

# Review - Sufism: A Theoretical Intervention in Global International Relations

Written by Faiz Sheikh

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### ***Sufism: A Theoretical Intervention in Global International Relations***

**Edited by Deepshikha Shahi**

**Rowman & Littlefield, 2020**

A fascinating book which broadly succeeds at bringing together an eclectic group of topics in one volume, which covers lofty theoretical grounds such as a new ontological, epistemological and methodological approach for IR, as well as more empirically grounded studies of Sufism in practice in Syria, Turkey, the USA, and more. The melding of these two poles is testament to the strong direction by editor Deepshikha Shahi, in front and back ending the book with clear focus and sense of purpose.

Broadly speaking the book teases at the promise of 'Sufi IR', which is a frame of theorising which avoids the pitfalls of some post/decolonial theory. Most exciting is the way in which, it is argued, Sufi IR does not unwittingly restate Eurocentric categories, such as a particular theory for a particular people (versus a universal Eurocentric theory for all peoples), or a derivative of pre-established universal (Eurocentric) thought only linguistically differentiated as belonging to this or that culture. Shahi tries to move the conversation away from such binaries, stating: "[it] does not have to be always about 'universal vs. provincial' (or Western versus non-Western); it could also be about 'universal along with provincial' (or Western along with non-Western)" (p.6). The distinction between universal and particular is quite central to the theme of the book, trying to link the 'many worlds' of humanity's lived experiences to 'one world', which unites us as a species (p.210). As such, the book speaks to the problem, if perceived as such, whereby much postcolonial theory can readily critique IR's Eurocentric universalism, but only sheepishly, if at all, forwards a different or corrected ontological and epistemological position. Sufi IR does just that, using the concept of "oneness of reality/*wahdat al-wujud*" (p.47) to frame an epistemological monism – a whole and its parts explained in reference to one reality. Monism is contrasted to epistemological dualism which is indicative of the discipline of IR (and the wider social sciences) at large, separating concepts into binaries to be contested over: history or philosophy; chronology or covariance; language or concept; culture or economy; single or plural (p.202). The bridge between plurality and oneness, as it turns out, is the heart. Shahi explains that "the rational faculty of mind is skilled in discerning the plurality of human experiences, the emotional faculty of heart is skilled in spotting singularity across the plurality of human experiences" (p.14). The argument is certainly contentious, but also absolutely fascinating.

### **Theoretical contributions**

The book is split into four parts; Part 1 is deeply theoretical, Parts 2 and 3 are more empirically informed, and Part 4 functions as the book's conclusion. In Part 1, we start with Ali Balci's chapter on a Sufi re-reading of the knowledge-power nexus. The chapter shows how al-Ghazali and Ibn al-Arabi relate to the construction of power/knowledge in the Foucauldian sense. This is not an unproblematic comparison to contemporary poststructuralist thought, however, and care is taken to show that while there is similarity, there are important differences (p.35). The latter sections relate directly to the project of Global IR and seem the richest with possibility. The chapter is provocative and shows convincingly that this is fertile ground for further study. Ending Part 1 is Shahi's chapter on Rumi and Global International Relations. It is bold in its claims, arguing that a Sufi approach, as read through Rumi in this instance,

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makes ontology inconsequential, methodology eclectic, and epistemology monistic (collapsing distinctions like positivist/post-positivist etc) (p.51). However, the chapter is complex and highly abstracted when compared to many of the other contributions, making it a difficult, if rewarding read.

## Non-Western Sufism in practice

Part 2 brings empirical insights from non-Western worlds (Syria, Turkey, Sudan and Arab history), while Part 3 does the same from Western worlds (Europe and the USA). I will tackle these sections together. Fait Muedini's chapter on the concept of 'Oneness of Reality' relates to the ability for social science to amalgamate the many differentiated experiences of humanity into a 'oneness', or singular way of knowing the world (p.69). The chapter provides an interesting description of how such a concept can be found in a multitude of religious traditions across the world, but its relation to IR, Global or otherwise, is speculative at best. Such speculation, four chapters into the book, seems misplaced. Another historically informed chapter is Giuseppe Cecere's contribution on the limits of the concept of 'Oneness of Reality'. This chapter is a welcome contextualisation of Sufi masters in their historical periods, in comparison to textual analysis of their work which can obfuscate the primacy of divine revelation in the understanding of monism. Rather, for Cecere, Sufism creates a different kind of dualism, "between subjective-human-inspiration and objective-divine-revelation" (p.118). It is certainly a compelling chapter, but is more a study of Sufi practice and theory, and less an attempt to relate this to IR. As such, despite potential, the chapter requires some work from an IR readership to bridge the gap. Then again, such bridging may well need to be a methodological commitment of Global IR, and we need to develop an understanding of the intellectual histories of different cultures, the same way we expect different cultures to have an understanding of European intellectual history.

Moving onto the country-specific chapters, Omar Imady's chapter on Sufism in Syria provides an excellent grounding of what have been, until now, quite abstract ideas. Imady relates Sufi ideas to Islamist uprisings in Syria in the 80s and 90s, moving from the micro of Syria to the macro of Global IR. It is less a conversation about IR as a discipline, and more an exploration of the intersection (and limits) of thought and practice. In the Syrian case, the chapter argues that Sufism's ability to breakdown "identitarian gaps" (p.95) through the concept of oneness, had been a contributing factor to Grand Mufti Kaftaru's conflict resolution efforts in the time period studied. Far more critical of Sufi praxis is Ayşe Çavdar's chapter on Sufi orders in Turkey, which warns against universalising or abstracting Sufi philosophy from practice, quite in opposition to the general thrust of the volume so far. The practice of Sufi orders in Turkey highlights the exclusionary mechanisms that are involved, calling into question the inclusiveness of Sufism as an abstraction; "Sufi *tariqas* [orders]... do not refrain from settling inside the communitarian borders and obtaining power from them" [sic] (p.135). As knowledge forms that stem from the European Enlightenment (liberalism) are also being re-evaluated by placing them in their historical context (slavery), it is admirable that such work is also present here, preventing the embrace of utopian dreams in the object of Sufi IR.

This brings me to the final chapter on non-Western Sufi experiences, but also the most problematic chapter of the volume. Focusing on the life of the Sudanese writer and politician Mahmud Muhammad Taha, the author Meir Hatina provides an introduction to the life and work of this compelling Sufi intellectual, but the application to a) the Arab-Israeli conflict and b) IR in general is lacking. First and foremost is the way in which Taha's troubling assumptions about 'the Arabs' versus a benign Israel are not critically engaged with. When the chapter claims that "[i]n fact, [for Taha] Israel functioned as a mirror for the Arabs, highlighting their faults, and therefore it was necessary to reach out for a peace with it" (p.154), it seems to me to be reinforcing an Orientalist dualism between inherently 'backwards/illiberal' Arabs and 'civilised/liberal' Israel. Addressing this aspect of Taha's writing could well be illuminating, much as the chapter on Turkey was. Most strange, however, is the tangential way in which Sufism is mobilised. Taha seems, in this reading, more an analogue for liberalism rather than Sufism, and if there is a discussion to be had about the relationship between liberalism and Sufism, it is not found here.

## Western Sufism in practice

Beginning the section on Sufism in the West, Elena Furlanetto and Shahi's chapter on the US discourse on Sufism is also a somewhat disappointing chapter. Full of suppositions and assumed linkages between Sufism and US civic religion or the heritage of that civil religion, the chapter does not, to my mind, read as particularly convincing. The

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chapter relies on perceived similarities in verse rather than more concrete examples of travel writing or translations, which are mentioned, but not explored in the same way as verse is. Moreover, the US Enlightenment runs alongside the extermination and expropriation of native peoples, but this colonialism is not historicised, but rather the '(neo)colonialism' is when Sufism is appropriated, detached from its Islamic roots. Heavy with talk of 'compatibility' and 'multifaith/multiculturalism' (p.173), the chapter does not engage with the notion of US multiculturalism as itself a racist construct linked to structural inequality (for a more polemical introduction to this idea see: Philips, 2004; for an academic introduction see: Cornell & Murphy, 2002). The final chapter in this section on the European discourse on Sufism, sees R. James Ferguson provide a fantastic appraisal of Sufism in Europe, its heritage, contemporary position and future prospects. The chapter draws well on Sufi principles to relate them to contemporary political processes, particularly European integration. Moreover, Sufism's role in interfaith dialogue and desires by European governments to 'use' it to improve societal cohesion is brilliantly problematised; in one case, British Sufism is sponsored by the state only to see government distance itself from the thing it has created, "to avoid divisive responses from Muslim communities" (p.186). In another case, Russian appropriation of a Chechen Sufi order "had little to do with the inclusive, tolerant, and mystical Sufi attributes", but rather "remained chained to the Russian government's interests" (p.187). The examples show well the problem with state appropriation of 'Western friendly' or 'apolitical' Islam.

## Typing it all together

Finally, Shahi takes us back to the abstract questions of heart-mind distinctions, attempting to square the circle between knowledge of the mind, which identifies difference, and knowledge of the heart, which recognises similarities. The chapter takes a surprising psychological turn, attempting to show how hierarchy in international relations, and the resultant pain and suffering that the strong can inflict on the weak, and vice versa, leads to "repetitive backlashes of the same pain-experience" (p.222). It is again contentious, but engaging. What confuses matters is that this argument was not alluded to in earlier chapters and so serves as an 'add on', after the chapter attempts to conclude with summary and synthesis of the preceding contributions. It is not an unwelcome read, but more perhaps could have been done to 'conclude' more forcefully and bring together the disparate threads different chapters have woven – thinking specifically about the theory-praxis distinction that many of the chapters make. As it is, such things are mentioned briefly, which leaves one with the distinct (and questionable) impression that Sufi IR really is a utopian idea which might solve any number of crises.

Overall, the book has some compelling chapters, some of which will certainly be of interest to IR scholars grappling with the discipline's Eurocentric heritage. As Shahi relates of the Helveti-Jerrahi Sufi order in the USA, "[a]nyone that walks in the door is welcome" (p.172), but make sure you bring your spirituality to engage with the provocations within this volume – not something I imagined ever saying about an IR text!

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## About the author:

Faiz Sheikh is a Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Sussex, having held positions at the University of Cambridge and as a Marie Curie Fellow at the Universität Hamburg. His book *Islam and International Relations: Exploring Community and the Limits of Universalism*, won the University of Sussex Centre for Advanced International Theory book prize in 2017, and he continues to work on issues of political Islam, global governance and IR theory.