

Book Review

Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism by Alexander Knysh.

Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017

Over the centuries, one of the most ‘misunderstood’, most ‘debated’, ‘complex’, and ‘multifaceted phenomenon’ in Islamic intellectual history has been ‘Sufism’—the “ascetic-mystical movement, stream, or trend within Islam”. Numerous scholars, both in the past and in the present times, including Muslims and non-Muslims, have attempted to explore the different dimensions of ‘Sufism’ (Islamic mysticism). However, most of this scholarship has focused either on the history and/ or philosophy of Sufism, or on its emergence, development, teachings, and doctrines of various Sufi orders (*silsilas*), etc. A new addition, with many distinctive features/ characteristics, new insights, and new perspectives, to this scholarship is Alexander Knysh’s *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism*. Knysh, who is Professor of Islamic Studies at the *University of Michigan*, is an expert on this subject and has many books (like *Islamic Mysticism* and *Islam in Historical Perspective*) and research papers to his credit.

In the work under review, covering the history of Sufism from its earliest times, Knysh reveals the tradition of Sufism, “the ascetic-mystical stream of Islam that emerged at the early stage of this religion’s development and that subsequently took a wide variety of devotional, doctrinal, artistic, and institutional forms” (p. 1). Without “embroiling” into the debates about the “true essence or what constitutes correct or incorrect Muslim or Sufi doctrines or practices”, Knysh’s position is very clear: “an outsider looking inside the ‘Abode of Islam/ Sufism’” (p. 8). The major objective of this work is “to give an accessible, while also nuanced, account of Sufism as a system of thought and action” from its beginning in 2nd AH/ 8th CE to present times, with a “novel” approach—which “departs from the traditional historicist and positivist perspective” (p. 10). Adopting a “holistic approach”, Sufism (or the Sufi tradition), for Knysh, can be treated under five (5) principal rubrics (or it comprises of 5 components), viz.: Teachings/ Discourses; Practices; Community; Institutions; and Leaders (pp. 7-8).

Consisting of Six Chapters, excluding Introduction and Conclusion, the work under review does not delve into the issue in a chronological order but rather explores the different aspects of Sufism—which is considered by the author as “Islam in miniature” (p. 14). It explores “How and Why Sufism Came to Be”; “What’s in a Name?” (Definitions of Sufism); “Discourses”; “Sufism in Comparison: The Common Ferment of Hellenism”; “Practices, Ethos, Communities, and Leaders”; and “Sufism’s Recent Trajectories” (focusing on Sufi-Salafi Confrontations) in its six chapters, respectively.

Chapter-1 revolves around the usefulness and viability of numerous terms and concepts related to Sufism, and in particular focuses on the “ideologically driven contractions and expansions” of the term ‘Sufism’. Building his argument on the theories/contentions of “human temperaments” and “Sufi sect is a result of socio-economic conditions” of two influential scholars, namely Marshal Hodgson and Agafangel Krymskii, respectively (pp. 20, 24), Knysh puts forth that “the phenomenon called ‘Sufism’... is real in the sense that it has long-ranging and tangible socio-political, practical, cultural, and institutional (material) implications” (p. 34).

Chapter-2 explores the various definitions of Sufism, focuses on the “reasons and dynamics of inclusion in or exclusion from Sufism of certain characteristics or phenomena”, and reviews the question “how the concept ‘Sufism’ can be contracted and expanded in response to various intellectual, cultural, and ideological concerns” (p. 36). “The possibility of producing a comprehensive definition of Sufism”, Knysh argues, “remains as elusive as ever before”, and “any quest for a comprehensive and universally acceptable definition ... is futile”, and the varied definitions “confirm this pessimistic conclusion” (p. 58).

Chapter-3 explores and explains Sufi practices and rules (teachings, doctrines, and literature: “Discourses”); how the “tradition” (‘school of thought’), especially in the light of the “Akbarian” and “Kubrawi” ‘school of thought’/ tradition—which draw inspiration from the intellectual legacy of the Sufism’s ‘Greatest Master’/ *Al-shaykh al-Akbar*, Ibn al-Arabi (d. 638/ 1240), and from the Central Asian Sufi thinker Najm al-Din al-Kubra (d. 617/ 1220), respectively—and focuses on an examination of the evolution of Sufi discourse with an emphasis on exegesis, which contains “the keynotes of Sufi thought and practice” as well as “anchors them firmly in the authority of the Muslim scripture” (p. 64). This chapter concludes, among others, with the argument that Sufism and its leaders “have been

making elaborate claims to a privileged access to Qur'anic mysteries through what they called 'unveiling' (*kashf*), 'veridical realization' (*tahqiq* or *tahaqquq*), 'direct tasting' (*dhawq*), or 'direct witnessing' (*mushahada*)" (p. 120).

Chapter-4 focuses on comparing Sufism with other traditions like "Hellenism", and highlights its similarity with the Platonic and Neo-Platonic ideas under the rubric that "each human individual is but a microcosm, a universe in miniature" or "an abridged translation...of the macrocosm" (p. 125). Chapter-5 focuses on two major categories in which Sufi *adab* (conduct) is divided in: (a) how one should behave oneself towards God; (b) how one should deal with various categories of people both inside and outside one's Sufi community (p. 138). Literature on this aspect has been produced in abundance, and Knysh gives examples from Abu Hafs al-Haddad (d. 879), Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 1021), Abu 'Ali al-Daqqaq (d. 1015), Abu Nasr al-Sarraj al-Tusi (d. 988), Ibn Abbad al-Rundi (d. 1390), etc., on its different dimensions. Here Knysh finds "a remarkable stability and uniformity of the Sufi tradition" (p. 174).

In the last chapter, Knysh focuses on Sufi-Salafi confrontation/ trajectory by highlighting the examples from the Northern Caucasus and Southern Yemen (Hadramawt), and concludes that though "the role of Sufism" in these and other societies, "is determined by a complex interplay of social, political, and economic factors", but the fact remains that Sufism is "deeply embedded in the history, culture, and social and power relations of concrete Muslim societies" (p. 225).

In 'Conclusion' (pp. 231-33), Knysh highlights, among others, these points: (i) the history of Islam and Sufism, as objects of knowledge, exhibit more continuity and less disruption; (ii) the combination of inside and outside perspective is key to understanding Sufism as a historical phenomenon; (iii) the understanding of Sufism by both insiders and outsiders has grown more sophisticated and accurate over the past 200 years; and (iv) the knowledge and insight offered by ascetic-mystical convictions and practices, unlike rational investigation, bring happiness and tranquility to the investigator.

Though by its title one gets the impression that the book will be a historical and chronologically-put analysis on the origin and development of Sufism and Sufi orders, however, it is the chapter titles and the discussions-therein which reveal the real content and context of this work. Written by a specialist, who has utilized a wealth of primary and secondary sources, Knysh's *Sufism* highlights the varied aspects of ascetic-mystic stream of

Islam. It has 'Endorsements' (advance praise) from scholars like William Chittick, Bruce Lawrence, Bilal Orfali, and Mark Sedgwick, which speaks of the scholarly reputation and erudition of Knysh. A significant work on Sufism, written from a new perspective, it highlights new dimensions and bringing forth new insights. In sum, Knysh's '*Sufism*' is a substantial contribution to this 'misunderstood' and 'misinterpreted' aspect of Islam, and it will indeed prove helpful to students and scholars of Islamic Studies and is a must-read for the scholars of Sufism.

Reviewed by Tauseef Ahmad Parray (Ph.D), Assistant Professor, Islamic Studies, at Government Degree College, Pulwama. (Jammu & Kashmir)

Email Id.: tauseef.parray21@gmail.com
