Book Reviews


It is practically impossible to write an overall history of Sufism, and nevertheless, there are some books purporting to do just this. It is hardly possible to write a book on certain aspects of Sufism if one wants to take into account all regions of the Muslim world and all periods of their history. One attempt to achieve this is the book under review—it concentrates on the Sufi brotherhoods in religious life, and therefore sets aside much of what could be said about Sufism in social life, in politics, in economics.

Jamil Abun-Nasr starts from the assumption that Tringham’s 1971 The Sufi Orders in Islam is by now seriously dated and in many points simply misleading (no specialist would object); he himself rests his presentation on later works, among which the 1996 volume Les voies d’Allah (edited by A. Popovic and G. Veinstein) which tried an overview over the many brotherhoods and numerous regions where Sufism has played a major role, and the 1999 Islamic Mysticism Contested (edited by Fr. de Jong and B. Radvka) which focussed, as the subtitle says, on “thirteen centuries of controversies and polemics”.

Abun-Nasr proceeds in what I take to be three major steps. At first, he explains the concepts of Sufi piety and how they relate to concepts of authority in early (and later) Islam; in so doing, he also recounts the early history of Sufism as a more or less individual endeavour to draw closer to God. In the second group of chapters, he addresses a selection of tariqas, a term he renders as “Sufi Paths” and keeps separate from “Brotherhoods” (without, however, accepting Tringham’s term ta’ifa for the brotherhood; nevertheless, the distinction itself clearly owes much to Tringham). The selection includes a group he associates with the “Islamic heartland”, meaning the Near East and probably also North Africa—this group consists of the Qadiiriyya and the Shadhiliyya; a group he terms “Central Asian” where the Naqshbandiyya and the Khalwatiyya figure; and a third group he calls the “ecstatic tariqas”, in particular the Rifaiyya and the Mawlawiyya. A first remark on this regional alignment: Whereas the Naqshbandiyya of course really originated in Central Asia, the Khalwatiyya did not, its origins can be traced to what is today Azerbaijan and western Iran. In the third group, the regional principle is abandoned, and the criteria shift to style in mystical practice.

The third step makes the reader move along in time, the movement from tariqa to brotherhood takes centre stage. A brotherhood in Abun-Nasr’s terminology is a Sufi group which constitutes an “exclusive religious community” (p. 127), and foremost,
it is a group where multiple affiliations are out of the question. This, he says, did not take place before the 18th century, and not in all cases. (Another remark: In Central Asian Naqshbandi circles, multiple affiliations were out of the question since the later 15th century if not earlier, and this seems to have been the case with other communities in that region as well.) In this chapter, the Naqshbandiya-Khālidiyya (Ottoman Empire), the Khalwatiyya-Bakriyya (mostly Egypt), the Idrīsiyya (stemming from Aḥmad b. Idrīs) and the Tijāniyya (North and West Africa) are treated. A special category are the “centralised brotherhoods” who are particular in that they exert “dominant regulatory religious influence” (p. 157 and passim in chapter 6) in rural—tribal—communities. Examples are the Sanūsiyya in the Cyrenaica and the Qādiriyya-Mukhātāriyya in the Western Sahara. These, the author claims, are the only examples for such “centralised brotherhoods”. Later chapters in this historical stage address the Sufi brotherhoods and their attitude towards the European colonial penetration of their respective regions, from anti-colonial jihād to pro-colonial collaboration, with a mainstream in-between of these two extremes. Examples in this chapter are mostly from North Africa and West Africa. A concluding chapter (the book does not have a conclusion as such) takes note of the Salafī criticism levelled against the Sufi brotherhoods.

The book has a clear tendency to favour “orthodox” Sufi thinking and practice over the less orthodox forms it can take. Therefore, there is no mention of the Qalandars and other “unruly friends of God” (to mention the title of Ahmed Karamustafa’s book on these groups: God’s unruly friends, Salt Lake City 1994, which is not quoted in the present work). Moreover, the reader gets the impression that Sufism as it stands today evolved in a rather smooth fashion over the centuries, and that its sources can be clearly identified. No mention is made of competing currents in the pre-Mongol period such as the Khurāsānian Malāmatiyya and other renunciant virtuoso currents, particularly in the eastern Muslim world. The shift to more organised forms comes without ruptures, and Abū Saʿīd-i Abū l-Khayr’s (d. 1049) set of rules for communal life goes without mention. The Mongol period clearly emerges as a key century in the development of organised Sufism, and rightly so; but the loss of the caliphate as a source of religious authority is perhaps overestimated. The 18th century, another key period, also receives due attention, but what is behind the controversy over “neo-Sufism” does not come to the fore, and the term itself receives no mention.

Abun-Nasr is a renowned specialist on the Tijāniyya order and African Sufism in general. The book therefore unsurprisingly has a marked bias towards this region and this brotherhood, and the passages and chapters devoted to Africa are a good summary, as far as I can tell, of what was the state of the art in around 2000. Other regions are much less well served, above all India and the Iranian world in general.

The bibliography reflects this drawback in more than one respect. First, literature published after the mid-1990s is not well represented, and even earlier central works are not quoted. And then, even a bibliography which is not intended “as a comprehensive Sufi bibliography” (p. 261) should mention more than one article by Fritz Meier, the collective volume on the Naqshbandis edited by Popovic, Gaborieau and Zarcone,