

Preface to the Special Issue “Sufism in the Modern World”

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“Sufism is the major sacrifice offered by Islam on the altar of its modernization”, declares a contemporary scholar while explaining the modern challenges faced by Sufism (Weismann 2015, p. 260). Prior to the advent of the “modern age”—itself a category with a baffling set of competing and conflicting definitions, which we consider here as a period of vigorous cultural change roughly after 1600 (Hodgson 1974)—*tasawwuf* became ubiquitous throughout the Muslim world. It eventually reached such a degree of influence in personal, social, and even political life of Muslims that it became indivisible from various dimensions of Islam per se, and, in many cases, one could not easily determine who is a Sufi and who is not (Green 2012, p. 154). Such embeddedness and integration in culture and in social and power relations were yet disputed and disrupted in the early modern period. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while a new wave of rethinking and revival began among different and incoherent Sufis and Sufi orders—a process referred to by the controversial rubric “Neo-Sufism” or “Sufi reform” (Rahman 1979, pp. 194–95; Radtke 1996; Voll 2008)—other revivalist movements, which were later labeled by such titles as Wahhabiyya and Islamic fundamentalism, considered mystical Islam a major part of, and reason for, Muslims’ deviation from an imagined, pristine Islam. They began denouncing what they regarded as “folk” Sufism, a religiosity categorized in Ernest Gellner’s problematic model as the ecstatic “low Islam” of the masses vis à vis the scripturalist “high Islam” of the scholars (Gellner 1981), despite the connection or even affiliation of several proto-fundamentalists with Sufism (Sirriyeh 1999, pp. 22–23). The fundamentalist critique of Sufism was accompanied by a fresh wave of Sufi antagonism by Muslim modernists and secular thinkers from the nineteenth century onwards, who often regarded Sufism as “medieval” superstition and practice and something belonging to the past and thus incompatible with the present. The culmination of this disparagement and rejection at the state level, interwoven with nationalist and Westernizing motivations and agendas, can be seen in Kemal Atatürk’s ban of Sufism in Turkey in 1925 and the seizure of the property and other assets of the *tariqas* by the Turkish secular government. To these should be added the battle against Sufi orders and their far-reaching networks by European colonial powers, who would see resistant Sufi brotherhoods such as the Sanusiyya, Qadiriyya, and Naqshbandiyya as a major obstacle against their colonial expansion from North Africa to the Caucasus and South Asia (Vikør 2014; Zelkina 2000), though one should not overemphasize the role of Sufism in Muslim anti-colonialism (Knysh 2002).

Notwithstanding these intense and multifarious critiques and oppositions, Sufism has remained a vibrant part of Muslim life and culture in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority areas throughout the modern period. Though Sufi orders have lost much of their sociopolitical influence and popularity, they have sustained, developed new branches, and partly transformed into a formal organization in its Weberian sense (Gilsenan 1973). Mystical poetry and literature have continued to spiritually, intellectually, and aesthetically inspire Muslims from the Balkans to Bengal (Ahmed 2016). Sufism has also played an important role in the modernist programs of some Muslim intellectuals. Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), Ali Shariati (d. 1977), and Mohammed Arkoun (d. 2010), who understood the mystical in line with modern *Weltanschauung* rather than being inharmonious with it



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(Zarrabi-Zadeh 2020), are cases in point. Mystical Islam has also rendered itself as an alternative to political Islam, as can be observed in the support of the Budshishiyya by the Moroccan government in its battle against Islamism and Salafism (Bouasria 2010; Sedgwick 2015, pp. 106–8). In addition, the modern era has witnessed the expanding activity of Sufism in new areas and environments such as Europe and America, where Sufism has been imagined and interpreted on the basis of their own intellectual ethos (Lipton and Zarrabi-Zadeh 2023).

The presence of Sufism in the Euro-American sphere, which is the topic of several articles in this Special Issue, has become a growing field of research since the turn of the millennium (e.g., Schleßmann 2003; Malik and Hinnells 2006; Geaves et al. 2009; Dickson 2015; Sedgwick 2017; Hermansen and Zarrabi-Zadeh 2023b). The first encounters of Westerners with Sufism took place in premodern times through the existence of *tasawwuf* in Ottoman territories in Europe and in Muslim Iberia, the Europeans' visiting or living in the "Orient", as recorded in the *Tractatus de moribus* by George of Hungary (d. 1502), and occasional travels of Sufi shaykhs to Europe. However, it was only during the modern age that Sufism became the object of earnest Western concern. Such concern began in the late eighteenth century, when Sufi texts were translated into English, German, French, and Russian by Orientalist scholars and colonial administrators who had learned languages such as Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. The Romantics of the first half of the nineteenth century, especially in German-speaking areas, played a pioneering role in this enterprise. Around the turn of the twentieth century, a number of spiritual teachers influenced by the mystical traditions of the East emerged due to an increasing interest in Oriental esotericism in the West. Figures such as Ivan Aguéli (d. 1917) and René Guénon (d. 1951), and a few migrant Sufi masters, most notably the Indian Sufi Inayat Khan (d. 1927), propagated a universalistic view of Sufism as a perpetual Truth and meditative practice shared by all religions. During the 1960s and 1970s, a number of the younger generation, mainly from the middle classes, showed a vigorous interest in the mystical traditions of the Orient, which they regarded as the home of spirituality compared to the "materialistic" West, and Sufism became part of new forms of syncretic and "New Age" spiritualities. Since the 1970s, there has been an increased tendency towards the re-association of Sufism with its religious background in the Muslim world and reasserting its connection with Islamic "orthodoxy" and "orthopraxy" (Malik and Zarrabi-Zadeh 2019). Most recently, and in the age of Cyber Sufism (Rozehnal 2019), one can observe among Sufis and Sufi-oriented Westerners an inclination for a more "affective" association or affinity rather than allegiance to a single order (Hermansen and Zarrabi-Zadeh 2023a, pp. 18–20).

The contributors to this volume analyze and examine different aspects of the presence of Sufism in the modern world and scrutinize the dynamics of its beliefs, practices, institutions, interpretations, conceptualizations, and aesthetics. In the first article, William Rory Dickson (2022) problematizes a major characteristic of the modern conceptualization of Sufism, at least before the second half of the twentieth century, that is questioning the Islamic nature of Sufism. Emphasizing that only few debated the Islamic provenance of Sufism in premodern times, he suggests that in order to better understand the nature of Sufism and avoid reducing Islam to only one of its aspects, the broad and inexact question "What is Sufism's relationship to Islam?" should be replaced with the more precise question of "What is Sufism's relationship to *shari'a* or Islamic law (*fiqh*)?" By such an analytic shift, he opens the door for contextualizing contemporary Sufism within the long history of Sufism-*shari'a* orientations before the modern period. These orientations are clustered under three main categories: juristic, supersessionist, and formless Sufi approaches. The first approach, which was the norm for many, if not most Sufis historically, organically relates *tasawwuf* with *shari'a* and considers Islamic law as a framework within whose moral and ritual boundaries Islamic mysticism functions. Supersessionist Sufism situates the law as important, yet not ultimate in its significance. Although the law is not wholly superseded in this approach, it becomes drastically decentered and is given a deeper meaning. Formless Sufism, called "antinomian" by some scholars (Karamustafa 2015), goes one step further

and prioritizes the internal experience of the Divine over external practices. It chiefly rejects the norms of Islamic law and advocates a spirituality detached from religious rules. This tripartite typology is then utilized to map contemporary Sufi movements in the West. Different Shadhili Sufis who are (also) active in the West, including the Palestinian shaykh Muhammad Sa'id al-Jamal, the American convert Nuh Ha Mim Keller (Darqawi-Hashimi branch), and the Algerian Sufi leader Khaled Bentounes (Alawiyya-Shadhiliyya branch) are regarded as juristic Sufis; Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998; Maryamiyya branch of the 'Alawiyya-Shadhiliyya), and to a lesser degree his successor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, as well as the Iranian Sufi Javad Nurbakhsh (d. 2008; Ni'matullahi) and his son Alireza Nurbakhsh, are considered supersessionist Sufis; and the British teacher Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, who founded the Golden Sufi Center in Northern California (rooted in Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya), and Inayat Khan (associated primarily but not exclusively with Chishti tradition), and to a lesser extent his grandson Zia Inayat-Khan, are introduced as representatives of the formless Sufi approach.

A comparison of the modern selfhood with the premodern Sufi-Islamic self is made in the next article. Muhammad U. Faruque (2022) establishes this comparison upon a conceptualization articulated in the works of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (b. 1931), particularly in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Taylor 1989). According to Taylor, selfhood is a distinctly modern phenomenon, which is connected to inwardness, authenticity, inner depths, and creativity and is based on "radical reflexivity", an introspective awareness that one can adopt toward one's own consciousness. He believes that the ultimate starting point of selfhood and subjectivity is René Descartes (d. 1650), and this specific notion of the self cannot be found before him. This is exactly the point that Faruque disagrees with and attacks. In order to substantiate that selfhood is not a modern invention and is not as radical or unique as it might appear, he shows how a variety of authors from the nonmodern Islamic tradition situate reflexivity and inwardness at the core of their conceptions of the self, while at the same time accentuating the self's multidimensional, multilayered, and indefinable nature. In doing so, he first explains Taylor's prior understanding of what constitutes the reality of the self and portrays the context of modern selfhood by reference to theories of disenchantment, subtraction schemes, exclusive humanism, reductionism, disengagement, immanent frame, and the affirmation of ordinary life. Then, after explaining the genealogy of Taylor's modern self and its evolution from Plato onwards, Faruque uses Taylor's criterion of radical reflexivity and inwardness—despite his own critiques against their conceptualization by Taylor—to investigate whether a concept of inwardness can be found among premodern Muslims. Therein, a plethora of textual evidence from Muslim authors, mostly Sufis but also including non-Sufis, is presented, featuring figures such as Avicenna (d. 1037), 'Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani (d. 1131), Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (d. 1191), Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), Rumi (d. 1273), Hafez Shirazi (d. ca. 1390), Mulla Sadra (d. 1640), Mir Dard (d. 1785), and Lalan Faqir (d. 1890). These evidences demonstrate not only an emphasis on the self's interiority and reflexivity but also the way it is situated in terms of love, bewilderment, and the paradoxes of self-identity. The author is well aware that the Taylorian modern inwardness is not exactly the same thing as those found in Islamic mystical and philosophical literature, which, in contrast to the Cartesian self, do not reject inner depths and expressivism.

The first case study of the Special Issue copes with the reception and appropriation of yogic practices in Sufism in early modern South Asia. The late Soraya Khodamoradi and Carl Ernst (2024) examine the voluminous Persian Sufi romance *Nala-yi 'Andalib* ("The Nightingale's Lament"), the masterpiece of the Indian Sufi Muhammad Nasir 'Andalib (d. 1758), who used to elaborate his teachings in the form of stories and parables. 'Andalib was a disciple of the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi shaykh Muhammad Zubair (d. 1774) yet founded a new system called the "pure Muhammadi path" (*tariqa Muhammadiyya khalisa*), which ultimately dropped its identification with the Mujaddidiyya and claimed to be the most authentic transmission of the Prophet's message. The examination here is made with references to *'Ilm al-Kitab* ("Knowledge of the Book"), the chef-d'oeuvre of Khwaja Mir

Dard of Delhi (d. 1785), ‘Andalib’s son and successor and the theoretician of the new path. The article shows that ‘Andalib’s overview of yoga practices and Hindu thought is incomprehensive and ambiguous, oscillating from an explicit association of them to the views of heretical Sufis to an implicit recognition of them as divine revelation to earlier ages of humanity which may bear spiritual and physical benefits. Notwithstanding this ambiguity, ‘Andalib tries to appropriate certain yogic elements in his Sufi system partly through connecting them to Muhammad’s practices and teachings. For instance, the Prophet’s command to use a wooden toothbrush (*miswak*) provides Muslims with a practice that accomplishes the same results as the cleansing methods of the yogis. Or, the Prophetic declaration about the belly having three parts—one third for food, one third for drink, and one third for breath—is a statement supporting yogic breath control or *svarodaya*. Similarly, Islamic restriction on diet and conversation and kneeling in ritual prayer results in yogic breath control and divination by breath. Based on the claimed authentic Sufi pedagogy of the pure Muhammadi path, ‘Andalib states that the disciple is advised in all these cases only to follow the practice of the Prophet while simultaneously achieving the goals of yoga practice. Accordingly, yoga supplies the criteria for judging the successfulness of Sufi practices, and breath control, dental hygiene, or postures for prayer are regarded as meeting the demands of both Islam and yoga. ‘Andalib’s attitude toward yoga showcases the complexities that South Asian Muslims encountered during the eighteenth century—a fertile and vibrant period in the Islamic world prior to the systematic European encounters (Dallal 2018).

Gianfranco Bria’s (2022) study of Sufi dynamics in the Balkans takes us from India to Europe. He distinguishes between the Bektashiyya, a Sufi order widespread in the Ottoman Empire named after Hajji Bektash Veli (d. ca. 1271), and Bektashism, a religious community or even autonomous religious sect in Albania that resulted from the transformation of Bektashi heritage in conjunction with nationalist movements. Such transformation started by figures such as Naim Frashëri (d. 1900), one of the most influential Albanian cultural icons of the nineteenth century, and it continued both during the rule of the Communist regime (1945 to 1991) and in post-socialist Albania. Taking this distinction into consideration, Bria focuses on the book *Syri i Tretë* (“The Third Eye”) penned by the prolific Albanian author, poet, and politician Moikom Zeqo (d. 2020) in order to analyze the evolution of Bektashi doctrines in the post-secular era, and more broadly, the modernization process of Sufism. After outlining the Bektashi legacy in Albania and its rebirth during the 1990s, the article delves into the conception of neo-Bektashism in *Syri i Tretë*, which describes and defends Bektashism as a balance between Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Bektashi pantheism, Shi’ism, and Sunni Islam. According to Bria, the book combines mystical doctrines with Albanian culture and presents an elected model—or a third way between West and East, antiquity and innovation, and science and religion. It is a New Age reworking and elaboration of the Bektashiyya, though it does not contain any evidence of the direct impact of Western esoteric or New Age doctrines. Influenced by the extensive literature consulted by Zeqo, mainly written by scholars of Sufism and Balkan history, the book is a representative of Bektashi reconstruction that tries to harmonize positivism and mysticism and intermingle science, spirituality, and poetry—a reconstruction resulted from, among other factors, radical socialist secularization. The inclusive approach of Zeqo has yet resulted in a constant tension between a universalist and a particularist conception of Bektashism. On the one hand, Bektashism has been imagined as a universal and unitive ecumenism common to all humanity and beyond specific religions. On the other, it is constructed in a dialectical relationship with Albanianism and considers the Albanian culture the only one capable of grasping divine enlightenment and the esoteric third eye of human knowledge. One may wonder to what extent Zeqo has been successful in rectifying this internal dissonance.

The next three articles are dedicated to studying the presence of Sufism in Euro-American space. One of the major issues concerning such presence is the gender dynamics of Sufi communities in their new diasporic context, considering the differences between the

West and most of the Islamic world with regard to their attitudes toward gender (for an overview of contemporary scholarship, see [Sharify-Funk 2020](#)). Sara Kuehn (2023a) tackles this subject by examining the spiritual path of Güllizar Cengiz (b. 1957; also known as Neriman Aşki Derviş), a contemporary Bektashi female dervish who was born in Turkey and migrated to Germany at the age of 21. As Kuehn explains, compared to many other Sufi orders, the Bektashiyya has traditionally given more significance to gender equality. Since its foundation in the thirteenth century, female members have participated in the order's ritual practices alongside men without any gender distinction. Female figures such as Kadıncık Ana, a Turkmen woman who became a spiritual successor of Hajji Bektash Veli and is venerated in both Bektashi and Alevi traditions, served as spiritual leaders and played a crucial role in the early history of the *tariqa*. Despite this background and legacy, however, the later development of the order witnessed a tension between patriarchal and gender-egalitarian tendencies, while the former gained the upper hand in the course of the institutionalization of the Bektashiyya. As a result, women could occupy merely a marginal position compared to men, they were excluded from some opportunities and positions in spiritual practice and leadership, and their chance to advance in the order's hierarchy became increasingly restricted. In this context, Güllizar Cengiz, who is the only current high-ranking initiated female Bektashi dervish, presents a rare exception. Based on ethnographic research in Cologne/Bonn regions and Izmir, combined with analyzing documentary sources, Kuehn provides a chronological spiritual biography of Cengiz, which includes her first guidance by her father Dervish Karabulut (d. 1976), migration to Germany, leaving the Alevi Federation subsequent to meeting her second spiritual guide İlhami Baba (d. 2009), initiation into the Bektashi order and promotion from *aşık* (sympathizer of the order) to *muhib* (official member), opening a Bektashi Sufi lodge (*dergah*) in Western Germany, which was later (symbolically) renamed as "Kadıncık Ana Dergah", and achieving the higher rank of *dervish* in Bektashi spiritual hierarchy. Providing abundant first-hand details about this spiritual journey, Kuehn regards Cengiz as an exceptional example of Bektashi's return to their original teachings and conventions with respect to gender equality.

One of the Sufi lineages spread from South Asia to the West and then globally is that of the Indian shaykh Azad Rasool (d. 2006), who established the Institute of Search for Truth (IST) in 1976 for the sake of making his mystical teachings available for the Westerners arriving in India in quest of spirituality. An international community of his students, known as the School of Sufi Teaching (SOST), gradually expanded a global network with a membership transcending Rasool's original target group—including both Muslims and non-Muslims of various backgrounds. Through a combination of textual analysis and ethnography, Michael E. Asbury (2022) studies this lineage associated with the Naqshbandi (primarily its Mujaddidi branch), Chishti, Qadiri, and Shadhili *tariqas*. Challenging the dichotomy of "change" versus "continuity", which cannot fully explain the multifaceted character of cultural transfers between the Orient and the West, he chooses the notion of "dynamics" as a proper alternative analytical tool to examine such complex transfer (see also [Asbury and Zarrabi-Zadeh 2022](#), pp. 317–18). Having this critical point in mind, Asbury explores the mysticism of Rasool and his heirs on the basis of six key technical terms drawn from Rasool's works and frequently used in the lineage. The terms *nisbat* (the relationship between the aspirant and God/*shaykh*), *lata'if* (subtle centers of consciousness), and *indiraj al-nihayat fi al-bidayat* (inclusion of the end in the beginning) provide the cosmo-psychological basis of Rasool's mystical doctrines, while *muraqaba* (meditation; watchfulness), *dhikr* (remembrance of God), and *tawajjuh* (spiritual attention) consist the foundation of his mystical practices and techniques. After a detailed description of these key concepts and their historical background in Islam and in the history of Sufism, especially in the Mujaddidi tradition, Asbury finds substantial continuity between the mystical doctrines and practices of this lineage and those in the early and premodern past. There is also much common ground with other "transplanted" Sufi communities in the West ([Hermansen 1997](#)), who have shown more tendency towards adherence to the

Sufism of their places of origin and less degree of adaptation to the Euro-American context. Consequently, the contextual changes, the presentation of Islamic mysticism as rational, scientific, and experiential by Rasool and his heirs, and their making use of language from the Human Potential Movement (HPM) do not necessarily mean an essential alteration of the major mystical elements this lineage received from the Orient. These can rather be understood as an act of cultural translation, or even an example of “integrejection” (Zarrabi-Zadeh 2019), which highlights intrinsic compatibilities and resonances yet making them more comprehensible and appealing to new audiences.

One of the rather understudied areas in studying Sufism in the modern age is the exploration of its aesthetic aspect. Focusing on the embodied aesthetic involvement of contemporary artists with Sufi practices, rituals, and concepts, Sara Kuehn (2023b) looks into the work of seven artists who are based in Europe and mostly have migration backgrounds in Muslim-majority countries. Their familiarity with both traditional Sufi idioms and discourses and Western culture has created a cultural hybridity (Bhabha 1994) that enables them to stretch Sufi vocabulary and imagery beyond its conventional limits. In her exploration, Kuehn combines visual anthropology and art history to analyze data from both subjective and objective perspectives. Since most of the artists at hand employ figurative visual language, she also addresses some current debates on the dominant prejudices depicting Muslims as opponents of figural representation. Each artist presents a different type of aesthetic form of lived Sufi experience, or “the skin of religion” (Plate 2012), selected by the artist to produce meaning. The seven case studies are: (1) the calligraphy of the German Naqshbandi Sufi Ahmed Peter Kreusch, which incorporates spiritual practice, corporetics (Pinney 2004), and creative imagination; (2) the allegorical works of the Iraqi-Swedish artist Amar Dawod inspired by Al-Hallaj’s (d. 922) treatise *Kitab al-Tawasin*, which include symbolic meanings and ideas evoked by sensory experiences; (3) the artwork of the Italian multidisciplinary artist and member of the Senegalese Muride Baye Fall Sufi movement, Maïmouna (Patrizia) Guerresi, who employs various creative media ranging from photography to sculpture, video, and installation; (4) the soundscapes of the French Sufi rapper Abd Al Malik, which besides raising emotions, modes of banlieue expression, and aesthetic tastes highlights his fight against racism and neo-colonialism; (5) the work of Hanaa Malallah, an Iraqi-British mixed-media artist, whose works are mostly inspired by ‘Attar’s (d. 1221) *The Conference of the Birds* (*Mantiq al-Tayr*) and uses the “ruins technique”, which evokes both aesthetic and “visceral” reactions in the viewer; (6) a performative, sensorial, and aesthetic digital opera by the Greek director, visual artist, and Inayati Sufi, Elli Papakonstantinou, based on a play written by Inayat Khan’s daughter Noor-un-Nisa; and (7) a multi-faith memorial cemetery in southern Tunisia created by the Paris-based Algerian artist and Tijani Sufi Rachid Koräichi, which activates a string of feeling, aroma, sight, sound, and taste. These cases display not only the transformative effect of Sufi aesthetics to produce an intersensory, “synesthetic” perspective but also the contemporary vitality of Sufi-inspired art in transcultural settings.

The current Special Issue draws on multiple approaches in the humanities and social sciences to document, analyze, and interpret Sufism in the modern world from diverse perspectives. It offers its readership a broad and multidisciplinary perspective on the question of the dynamics of mystical Islam in the modern era and addresses the issue through various academic fields such as religious/Islamic studies, intellectual history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, gender studies, and minority studies. Contributors to this volume have demonstrated that Sufism, like Islam itself, should be understood and scrutinized “in context” and with regard to its constant change-in-continuity.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

List of Contributions

1. Asbury, Michael E. 2022. Naqshbandi Mujaddidi Mysticism in the West: The Case of Azad Rasool and His Heirs. *Religions* 13: 690. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13080690>.

2. Bria, Gianfranco. 2022. Nationalism, Post-Secular and Sufism: The Making of Neo-Bektashism by Moikom Zeqo in Post-Socialist Albania. *Religions* 13: 828. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090828>.
3. Dickson, William Rory. 2022. Sufism and *Shari'a*: Contextualizing Contemporary Sufi Expressions. *Religions* 13: 449. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050449>.
4. Faruque, Muhammad U. 2022. Charles Taylor and the Invention of Modern Inwardness: A Sufi, Constructive Response. *Religions* 13: 674. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13080674>.
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