Book Reviews

Sedgwick, Mark

In the introduction to *Western Sufism*, Mark Sedgwick sets an ambitious goal to fill the “gap between what Sufism is according to Islamic studies scholars and the role that Sufism plays in the lives of contemporary westerners” (1). He addresses this gap in the scholarship by tracing the history of Sufism in the West as a series of intercultural transfers in theology and philosophy from the time of late Neoplatonism to the 1970s. As such, *Western Sufism* is an invaluable resource for the study of Sufism.

Sedgwick is keen to dispel notions of Sufism in the West as a unique phenomenon of the “new age” in isolation from intellectual and social developments in Europe and North America. He presents it rather as a “product of Islam, of the late antique world, and of the West’s intellectual history from the Renaissance via Spinoza, to Helena Blavatsky and Dorris Lessing” (5). As part of this adjustment he defines Western Sufism as “the Renaissance and Enlightenment dream of a pure, simple, and true religion, made real during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,” (6) and a phenomenon whose features include emanationism, anti-exotericism, perennialism, and universalism.

*Western Sufism* is arranged chronologically, with Part 1 discussing the pre-modern period, Part 2, the early modern, and Parts 3 and 4, the establishment of Western Sufi movements from the interwar period to the 1970s. Part 1 examines the entrance of Neoplatonic emanationism from late antiquity into Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Chapter 1 summarizes what the author considers to be the first pre-modern intercultural transfer: the movement of emanationist thought from the late antique philosophy of Plotinus and his followers into Muslim and Christian Neoplatonist thought. Emanationism argued for the divine origin of the soul and its subsequent return to the One. Chapter 2 examines how Arab Neoplatonism integrated into early Sufism from al-Muhasibi to Ibn Tufayl, thereby providing both its analytical framework and
characteristic theology. Sedgwick usefully focuses on Al-Himsi and Al-Kindi, who, while translating Plotinus into Arabic, also invented a new technical vocabulary, and thus worked to reconcile Islamic theology with Greek philosophy.

In Chapter 3, Sedgwick expands his mode of intercultural transfer along two more paths, tracing emanationist ideas from Neoplatonist philosophy into medieval Judaism, and from Arab Muslim and Jewish philosophy to Latin Christian philosophy. Four Jewish thinkers, Ibn Gabirol, Judah Halevi, and Maimonides are particularly important; Meister Eckhart is the focal point for discussing Latin Christianity. Having presented a diachronic account of theories of emanation, Part 2 gives a genealogy of Western ideas of Sufism from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, focusing on the discourse in Europe, and later, in the U.S. According to Sedgwick, this period saw a fourth intellectual transfer – from the Muslim world into the West – with impact largely on intellectual life, and not religious practice. Chapter 4 surveys how accounts of Sufis emerge in Western sources for the first time, in the context of European contact with the fifteenth-century Ottoman Empire. Theological debates in Europe during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment colored perceptions of Sufism as antinomian, rendering its use “as ammunition in internal, Western theological debates” (79).

Chapter 5 traces the development of what Sedgwick argues are the four foundations of Western Sufism: perennialism, anti-exotericism, Deism, and universalism. Although these intellectual currents developed in the specific European religious and political context, they were going to color Western ideas of Sufism through modernity. Chapter 6 examines how Western understanding of Sufism gradually shifted away from esoteric pantheism to perennial, esoteric Deism, to universalism, influenced by the reception in the West of the Dabistan, a Persian survey of sects. The idea that Sufis are the Islamic manifestation of esoteric Pantheism emphasized the similar premises and method of Islamic Neoplatonism and Spinozan Pantheism, while overlooking their opposing conclusions about the relationship of God to nature.

Chapter 7 outlines the “last major cultural transfer of a Sufi text from the Muslim world into the West,” in the form of FitzGerald's very loose translation of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. This translation resonated in a time of religious crisis and rapid urbanization, producing representations of dervishes as deviant, attractively exotic, or both, across nineteenth-century Western literature, paintings, and drama. The chapter contrasts these images of Sufis with such painting them as fanatical warriors, in the context of Sufi involvement in resistance to imperialism in Algeria, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, and Russia.

Part Three discusses the establishment of Sufism in the West between 1910 and 1933, called by Sedgwick “a turning point in the history of Western