

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO SUFISM

Often described as the ‘mystical’ dimension of Islam, Sufism embraces specific aesthetic, literary, ritual, and devotional manifestations of the Islamic tradition. The origins of Sufism stretch back to the early formative period of Islam, but it was in the ninth to tenth centuries CE that celebrated individuals appeared from the mists of historical myth. By the medieval period the Sufi orders (or brotherhoods) emerged in Islamic lands, many of which still exist in the contemporary age. *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism* traces the evolution from the formative period to the present, addressing specific themes along the way within the context of the times. The first section of this book analyses the early period with a focus on ascetic devotions, gender, and ethics. The section of the medieval period examines antinomian forms of Sufism, the ways that Sufis understood ‘mystical experience’, and Sufi poetry. The final section assesses the forms of Sufism that can be found in the modern age, explaining the controversies that took place in the colonial period and how as a transnational movement Sufism has responded to the challenges of modernity and has developed and grown in the West. This inimitable volume sheds light on a multifaceted and alternative aspect of Islamic history and religion; it covers a wide range of manifestations of the Sufi way of life during more than one thousand years of history, encompassing Sufism in the traditional Middle Eastern and North African heartlands, sub-Saharan Africa, and newly emerging forms in the West.

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Edited by

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introduction to the women's accounts in Ibn al-Jawzi's *Sifat al-safwa* (in progress); 'God Loves Me': *Early Pious and Sufi Women and the Theological Debate over God's Love*; and 'I am One of the People': *A Survey and Analysis of Legal Arguments on Woman-Led Prayer in Islam* (with Ahmed Elewa). She teaches at the University of Toronto.

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Preface

The so-called mystical tradition of Islam has been the focus of a number of admirable surveys and studies, each with its own specific focus. Worthy of mention are works by Annemarie Schimmel (*The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*), Alexander Knysh (*Islamic Mysticism: A Short Introduction*), and Julian Baldick (*Mystical Islam*). These works provide an excellent background to many elements of the Sufi tradition, but they lack any significant discussion of Islam and Sufism in the modern period; rather, they focus primarily upon the formative and medieval period. Other introductions have concentrated on aspects of the tradition that reflect its “high” and intellectual approach, with examples taken largely from the medieval period. Typical of this is William Chittick’s attention to Sufi ritual and theology in his *Sufism: A Short Introduction*. Carl Ernst’s *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* covers more territory in terms of chronology, but its scope is far from comprehensive, and it serves instead as a first-rate introduction to the topic. In assembling the present volume, a conscious effort has been made to move away from the phenomenological presentation of Sufism in its various geographical guises, which is a feature of Seyyid Hossein Nasr’s *Islamic Spirituality*. Moreover, the issue- or theme-based nature of this collection of articles dispenses with the need to capture absolutely everything, and thus avoids the danger of presenting a very thin coverage of the phenomenon of Sufism in its entirety.

The present work attempts to build on the achievements of the aforementioned works by addressing a range of questions that are of concern to academics and students across a broad range of disciplines. Aside from the more “traditional” chapters that focus on the early formation of Sufism, Sufi rituals and belief, and love within the Sufi tradition – all of which are indispensable topics for such a volume – this work includes thematic chapters on issues relating to gender, identity formation, mysticism, marginalisation,

ethics, and the impact of modernity, colonialism, and globalisation. In this respect it offers a very different history of Sufism, one that takes readers on an intellectually challenging journey. It is designed to help readers through and beyond the “introductory” level.

Of necessity this introduction is very brief because of space constraints as well as the difficulties of defining what Sufism is. With more than one thousand years to its history, there have been diverse interpretations of what Sufism has been and is, and it would be futile to attempt to offer a definition within a few sentences or paragraphs. My own chapter on “Sufism and Mysticism” should indicate the kinds of problems that appear when attempting to define the tradition. Suffice it to say that Sufism is a form of Islamic spirituality that by the early medieval period had developed specific rituals that were meant to focus the believer’s attention upon God – in some cases leading to claims of direct experience with God. The implications of this belief are all too readily apparent in political, social, and literary realms – which the following twelve chapters address.

I have no wish to summarise the articles in this volume – it would be an injustice to the scholarship that has gone into these twelve chapters. By studying the whole of this book the reader will emerge with a very sound basis for comprehending Sufi history and for engaging in further and more detailed study. Should this be the case, then I will have achieved my aim. Gratitude is due to a number of individuals in the production of this book, including Marigold Acland, Sarika Narula, and William Hammell, and I also wish to thank the authors for their patience and goodwill over the past couple of years as this book was being prepared.