud}), which was supererogatory (\textit{nawāfīl}), not obligatory (\textit{fara‘īd}), prayer. How did the voice of God define the human being: as His obedient servant (\textit{wāli allāh}) or His intimate friend (\textit{wāli allāh}) – or both? Could adherence to the law, performance of the ritual duties, and study of the religious texts leave one with the satisfaction of having reached God? Or was it necessary to complement such things as prophetically spelled out with additional prayers, additional devotions, and above all ascetical discipline and spiritual exercise that turned the attention of religion to the interior dimension of human existence? After all, divine law (\textit{sharī’a}) was God’s measure of external life, including ritual and social action, but what was to be the divine measure of internal life? Surely that could not be ignored, and there was something additional to divine law – a divine reality (\textit{haqīqa}) that was not apparent, but hidden, and yet necessary to know as standard against which the various movements of the soul were to be judged as godly or ungodly. Did sharī’a amount to the totality of religion or only point of departure to a much fuller realization – and experience – of divinity?

The journey of the soul to God as necessary partner to performance of the norms of sharī’a opened the door to sainthood. The idea of realizing the divine in this world was seen by some as a fulfillment of prophecy, by others as unwelcome rival to it. Did the prophetic heritage have any relevancy once sainthood was achieved? Variouslly conceived, sainthood was generally taken as necessary complement to a now sealed prophecy, designed to accomplish the divine work in the world that prophecy had laid out. The saint was agent of the prophetic mission and guarantor of its validity, ensuring its place as a living representative of the godliness described by the Qur’an and first embodied by the prophet Muhammad. The life of Muhammad was thus held to be saintly as well as prophetic, making all subsequent saints his spiritual – as opposed to political – successors. Did this mean that Muhammad was first and foremost a saint who had been chosen for a prophetic mission, indeed the final one, or was his prophecy his primary quality and his
sainthood or was the reverse true? Certainly, the saint could not bring a new prophetic message, but could considerably expand – by fulfilling – the final prophecy of Muhammad, in that sense acting – in echo of a canonical hadith – as the hands of God in the world and – in echo of a Qur’anic verse – a means (wasila) to bring people, creation entire, to the Lord.

God thus chose individuals, saints, to fulfill the mission of Islam, as He had chosen individuals, prophets, to initiate it. Sainthood came to be elaborated as a spiritual hierarchy at the pinnacle of which stood “the pole of the age” (qutb al-zamān), the saintly ruler of the universe. Even if his rule was not worldly, the welfare of the universe was in his care and its salvation effected through his mediation. His domain was the spiritual, but – as superior to the temporal – also included it; however, to preserve spiritual purity, the saints delegated direct supervision of temporal affairs – the dirty business of politics – to the powers of the day. There was thus a symbiotic relation between saints and sultans – the spiritual and the temporal working together in harmony. Saints would bless and thus extend Islamic legitimacy to sultanic rule and in exchange would be patronized by it. When things went awry, however, at moments of crisis in Muslim society, saints would call rulers to task – or seek to reinvigorate the spiritual caliber of society – by invoking a messianic title, mahdi, identifiable with the pinnacle of the saintly hierarchy. This messianic aura galvanized followers of the saint, individuals and entire clans, in armed struggle against sultanic power, rebellions that combined material and religious interests and that, if successful, could result in the formation of new dynasties.²⁷ Claims to be the mahdi have become less common today, but still exist; for example, in the case of Ṣālim Yāṣīn, leader of Justice and Charity, a group in Morocco which has challenged, if not threatened, the monarchy.²⁸

The salvific role played by saints transformed their tombs into objects of pious devotion – sites which radiated other-worldly blessing as recognized by people and rulers alike. Visitations to these shrines were undertaken not for the purpose of worshipping the saint but for seeking his or her intercession in obtaining requests which were not always spiritual in nature. Seeking the intercession of saints, even if the specific requests were not granted, did provide petitioners with emotional comfort and spiritual renewal via the saintly presence represented materially in the shrine, a presence to which Muslim and non-Muslim alike could have recourse.²⁹ The insistence in Islam on the integrity of the body, before and after death, precluded dismemberment of saintly bodies and distribution of their parts to the faithful far and wide, as in Christianity. Still, a system of relics – based on closeness to the saint’s body (e.g., material that had come in contact with it, amulets the saint had fashioned in his lifetime) – has its place in Islam as a means for materially representing the charismatic protection of the saint beyond the sanctuary of the shrine itself.
For many, lettered and unlettered alike, the saint had attained human perfection (al-insân al-kâmîl) by embodying – thus modeling and mediating – the qualities of God, making of the saint the spiritual focal point of all existence without whom creation could have no discernible meaning. The shrine of the saint thus took on enormously important implications for local identity, as underscored in a recent study on the centrality of saintly shrines to the religious coherence of the Kazakhs as a nation, especially in the wake of post-Soviet independence; a collective memory of family and national ancestors, especially saintly figures, is nurtured through a landscape of shrines that act as “signposts of the Muslim identity of the Kazakhs.” In Egypt also, sainthood figures in everyday Muslim religiosity, fashioned through the commemoration of saints in a calendar of feast days that have both local and national significance.

Given its role as divine agent, sainthood in Islam cannot be characterized by moral apathy. In other words, the mystical experience nurtured by Islam did not lead to the conclusion that the world was an illusion and action in itself senseless. An early architect of Sufism, al-Junayd (d. 910), offered an expansive interpretation of the oneness of God affirmed by the Qur’an. It did not mean simply that there were no other gods but God, but rather that there was nothing else but God. It was thus with Sufism that Islam was given a deeper understanding of the world. While true that Sufism has the tendency to view this world as source of temptation and thus to be renounced, also as ephemeral existence and thus to be endured until death, it is no less true that at a more fundamental level Sufism views the world as a manifestation of the divine, creation as a mirror in which the supreme jewel of divinity – in echo of a canonical hadith – could be reflected and thus known. The world as a whole therefore has theological value, greatly expanding the idea of Islam not simply as prophetic edict but more fully as divine presence represented, even if hidden, in all existence. In other words, the universe – the created order, the human being – is, to be sure, not God, but does share in the same nature as the Qur’an. All is revealed. All points to God. All existence is one. There was, of course, debate about the implications of the oneness of existence (wahdat al-wujûd). Was evil included? The monistic outlook – one of many Sufi-derived philosophies of existence – is most closely associated with the name of Ibn ʿArabi, but has had a wide-ranging history, undergoing subsequent refinement and reformulation, for example, at the hands of Sufi reformists in India, notably Ahmad Sirhindî (d. 1624) and Shâh Walî Allâh (d. 1763). The intricacies of the debate aside, it was agreed that the real battleground of Islam was not the apparent realm, however vital it was to have Islam visibly represented in the world, but the unseen realm of the soul striving to be more godlike, i.e., to appropriate more fully the divine writing, the names of God constitutive of all existence. The goal, however, was not a given. One had to pursue Sufism for many years before being able to see existence so transfigured in the divine image, the image of which the human being above all – in echo of a canonical hadith – was primary bearer.
The upshot of all this is that Sufism – despite its ascetical origins – ended by attributing theological worth to the world. Existence entire, whether or not identifiable with Islam, shares in divine existence, even if imperfectly. Certainly, for Sufism, Islam for med the necessary starting point without which such a conclusion could not be reached. The theology of Sufism is not relativistic, but rather works to reconcile the ideals of Islam to the realities of the world. Nor is this to suggest that Sufism is given to quietism as a result of its theology, but rather to say that Sufism has the theological resources to bridge what appear to be unbridgeable gaps between religious principles and secular realities, between Muslims and non-Muslims, between nations and peoples with apparently irresolvable political interests. Its ethical disposition, embracing šarīʿa, is more widely affirmed in all relationships, even with infidels, who, it could be argued, also share in divine existence and can be led to conversion, to awareness of divine oneness, not by condemning their theological shortcomings, but by showing them a charitable kindness (iḥsān) that was a more effective witness, even “proof,” of the meaning of Islam than debate over doctrine ever could be.

Sufi manuals composed in the tenth and eleventh centuries indicate that the representatives of Sufism were quite conscious that their way was superior to legal formalisms and theological assertions. As the living embodiment – and thus full representation – of Islam, Sufism was the antidote to the sickness of the heart, remedy for doubts that theological debate and philosophical demonstration could never finally resolve. In other words, the very truth of Islam, not simply its moral project, was dependent on the mystical evidence offered by Sufism and its saints, as recognized by the great Muslim intellectual, al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). The challenge of skepticism could not be met – and the decadence of faith could not be halted – by syllogistic reasoning, but only by a god-consciousness induced by the practices of Sufism, above all the ceaseless repetition (dhikr) of the names of God that in time would permit one to see existence as the Qurʾan depicted it. As al-Ghazālī argued, decisive proof of the truth of Islam lay with the saints, whose mystical knowledge offered direct vision of what prophecy described. After all, there was no denying what could be witnessed firsthand by those capable of viewing existence with the inner eye of the soul. The reality of the throne of God could be verified with certainty not because prophetic verse spoke of it but because the saints frequented it.

In the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries, the charisma of sainthood underwent a process of institutionalization, and spiritual brotherhoods under the aegis of saintly figures began to take shape. There were degrees of membership: some wholly devoted to the journey to God, while others pledged allegiance to the sheikh and participated in the life of the Sufi milieu – religious teachings and spiritual exercises – to the extent that work and family permitted. In a training manual for Sufism, Abū Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d. 1168) makes considerable allowance for those unable to fulfill the more stringent, world-renouncing demands of Sufism. In other
words, as the appeal of Sufism spread, the way in which the spiritual path was experienced underwent alteration. First, the place of the sheikh grew in prominence. Larger numbers of disciples meant that individual instruction was not feasible in every case, transforming his role from that of teacher to intercessor. It was his image that formed the link to the prophet and to God, and devotion to him, love for him, concentration on his image in prayer became part of the process of salvation. In short, the Sufi initiate was to identify not so much with God as with his sheikh, who would bring him to God. Second, the long years of ascetical discipline, withdrawal to the desert, solitude with God, gradually gave way to spirituality via community. The companionship of the brotherhood not only located the individual believer in a social context, but also encouraged humility, an altruistic readiness to prefer others to oneself, constituting a kind of self-abnegation that furthered progress on the path to God. So long as the socio-spiritual atmosphere was wholesome, one could seek communion with God not as end but as beginning. That is, one might feel an attraction to God, induced by spiritual song amidst the brethren, chanted recollection of the names of God, before actually setting out on the spiritual journey.38

These spiritual networks, known as paths (turuq, sing. tańqa, i.e., paths to God), were named after the founding saints – e.g., Qādiriyya (‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, d. 1166), Shādhiliyya (Abū l-Hasan al-Shādīlī, d. 1258), Chistiyya (Mu‘īn al-Dīn al-Chīshṭī, d. 1236), and Naqshbandiya (Bahā al-Dīn al-Naqshbandī, d. 1389). Such networks spread throughout the Muslim world, but were organized locally under a sheikh who represented only one of many spiritual successors to the founding saint. Later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, networks emerged that were more centrally organized, such as the Tijāniyya in West Africa and the Khatmiyya in East Africa. These regional networks, embracing various locales, served in some cases as a template for empire builders and, in time, the modern nation-state.

Saintly lineage coalesced with family lineage, the descendants of the saint acting as custodians of his shrine and the lucrative lands associated with it, if not also as his spiritual successors. The saint’s progeny became quasi-feudal dignitaries, capitalizing on their ancestor’s post-mortem patronage and prestige. A cult of saints spread along with the spiritual networks, which promoted visitation to the shrines of past spiritual masters. The visitations of the faithful to these shrines had various motives, chiefly the intercession of the saint in obtaining a request which was not always spiritual in nature. Some scholars, notably Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), while not rejecting shrine visitations per se, criticized some of the practices associated with them, especially saintly intercession, which they equated with the cardinal sin of Islam (i.e., attributing godly powers to beings who were clearly not God). The controversy continues today – for example, in South Asia between Barelwi partisans of a shrine-focused piety and their Deobandi counterparts who do not oppose Sufism as a form of spiritual guidance, but do reject the excesses they impute to the cult of saints and its claims to intercessory powers.40

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It should not be concluded that Sufism, now so thoroughly embedded in Muslim society, had somehow sold out to the world, although some cases might warrant such a conclusion.\(^{41}\) Brotherhoods did compete for social prestige and political patronage, but new spiritual insights had developed – such as the concept of “retreat in society” (i.e., being in the world but not of it) – that facilitated greater integration of Sufism into society. It is more accurate to say that the spirituality of Sufism came to be inscribed into the materiality of the world as a visible part of the geography of Muslim society.\(^{42}\) Its saintly shrines and dervishes lodges, alongside mosques and madrasas, created a distinctly Muslim landscape of sanctity that worked to remind the faithful of the unseen realm by representing it visually – verses of the Qur’an and the names of God calligraphically adorning the walls of saintly shrines no less than those of mosques: a visual authority.\(^{43}\) The saint, whose presence was now represented in Islamic architecture, created a link between a people and its religious past and religious identity.\(^{44}\) Sufism has been unequalled in the history of Islam in terms of its influence on the formation of the religious and cultural character of Muslim life and society. It would be simplistic, then, to call its integration into the worldliness of Muslim society a strategy for institutional survival. It certainly was a strategy for institutional survival, but one without which the spiritual outlook of Sufism could not have penetrated Muslim society so completely.

The changes wrought by European colonial rule cannot therefore be limited to the political, but touch upon the very meaning of Muslim society, the norms and symbols that spoke to the exterior and interior lives of Muslims alike. Sufism no less than other dimensions of Islam was affected and sought strategies of adaptation and reformulation, a process still ongoing today. It was not just a matter of new masters, new laws, and new politics. The souls of Muslims were also at stake. What would happen now that the ideas sustaining them, the symbols animating them, the attire identifying them, and the governing structures backing them were gradually ceding pride of place to the new ideas, symbols, attire, and governance of Europe? Could the geography of Muslim society that Sufism had so deeply cultivated simply be discarded without a corresponding need for internal reconstruction? The souls of Muslims and the societal ways that nurtured them – how was the disconnect going to be managed? Was Sufism up to the task? The spirituality of Islam, it is no exaggeration to say, forms one of the major religious questions of our day.

Sufism persists and in some places is undergoing a renaissance. It still faces the attacks of rationalist and fundamentalist currents, but also interacts with them in forging its own reformist path.\(^{45}\) Are new generations interested in a spirituality mediated through miracles and saintly intercession? Sufism continues to play key roles in shaping Muslim societies as diverse as Senegal and Turkey.\(^{46}\) The history of Muslim spirituality still needs to be more precisely mapped out, but much progress has been made. What is its future and will it still be referred to as Sufism? Whatever form it takes and whatever
name it goes by, it will be part and parcel of Islam. As Sufism has long insisted, in echo of a Qur’anic verse, nothing endures save the face of God.

*Short Biography*

Paul L. Heck is assistant professor of Islamic Studies in the Department of Theology at Georgetown University. His work focuses on religious knowledge and its ethical and socio-political implications. His publications on Islam treat conceptions of jihad, moral dimensions of mysticism, religious renewal, scripture-based politics, eschatological sensibilities, and the transmission of religious knowledge. His book, *The Construction of Knowledge in Islamic Civilization*, looks at the formative period of Islamic systems of knowledge and explores ways in which knowledge was classified and shaped in accordance with the social and political as well as intellectual concerns of the day. He has edited a collection of articles on “Sufism and Politics,” forthcoming shortly as an issue of *Princeton Papers*. Current projects include two monographs: *The Theology of Islamic Politics*, which looks at the connection of faith outlook and political attitudes in Islam, and *The Crisis of Knowledge in Islamic Civilization*, which is a full treatment of the phenomenon of skepticism in Islam and the varied responses to it.

*Notes*

* Correspondence address: Theology Department, Georgetown University, 120 New North, 37th and O Streets, NW, Washington, D.C. 20057, USA.
1 The point that all Sufis are not mystics has been made by Arthur F. Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet. The Indian Naqshbandiya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).
6 On such movements, see Ahmet T. Karafinustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends: Devush Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period 1200–1550* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1994).


12 In the hopes of defending traditional Sufism, some scholarship tends to reify it. A recent work with that tendency is Scott Kugle, Rebel Between Spirit and Law: Ahmad Zarnaq, Sainthood, and Authority in Islam (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).


14 For this kind of Sufism, see David Westerland, ed., Sufism in Europe and North America (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).


20 See Anna Suvorova, Muslim Saints of South Asia: The Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

21 It has not been possible here to discuss the important issue of gender and Sufism. For one study, see Jamal J. Elias, “Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism,” The Muslim World 78.3–4 (1988): 209–24.


23 Paul L. Heck, “Mysticism as Morality: The Case of Sufism.”


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33 Another important Sufi-related philosophy is illuminationism (ishāq).
34 For Sirhindi, see J. G. J. ter Haar, Follower and Heir of the Prophet: Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī (1564–1624) as Mystic (Leiden: Het Oosters Instituut, 1992); for Wali Allāh, see J. M. S. Baljon, Religion and Thought of Shah Wali Allāh Dihlānī, 1703–1762 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1986).
35 The question of skepticism in classical Islam and the many responses to it, including the Sufis, is a current project of this author. As first stage of the project, see “Paul L. Heck, The Crisis of Knowledge in Islam (I): The case of al-‘Āmirī,” Philosophy East and West 56 (2006): 106–135.
41 For example, see Matthijs Van Den Bos, Mystic Regimes: Sufism and the State in Iran, from the Late Qajar Era to the Islamic Republic (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2002).
44 Bruce G. Priratsky, Muslim Turkistan: Kazakh Religion and Collective.

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