

The Reception of Sufism in the West: The Mystical Experiences of American and European Converts

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Abstract

In the last decade, Islamophobia and racism have become rampant in the West, particularly in the United States of America and Europe. Muslims, whether they are immigrants or not, practitioners or not, are frequently prejudiced and discriminated against. The observer of the world scene is more likely to note that Sufis are valorized by a large audience. Compared to cults that identify themselves with the Salafi or Wahhabi ideology, the Sufi folk are usually defined as peaceful, tolerant and moderate. It is not a coincidence then to find that the Sufi leaders are working tremendously hard to promote love and peace worldwide. The present paper is an attempt to sketch out the reception of Sufism (Islamic mysticism) in the West. More particularly, it sheds light on the experiences of some Western converts, whose attraction to and fascination with Sufism is immeasurable. Central to this enquiry is the reception theory, which claims that people receive discourse in different ways.

Introduction

Some years ago, the American political scientist, adviser and academic, Samuel Huntington (1927–2008), divided the world into several blocks, and he wrote that human beings can be categorized along cultural lines—Western, Islamic, Hindu and so on. There is no universal civilization that might include the human race. All that one can find is these disturbing cultural blocks, each within its own distinct set of values. He added that the Islamic civilization is the most troublesome.¹ This theory of *The Clash of Civilizations* has proven erroneous because there is one universal civilization, or say a cosmic culture that seems to unify people altogether despite differences in culture, creed or color. This universal language of the spirit predicated on love, peace, tolerance and togetherness is what Sufism² came to represent many centuries ago. To borrow al-Junayd's (d. 911) terms, "Sufis are like colorless water." That is, they take on the hue of their surroundings and yet suffuse it.³

Not surprisingly, therefore, several orientalist were attracted to Sufism as one cult mushrooming inside Islam. Louis Massignon (1883–1962), Reynold Nicholson (1868–1945), Arthur Arberry (1905–1969), Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003) and Alexander D. Kynsh (b. 1957)⁴ and innumerable others, have been content with Sufism, and they

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delighted in its history and rich legacy in numerous scholastic treatises. Knowingly or unknowingly, these orientalists have exposed Sufism to non-Muslims thanks to Muslim mystic scholars, who possessed encyclopedic knowledge and produced original works in many fields. Sufi figures like Rumi (1207–1273), Hafez (1325–1389), Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) and Iqbal (1877–1938) have become “household names in the United States of America”⁵ and even in Europe. It was stated that Sufism was the symbol of tolerance and humanism—undogmatic, flexible and non-violent.⁶ Such compatibility and congruency of Sufism with humanity is virtually what positioned it at the crest of all kinds of religiosity. In England, Sufism has broken physical and non-physical borders. Karen Armstrong (b. 1944), a former Roman Catholic nun turned mystic, conquered the best-seller lists with her provocative explorations into the nature of God and her sympathetic expositions on Islam. New actors from Hollywood to New York enthuse over Oriental Sufi approaches to trance and meditation. Edward Said (1935–2003), the powerful Palestinian critic of Western Orientalist and stereotypical discourse, once described the Sufi poet Hafez (1325–1389) as one of his role models.⁷ Other well-celebrated American masters of literature have found their path to Sufism through German translations of Persian poetry, and various Sufi doctrines, such as the annihilation of the Self in God (*fana’ fi’llah*), and had a deep effect on their life and work.⁸ These masters include Edward Fitzgerald (1809–1883) and his mesmerism by al-Khayyam’s (1048–1131) poetry, Coleman Barks (b. 1937) and his enchantment by Rumi (1207–1273), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and his strong allurements by Hafez of Shiraz (1326–1389), Walt Whitman (1819–1892) and his enormous influence by Saadi (1193–1291), et al.

The influence of Sufism on British literature is remarkably immense. Many of the sonnets produced by William Shakespeare (1564–1616), for example, are either borrowed from or inspired by Rumi. His depiction of the “Fair Youth” is somewhat akin if not entirely identical to Rumi’s description of his friend and master, *Shams edDin Tabrizi*, (1185–1248), albeit Rumi takes his love-relationship with Shams to another direction full of divinity and inspiration.⁹ Many critics now agree that Shakespeare’s familiarity with Oriental mysteries, his tendency to domesticate his characters and vehicle a number of lessons about human wisdom suggests that he might have been informed of Sufism.¹⁰ It has been argued that “Shakespeare’s plays contain not only many stories of Persian, Arabian and other Eastern origins, but also what might seem to be almost literal quotations from Sufi literature.”¹¹

Another powerful influence of Sufism on Western thinking could be easily spotted in a poem written by the English critic and poet Leigh Hunt (1784–1859) about Ibrahim b. Adhem (730–782), the exemplar of love and the personification *par excellence* of peace and humanity.¹² Classical Sufis in the Islamic world include Rumi, Omar Khayyam, Farīdud-Dīn Attār (1145–1221)—whose stories were later used by Chaucer (1343–1400)—and Ibn Rochd (1126–1198), known in the West as Avēroes, the “great commentator” on Aristotle (384–322 BC). Many of their ideas passed to Europe through contacts between the Islamic and Christian worlds in the Crusaders’ states, Norman Sicily and the Iberian Peninsula. From the outset, Sufism has been concerned with building bridges, not least between communities whose contact can be of mutual benefit. In the West, people as diverse as Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961), St. Francis of Assisi (1181/1182–1226), Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547–1616) and Winston Churchill (1874–1965) have all been influenced by Sufism.¹³

This paper aims to study the reception of Sufism in the West; specifically, it addresses the response of some Americans and Europeans toward Sufism pre and post 9/11.

To avoid ambiguity of the term “West”, the researcher intends it as a geographic entity comprising Europe and the United States of America. In either place, the mystical experiences of converts appear eye-catching because these people have found in Sufism an arena of peace and tolerance that are well-nigh absent in many religious orthodoxies. By the word convert, the researcher means a change from one spiritual state to another. Despite the multiplicity of definitions with respect to conversion, almost all scholars and theologians agree that change is one property common to all meanings, ancient and modern.¹⁴ The following research questions are fully investigated:

- (1) To what extent did Sufism impact on Western thinking?
- (2) How are the Sufi communities viewed in the West, particularly in Europe and the United States of America?
- (3) What contributions could Sufism make to peace and world order?

The paper departs from the premise that says that the Sufi folk could serve as a powerful antidote to extremism and rigid interpretations of Islam because their message is universal, inclusive and timeless. With such all-embracing message of peaceful co-existence, tolerance, unity, love, fraternity, Sufis are capable of unifying people under one denomination. Historically, they brought humanity together in a very coherent bond based on dialogue and diversity.

Review of Literature

Sufism in Europe

Several researchers have interrogated the growth as well as the expansion of Sufism in the West, and they have attempted to address its burgeoning presence in many spots of the world. European converts and their yearning for Sufism, along with the broad trends, characteristics and problems faced by the newly converted Sufis in Western Europe, especially in Germany, their interaction with other non-Sufi Muslim groups, both in their own countries and abroad, has been the concern of some researchers. In certain situations, it was found that Sufis who fully convert to Islam become strongly devoted to it, while there are others—twice as many—who are not official converts, but are, nonetheless, close to Islam. Their number is particularly high in Britain and Germany, yet they may exist all over Europe, especially in the Netherlands and Italy, but also in Spain and even Greece.¹⁵

The popularity of Sufism in Eastern Europe was also another worthwhile question raised by some researchers. In fact, various Sufi orders, which grew widely in the Balkans, the Crimean Peninsula and other parts of Eastern Europe following the Ottoman conquests, have been another concern. When tracking down the religious identity of Sufi converts in this area of Europe, it was found that most of them came from Christian societies, principally from Eastern Orthodox backgrounds and churches which were suspected of heterodoxy of belief and of antinomianism.¹⁶

Likewise, in one attempt to explore why some Americans join Sufism, and more specifically, choose the mystical practices of the ‘*Alami Tariqah*’ in Waterport, New York, which was founded by Sheikh Asaf of the Balkans, the American Sufi affiliates were grouped down into (1) non-Muslims who joined it and became Muslim during the process, (2) non-Muslims who embraced Islam prior to joining it and (3) Muslims who joined it, including those born to Sufi followers. Westerners, after all, who intermingle

with Sufis, are most often driven by a desire for a deeper, fulfilling relationship with God.¹⁷

Sufism in the United States of America

The visibility of divergent aspects of Moroccan Sufism in the United States of America, as well as its remarkable influence on the American lifestyle and art was another focus of some Sufi practitioners. The Sufi paths that make up the very fabric of Sufism in the United States of America, their fundamental importance in the expansion of Islam, as well as the underlying reasons that drive Americans to Sufism has been raised in many respects.¹⁸

The Western fascination with the East, especially its prodigious mystic literary heritage, was also at stake. No one can deny that American literature owes a lot to Sufism since its masters, as already observed, have been greatly inspired by poets and philosophers of the mystical tradition of Sufism.¹⁹ As can be seen, continuous emphasis has been laid on the evolution of Sufism in Western societies, with a regional focus on North America and Europe. The formation of Sufi communities, their emerging discourses and new (and old) identities, together with their migration from their country of origin to become forces of socio-political change in their receptive countries, have constituted a basic part of academic research.

It is crystal clear that a huge number of Americans and Europeans have been attracted to Islam through the vehicle of Sufism, not only in its very traditional way but in its trendy and fashionable forms as well. By the middle of the twentieth century, a number of Sufi groups had become established in America, their popularity fostered by the resurgence of interest among young Americans in religions of the East. Very often, their legitimacy was neither recognized nor appreciated by some Muslims, especially those adopting Salafi and Wahhabi ideologies. Today Sufi fraternal orders, which date back to centuries old orders, have become well established and acknowledged as a legitimate part of the heritage of Islam. Many people have become interested in Sufism because it is considered a moderate version of Islam in light of rising American fears of radicalism.²⁰ However, when observing the Sufi structures in the West, one could find that there are few nuances and subtle differences that distinguish them from other groups in the Muslim world. Indeed, this difference has prompted some scholars to view Sufi movements in Manichean terms as “theirs” and “ours”.²¹

Sufi Movements across America

The variety of Sufi movements in the United States of America and Europe confirm that Sufism is a fertile terrain that can customize itself to fit every place and every person. In Philadelphia, for example, the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship was established in the 1960s by a Sri Lankan Sufi called Mohammed Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen.²² Many American converts, affiliated to this Sufi order, have confessed that “without Sufism, they would probably not have accepted Islam.”²³ Another order that has attracted a fair number of European converts is the Ni’matullāhi, which was founded in the fourteenth century by Shāh Ni’matullāh Wali (1130–1231). This order has a Shiite background and still has a strong position in Iran.²⁴ Another Sufi order that is gaining visibility in the United States of America is the order of Inayat Khan, which was founded in 1910.²⁵ Chishti Sufis are also among the oldest in America, and the first Chishti order was known as the Sufi order of the West.²⁶ The Qadiriya Boutshishiya

Sufi order is another mystic path that has developed a geography of varied groups that extends across the globe, from Morocco and West Africa to Western Europe, Latin America, the United States and Canada.²⁷ In general, Sufi groups in the United States of America can be classified into different categories: some, which are either Turkish or Persian, like the Halveti-Jerrahi order, the Naqshbandi Haqqani order, the Baktashia and Ni'matullāhi orders. Others are presumably of a Hindu-Pakistani descent like the Chishti order, the universal order of Inayat Allah Khan and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen order. However, there also exist other orders that descend from Moroccan origins such as the Shadhilia and its branches, the Tijania, the Idrissi-Ahmadi order and the Qadiria Boutshishia as mentioned above.²⁸

Given this state of affairs, one notes that several Sufi masters have traveled far and wide across Europe and the United States of America in pursuit of their missionary work, laying the basic foundations for love and co-existence with other races and faiths. These masters "have always possessed a missionary spirit".²⁹ Their followers were more prepared to undertake missionary missions and it was easier for them to mix with non-Muslims without formality and difficulty.³⁰ Sufi orders have then prospered in the West and contributed to the shaping of a good image about Islam by focusing on humanity, peace and the like. For that alone, the Sufi literature turns widely popular, appreciated and is approached positively since it is now read in the West by millions.³¹

In academia, there is still a paucity of research that addresses the reception of Sufism in the West. In fact, few studies have meticulously explained and detailed on the reasons that push Westerners to desert (or keep) their faith and espouse Sufism. It seems that converts are devoiced because they are not accorded a major space in research to recount their mystical experiences, speak out of their conversion and, most significantly, give away their response about Sufism. The paper comes to compensate for this gap and in turn seeks to enrich the literature, by highlighting the mystical experiences of American and European converts with Sufism, their reception of it and their diverging reactions to its spirituality both in Europe and the United States of America.

The Data

The data of the following research paper are retrieved from different international media that constantly and consistently focus on the clashes between Islam and the West. To this end, media and news outlets such as *The Guardian*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, BBC, CNN, among others, have been chosen because they provide a holistic and up-to-date coverage about Islam, Muslim groups and their conflict or amity with the West. *The Guardian* is a British national daily, the BBC (The British Broadcasting Corporation) is a British public service broadcaster. Like its American counterpart CNN (The Cable News Network), the BBC website provides immediate and up-to-the-minute news about a wide range of topics at a local and an international level. Both news agencies allot a large amount of their coverage to controversies about religion such as conversion, Islamic warfare, sectarian divisions, etc.

As for *Foreign Affairs*, it is an American magazine, whose official website publishes articles daily, written by academics, public officials and policy leaders. With respect to *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, they are two American dailies that circulate widely across the globe and their readerships count in millions. The choice of the British and American news media as the basis of this enquiry is generally attributed to their vivid leadership in the domain of the press and new journalism. Unlike conventional reporting, which used to answer the standard questions of who, what, where, when, why and how,

new reporting, in the aforementioned media, attempt to create “a more engaging and emotionally charged writing style”.³² In his search for the articles that make up the backbone of this paper, the researcher keyed in various words and phrases like “Sufism”; “Sufi Converts”; “American Converts”; “European Converts”; “Muslim Converts” in the dataset of the pre-mentioned news outlets. The aim is not only to excavate for the mystical experiences of European and American converts but also to cluster a sound number of corpora to work on at a later stage. Dozens of articles have been excluded from the empirical analysis because they either addressed Sufism in a broad manner or focused on its rise in the Muslim world and not on its unfolding across Europe and the United States of America.

Methods of Analysis

This paper tends to tailor the reception theory to address the response of the West to Sufism. Reception theory can be described as a reflection on the role of the audience in the constitution of the meaning of texts. And since texts cannot be limited to verbal language, be it written or spoken, it seems adequately convenient to consider Sufism as a text. “Everything is a text, the entire society is a text, and the whole world is a text.”³³ Recent critics have attended to the role of the audience in producing meaning in interaction with texts. In line with this frame of thought, reception theory embraces a variety of approaches and is often expressed by the term “response”.³⁴ The response can be accompanied by judgment or pregnant with enjoyment and contentment, and it can be a mishmash of all these. In his distinction of recipients, be they readers, listeners, viewers, or whosoever, the German romantic poet Goethe (1749–1832) notes that “there are three kinds of recipients: one, which enjoys with judgment, a third, which judges without enjoyment, and the one in the middle which judges as it enjoys and enjoys as it judges. This latter kind really reproduces the work of art anew.”³⁵ This paper is interested in the first kind of recipients that enjoy with judgment.

Discussion

Sufism and Interfaith Dialogue

When diagnosing the body of articles about the reception of Sufism in the West, it was found that Sufis are frequently represented as promoters of peace; they always act out as cross-cultural mediators and problem solvers; they are highly welcomed, appreciated and accepted by Christians and Jews alike. Likewise, they are the bridge to reach out to the West thanks to their moderate non-violent discourse that stresses diversity as well as difference. The vivid model given by the Sheik Jamal Rahman, who established with Rabbi Ted Falcon and the minister Don Mackenzie a strong friendship, offers important lessons of a constructive dialogue with the Judeo-Christian West. The trio clergymen call themselves the “interfaith amigos”.

What distinguishes the “amigos,” who live in Seattle but make presentations around the country, is a unique approach to what they call “the spirituality of interfaith relations.” At the church in Nashville, the three clergymen, dressed in dark blazers, stood up one by one and declared what they most valued as the core teachings of their tradition. The minister said “unconditional love.” The sheik said “compassion.” And the rabbi said “oneness.”³⁶

The three men become like stand-up comedians performing multiple shows across the United States of America. All of them admit that there are some “untruths” in their own faiths. The minister, for example, said that one “untruth” for him was that “Christianity is the only way to God”. The rabbi said for him it was the notion of Jews as “the chosen people”. And the Sheik said for him it was the “sword verses” in the Koran, like “kill the unbeliever”. Concerning the “sword verses”, Sheik Rahman explained that “it is a verse taken out of context”, and he adds that “some verses are literal, some are metaphorical, but the Koran does not say which is which”.³⁷

Clearly, Sufi leaders like Sheik Rahman are capable of communicating to the West the culture of peace that Sufism comes to develop and promote in people. While he is determined to bypass dogmatic opinions and controversies inside Islamic orthodoxy, he unquestionably proves to be the purveyor of a peaceful message about his faith, which rebuts all ideologies of exclusion and division. That he considered the “sword verses” as an “untruth” should not be taken for granted in as much as the same verses sometimes are miscomprehended and decontextualized. What is more, he is quite diplomatic in his critical approach to the verses. Are the “sword verses” not the excuse, behind which the hardliners and extremists hide to wage a war against the West?

Sufism and the Promotion of Peace

Across the United States of America, many people took to Sufism because it was “therapeutic and soothing to the traumatized American society”, especially after the Civil War (1861–1865) that plagued it. They found in Sufism a central space wherein they can be relieved, comforted and entranced. The experience of the “10 beloveds” as they call themselves, showcases the enormous impact, which Sufism triggered on the identity of American converts. It is received with a high level of veneration, and it is practiced as though it were an obligatory ritual.

The participants—mostly Americans-born converts to Islam—squeezed their eyes shut; some gently swayed, letting themselves be carried away by the rhythmic mantras. The pace of the chants quickened, one man stamped his feet, another wept silently, and after 30 minutes the beloveds were captivated and perspiring.³⁸

Such practice of *dhikr*³⁹ and trance connect the converts with God and it elevates them through collective meditation. Bjorn Bolinder, who belongs to a Christian family and was raised by a Baptist minister father, tells of his search for divine connection, which he could not find in regular church services and Sunday School, discovered Sufism through self-help spirituality books and a healing therapist. *The New York Times* reports his experience with Sufism as follows:

Mr. Bolinder, now 39, described an early spiritual moment as a downpour of light so bright that he had to open his eyes to double-check that the room lighting had not changed. “I suddenly realized that maybe this is God, not whatever I learned in church,” he said. “I felt like a completely different person. It was just so beautiful.”⁴⁰

Because of its moderate message and its promotion of universal values and conformity with human ethics, Sufism has been adopted as a mode of life even by people of Jewish descent. With its concentration, among other things, on God’s consciousness and psychological balance, it manages to find a place in the lives of non-Muslims.

They may practice the mystic dancing, whirl like dervishes, share food and spiritually looking for self-fulfillment to be at peace with themselves and with the world. The mystical experience of Ayelet Lugassi with meditative exercises is a signifier of Jews' positive attitude *vis-à-vis* the mystical Sufi branch of Islam and their indisputable reception of it.

When I turn, I really feel an excitement," said Ayelet Lugassi, 50, who drives about an hour each week from her home in Jerusalem to whirl with this group. "It is a practice that makes me feel more in touch with my heart. Yes, I am a Jew, and this practice comes from Islam."⁴¹

So what is Sufism? In one word, it is peace that Sufis look for inside and even outside in the colossal world. This is one reason, among many others, that motivate millions of Muslims on several continents to embrace Sufism today⁴²—because they are basically spiritual people and consider love and peace as fundamental part of human life.⁴³ Sufis, throughout history, have drawn Muslims and non-Muslims to their fold through their simplicity and sincerity, their broad-mindedness and compassion, so they have built bridges of understanding, amity and conciliation between different people.⁴⁴ Sufism has been embraced by free thinkers, elite and non-elite, males and females, young and elderly, practitioners and otherwise, from many cultures. Unlike other rigid cults of Islam that identify themselves with Wahhabism and Salafism, Sufism is the most pluralistic incarnation of Islam—accessible to the learned and the ignorant, the faithful and nonbelievers—and is thus a uniquely valuable bridge between East and West. The Persian poet Rumi held that all existence and all religions were one, all manifestations of the same divine reality. What was important was not the empty ritual of the mosque, church, synagogue or temple, but the striving to understand that divinity can best be reached through the gateway of the human heart: that we all can find paradise within us, if we know where to look. In some ways Sufism, with its emphasis on love rather than judgment, represents the New Testament of Islam⁴⁵ as long as it presents a bright picture of Islam that welcomes and never rejects anyone.

Sufism as an Antidote to Extremism

In France, where Islamophobia has reached its zenith, Sufism is striving to alter French people's perception and reception of Islam by rebutting fanaticism and combatting extremism. The story of Abdel Malik (b. 1975), the French Rapper, belonging to the Qadiriya Boutshishia order,⁴⁶ starkly demonstrates that Sufism is able to build individuals, sharpen their artistic skills, and most importantly, forge their minds to espouse differences and love for their countries. From thievery and delinquency in downtown Strasbourg, Abdel Malik shifted to Sufism because it catered for his spiritual needs and lifted up his spirit, so he would no longer lead a "double life" and be split into inconsistent "selves".

He turned to Sufism and discovered writers who celebrated difference. "The problem was that all of the people who spoke about this were from the 11th century, the 12th century, the 16th," Mr. Malik said. "I cried, I spent entire nights crying, saying to myself, 'My God, I live in the wrong era.'" In eastern Morocco he found a spiritual leader who spoke in those terms, however. (A favorite proverb: "In a garden the flowers are diverse, but the water is one.") Sufism taught him to love France, he says, a place where he nonetheless feels a "deep" and "perverse" racism.⁴⁷

In Órgiva, more particularly in the South of Catholic Spain, it is assumed that 35 Sufi families have converted from Catholicism into Sufism. Bahia, as a case in point, who had practiced Buddhism, Shamanism,⁴⁸ Psychotherapy and Catholicism, recounts how she learned about Sufi mystical practices from a friend. As she herself admits:

“My search for the right way of life actually started in the Catholic college I attended in Seville,” she said. “It took me years of studying, probing, doubting and experimenting until I finally came upon the philosophy and teachings of Sufism. Sufism’s way of life, teachings of tolerance, wide understanding, unconditional love of mankind and total rejection of violence made me convert. We concentrate on the simplicity of life, valuing the spiritual over the material.”⁴⁹

What is special about these people that embrace Sufism as a way of life is that they are hankering after an alchemical process to transform their very imperfect nature into enlightened beings. It is a process that could be compared to the changing of lead into gold.⁵⁰ Hence, the teachers of the Sufi path were viewed as “gold makers” or alchemists in the metaphorical sense of the word.⁵¹ Interestingly, Western people, either Europeans or Americans, choose Sufism, with the aim of achieving “a state of enlightenment and self-harmony”.⁵² This applies to Elissa Kerhuas, whose initiation into Sufism, enabled her to perceive complementarity and completeness in all the spiritual paths leading to God. Put otherwise, her migration from the confines of numerous spiritual traditions into the mystical experience of Sufism helped her experience a prominent spiritual transformation. Consider the next commentary on her story with Sufism below:

Elissa Kerhuas, 61, of Sherman Oaks who was raised a Christian, found Sufi Islam—the mystical branch of the faith—more than three years after living a number of other traditions and spiritual practices, including Buddhism, yoga and Kabbala, she said. Being a Sufi Muslim, she said, has allowed her to find “unity in all” these paths.⁵³

The Sufi converts expressed that it had been at this point that Sufism accompanied with Islam had come into the picture which offered them an overall system, a way of life based on moral and ethical values. It is not surprising that one could find the renowned American professional boxer, Mohammed Ali (1942–2016), widely regarded as one of the most significant and highly celebrated sportsman of the twentieth century, growing from being a Muslim in the traditional sense—a separatist—into a tolerant and peaceful being when he got initiated into the path of Sufism. In an article written for CNN, the cryptic mysteries of Ali’s life have been sketched out, one of which is that Sufism has played a considerable change in the last phases of his life. According to him, “Sufism is arguably the most peaceful sect of any major or minor religion. Sufis believe that to purposely harm any person is to harm all of humanity, to harm each of us and to damage the world.”⁵⁴

It was this great esteem for other faiths, not to mention his advocacy for peace and dialogue worldwide, that make Muhammad Ali loved by the Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the United States of America. Because of this, he was viewed as the “greatest American Muslim”. Such identification of Sufis and mystical Muslims with greatness is almost always at stake whenever they champion the rights of other faiths. This salient spiritual transition, or conversion, made by Muhammad Ali from orthodox Islam into Sufism, helped him be venerated by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Is it not Sufism

that has changed Muhammad Ali's attitude *vis-à-vis* non-Muslims? He later completed the full transition from militancy to mysticism through Sufism, a strand that emphasizes a direct, personal connection to God. That connection is sometimes accompanied by an openness to other religions, as demonstrated in Ali's request before his death that Christian, Buddhist, Jewish and other religious leaders receive invitations to his memorial and funeral services in Louisville in 2016.⁵⁵

The Attraction of Sufism in the West

Sama' and Mystical Dancing

In the United States of America, more or less like Europe, Sufism is attracting a huge number of people. This spiritual progression of Sufism is not new to Americans, who might have been exposed to it through the Sufi culture of peace, love and union in the American literature in art, poetry and drama. They might have gathered the kernels of Eastern Sufi knowledge because a generation of them has traveled as spiritual pilgrims to the Orient. For this reason, Sufism has started to gain much visibility in the United States of America. International symposia are held from time to time in cities like Philadelphia, New York and California, universities are adding novel courses about Sufism, Sufi masters are encouraged to speak to the public, while Sufi poets are celebrated throughout the year.

In Vermont, for example, dozens of American converts gather to practice Sufi rituals, which include but are not limited to, mystical whirling, *Sama'*⁵⁶ and meditation. In the ceremony, the Sufi Sheik, or master, was born a Catholic in New Jersey, and he managed to gain a number of followers from Protestants, Catholics and Jews. Kabir Helminski (b. 1947), the Sufi Sheik, explains how they created a Sufi culture in the North America to disseminate good values to people about Islamic religion and modern spirituality. As stated in the *Washington Post*:

The Vermont Sheik, Helminski, whose given name was Edmund, says he became interested in Sufism through its literature and poetry. He first met his mentor Suleyman Dede, a Sheik of the Mevlevi order, at a retreat in the Shenandoahs. "He was such a powerful presence, he exuded such love, that it made all the spiritual practices and spiritual ambitions I had ever known seem pretty insignificant," said Helminski, 59. "And that's what got me started. I felt like I was seeing real gold for the first time."⁵⁷

In fact, most of the American converts, who adopted Sufism, are very much attracted to whirling, mystical dancing and Sufi music, because they are neither elitist nor exclusive. Yet, sometimes they choose Sufism so long as it allows them to "savour" the spirit of religion and experience a spiritual conversion. This is what happened to the famous British writer and broadcaster John Eaton, who got interested in Sufism and embraced it at the hands of the English mystic Martin Lings (1909–2005) in Egypt.⁵⁸

Like so many Western intellectuals, Eaton found Sufism irresistibly compelling. It was not the externals of the religion that appealed; rather it was the spirit of the faith, exemplified in Sufism, which brought about his conversion. For the Sufi interpretation and application of Islam allowed Eaton to continue to adhere to his belief (...). It also offered him the possibility of a direct, experiential "taste" of the deeper spiritual truths of the faith.⁵⁹

The proliferation of certain rigid ideologies in the Muslim world, and even in the West, such as Wahhabism and Salafism, have wrought havoc to the beauty and very fabric of Islam.⁶⁰ Several scholars and demagogues in either doctrine still provide a decontextualized if not a literal and harsh interpretation of the Koranic text that does not catch up with modernity, nor does it appreciate the alterity of humanity. Even worse, the absence of well-informed theologians that can advance sound understanding about this timeless text is still lacking throughout. Islam, to borrow Hansen's words, "has been hijacked by a discourse of anger and the rhetoric of rage".⁶¹ This shift into radicalist thinking and extremist appropriation of Islam resulted in a disagreement between Muslim groups, bringing "a clash within Islam between the Sufis, who believe in tolerance, and the intolerance of the fundamentalists".⁶² Unlike the Wahhabis or even Salafis, who, arguably, have no respect for divergent opinions, Sufis have proven to be open to the other's view, tolerating differences and even accepting them as one primordial component of their philosophy of life.

Dhikr and Toleration of Alterity

In addition to their sensibility, delicacy and stark wisdom, Sufis were capable of gaining both the sympathy and the trust of non-Sufis and non-Muslims. Their message is far from being theoretical because it takes practice as a threshold toward self-fulfillment and realization. News reporters, TV correspondents, photographers, musicians, poets and even some politicians have all somehow delighted in the experimentation of Sufism. Peter Culshaw, who frequently reported for *The Guardian*, has been enthralled by Sufi chanting and music. He documented a series of revelatory encounters with different Sufis while in many Muslim-majority countries. His experience of Sufism is worth-considering because it demonstrates that the Sufi circle welcomes everybody notwithstanding their ideological ends. He narrates his experience with the Sufis as follows:

Finally, I found myself at a zikr (a remembrance) among 80 or so dervishes in a hidden tekke (religious house), and they began to chant, rhythmically, the name of Allah. It was one of the most powerful sounds I have ever heard. (...) I was sitting in the middle of the group and, although I had permission to take photographs, I couldn't actually stand — pinned back by the weight of numbers but also by what seemed a spiritual force field.⁶³

Sufism occupies a unique position in the Western conception of Islam. "It has generally enjoyed a positive reputation across the political spectrum."⁶⁴ Because of its strong emphasis on peace and tolerance, it has long been fashionable even outside the Muslim world.⁶⁵ In fact, the common denominator between all the converts mentioned above is that they have embraced Sufism out of free will as it quenches their spiritual thirst for the divine. Therefore, they kept company of some Sufi Sheiks who identify themselves with the promotion of unity, humanity and love for all people. It is this respect for and toleration of differences that make Sufism appealing to people of whatever race or culture; it neither differentiates nor distinguishes between people because they are all a genuine manifestation of God. It is thus fair to say that such compassion and universal love that Sufism conveys to the world could bridge gaps left by sectarian, political and ideological divisions. Compared to the scholars of orthodox organized Islam, who focus on outward matters and see difference in people, the Sufi folk uphold an inward view that make them see likeness and sameness in all mankind. "This inward view sees all alike and worthy of respect and toleration. Respect and toleration lead to peace,

sharing, universal love and compassion and spiritual enlightenment. The outward, externalized view promoted by orthodox organized Islam, sees differences between people, separation between sexes and intensifies the egoistic desires (greed, lust, power, etc.) of the human heart. This in turn leads to ideologies based on greed and fear. Greed and fear lead to stealing, violence, hatred, segregation, delusions of superiority and inferiority of one group in relation to others, conflict and religious (spiritual) stagnation.”⁶⁶

For Sufis, human beings are more alike than different; whether they are rich or poor, black or white, male or female, religious or not, they all belong to the large family of humanity. Probably this is what prompted some scholars to proclaim that “the Sufi Islam is love-oriented, while the theological Islam is mainly law-oriented. The Sufi God is God of love, whereas that of theological Islam is God who punishes for violation of the law,”⁶⁷ yet Sufism ought to be viewed as complementing theology and not a substitute for it.

Inner Struggle and Self-Purification

In comparison to Wahhabism and Salafism as divisive ideologies, which are regarded as too extreme sometimes and too literal at other times, Sufism addresses human feelings and spirituality. In this regard, Sufis have been much interested in *jihad* and inner struggle against their prone to evil souls.⁶⁸ *Jihad* for them is an internal as well as a personal spiritual matter for the sake of purification. This great interest of Sufism in purification and even perfection is another reason that made it thrive rapidly in the West, so it fascinated American and European converts, allowing them to maintain their old identities,⁶⁹ and at the same time acquire novel ones.

The mystical experience of Nasruddin, “the American Sufi”, is reminiscent of the capacity of Sufism to inculcate both hope and pacifist thinking into its new adherents. Emerging as a Muslim switching from atheism into Salafism and *jihadism*, Nasruddin was indoctrinated into strict versions of Islam that enforced him to grow a beard, stop partying and start praying at the mosque on a daily basis. At first, he was attracted to the ideology of *jihad* that represented for him chivalry, honor, dignity and self-sacrifice. However, his life underwent a spiritual metamorphosis upon meeting a Sufi Sheik.⁷⁰ His spiritual journey started when he looked for a deeper understanding of humanity’s relationship with God. *Foreign Affairs* has reported his words below verbatim:

“The most important things in mysticism are you and God,” said Nasruddin, as he eyed his watch to see if it was time for the afternoon prayer. “All else is an illusion. Salafism is more about books and knowledge of legal definitions. It’s fascinating on an academic level, but not on a religious level. In Salafism, there’s no relationship with God. Only if you’re good enough can you go to him. Only if he’s merciful enough can you reach him in an afterlife.”⁷¹

In this world torn apart into several factions, sunk in blood because of armed conflicts, clashes and anarchy, it is claimed that Sufism can play a big part as a powerful antidote to extremism in all its forms. Sufism is by no means the best remedy for the obliteration of radicalism, fundamentalism and religious bigotry. These divisive ideologies are indeed responsible for the disintegration and the distortion of the image of Islam, so the humanism, comprehensiveness and universalism of Sufism may contribute to harmony and dialogue among the world’s major religions.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the reception of Sufism in the West, especially in Europe and the United States of America, and it has unraveled the multiple motives that propel Americans and Europeans to adopt Sufism. Many of the mystical experiences covered in the media in both places have, either directly or obliquely, stressed that there is something mysterious in the realm of Sufism that continues to attract Western people to it. As a consequence, the latter's reception of this antique Islamic tradition waver between enjoyment and non-stop fascination.

Moreover, because it puts peace and diversity as its top-priority, Sufism was able to gain a huge number of converts from Judaism and Christianity: the Jew, for instance, might have been mesmerized by the Sufi dancing; the Christian has almost been captivated by the unconditional love present in the Sufi thinking, while for the Muslim, Sufism has been a requirement because it is a basic component of religion.⁷² That Christians and Jews delight in the practice of Sufism is a reminder that the Sufi masters have been keen on developing a methodology of spirituality, which is neither exclusive nor separatist of human beings. That spirituality would not have appealed to Muslims and non-Muslims had it not commemorated both love and peace within its frame.

NOTES

1. S. Phillips Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Reading: Cox & Wyman, 1996.
2. The etymology of the Arabic word *Sufi* is unclear. It may come from *Suf*, wool; there is a theory that a group of especially devoted followers of the Prophet Muhammad wore woollen cloaks, which were in those days cheaper and less comfortable than those in general use. Alternatively, the word may come from *suffa*, a raised platform or step, and refer to a group of particularly devoted Muslims who used to assemble on a platform outside the house of the Prophet (See J. Mark Sedgwick, *Sufism: The Essentials*, Egypt: The American University in Cairo, 2003, pp. 1–2). Nevertheless, it is widely assumed that Sufism is one way of understanding and approaching God in Islam. Through the medium of spiritual orders and the master–disciple relationship, Sufism had developed several ways of purification. To attain the highest station in Islam, the disciple was entailed to accept the authority and guidance of a realized master (i.e. A Sheik that combined between the knowledge of theology and mysticism) because he had traveled the stages of the Sufi path before them and experienced the divine reality (A. Saeed, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006).
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10. *Ibid.*
11. I. Shah, *The Way of the Sufi*, Bodmin, Cornwall: MPG Books Ltd, 2004, p. 41.
12. See Leigh Hunt's (1784–1859) poem titled “Abou Ben Adhem”, in *Literature, Literary Criticism and National Development* by C. Nnolim, Lagos, Nigeria: Malthouse Press Limited, 2016, pp. 9–10.

13. J. Webster, "Sufism: 'A Natural Antidote to Fanaticism'", *The Guardian*, Oct. 23, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/23/sufism-natural-antidote-fanaticism-the-sufis-idries-shah> (accessed 22 November 2016).
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15. Khalid Duran, "Muslim Diaspora: The Sufis in Western Europe", *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Winter 1991, pp. 463–483.
16. H. T. Norris, *Popular Sufism in Eastern Europe: Sufi Brotherhoods and the Dialogue with Christianity and "Heterodoxy"*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. i.
17. Julianne Hazen, "Beyond Whirling and Weeping: Tasawwuf in America", *The SOAS Journal of Graduate Research*, Vol. 3, 2011, pp. 17–32.
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20. J. Cesari, *Muslims in the West after 9/11: Religion, Politics and Law*, New York: Routledge, 2006.
21. M. Hermansen, "Global Sufism: 'Theirs and Ours'", in *Sufis in Western Society: Global Networking and Locality*, eds. R. Geaves, M. Dressler, and G. Klinkhammer, London: Routledge, 2009, pp. 26–45.
22. M. Muhaiyadeen (Emanuel L. Levin) has described this spiritual master—who has instructed him love—wisdom and human perfection, "as a small, dark-complexioned man who spoke a language called Tamil". In the words of this American Sufi teacher, "[BawaMuhaiyadeen] was love personified, he was mercy personified, he was compassion personified". For more details, see Musa Muhaiyadeen, *The Elixir of Truth: Journey on the Sufi Path*, Philadelphia: The Witness Within, 2014, Vol. 1.
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37. *Ibid.*
38. A. Suliman, "Sufi Sect of Islam Draws 'Spiritual Vagabonds' in New York", *The New York Times*, Sept. 23, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/25/nyregion/sufi-islam-new-york-converts.html> (accessed 23 November 2016).
39. In Islam as well as in Sufism, *dhikr* designates constant remembrance of God; it is every means of praising, eulogizing, or glorifying the essence of Allah. (See O. Morufudeen Olowu, *Dhikr (remembrance) The Sufis perspective*, Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corporation, 2009.
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41. T. Sara Stub, "In Israel, Jews are Adopting Muslim Mystical Practices, Such as the Whirling Dervish Dance", *The Washington Post*, July 28, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/>

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44. A. Pal, *"Islam" Means Peace: Understanding the Muslim Principle of Nonviolence Today*, Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011.
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46. Situated in Madagh in north-eastern province of Berkane in Morocco, the Qadiria Boutshishiya order traces its genealogy to Sheikh Abdel Qadir al-Jilani (1077–1166), who appeared in the fifth century. The nickname "Boutshishia" has been assigned to the order when its Sheikh Ali. b. Mohammed (later nicknamed Sidi Ali Boutshish) was accustomed with feeding people milky-wheat-soup during starvation in his Sufi school. Since 1970, Sheikh Haj Hamza (1922–2017) b. Abbas has led its spiritual affairs, and he has been considered an alive spiritual master, whose popularity crossed Morocco's geographical borders (See D. Marta Diaz. *Women in Sufism*, 2015). Currently, Sheikh Jamal Eddine al-Boutshishi is viewed as an authentic spiritual master after the death of his father.
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55. D. Burke, "Why Muhammad Ali Was 'The Greatest' American Muslim", *CNN*, Jun. 7, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/06/us/muhammad-ali-american-muslim/index.html> (accessed 20 September 2016).
56. Spiritual audition or hymns are chanted by Sufis in one *soirée*. Sometimes they can be accompanied with mystic music and sometimes they are chanted with no music.
57. L. Goodstein, "Sufi Faith Gains a Foothold in Vermont's Green Hills", *The Washington Post*, Jan. 19, 1997, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/01/19/sufi-faith-gains-a-foothold-in-vermonts-green-hills/f6d463ff-e9c2-4eca-a576-e37586ff808b/> (accessed 18 October 2016).
58. Martin Lings is also known as Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din. He was an English scholar best known for his works *Mohammed: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, *What is Sufism* and *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Sheikh Ahmed al-Alawi, His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy*.
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62. P. Culshaw, "The Whirling Wind of God", *The Guardian*, Oct. 16, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2005/oct/16/popandrock3> (accessed 15 September 2016).
63. *Ibid.*
64. P. Amitabh, *"Islam" Means Peace*, 2011.
65. *Ibid.*

66. W. Owolawi, *A Dialogue in the City of Niyod*, Raleigh, NC: Lulu Publishing, 2009.
67. A. Asghar Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt, 2003.
68. *Jihad* comes from the Arabic root *jahada*, which means “to struggle or strive, to work hard at something.” A *jihad* is simply a struggling or striving that is understood in an Islamic context as a striving in the way of God. For some, *jihad* means to strive within oneself to live a life in accordance with God’s will. That is, *jihad* refers primarily to a personal spiritual struggle. For others, *jihad* refers to the struggle to defend oneself when attacked, and in this context often is understood as a kind of defensive warfare (See F. Robert Shedinger, *Jesus and Jihad: Reclaiming the Prophetic Heart of Christianity and Islam*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).
69. F. Nawa, “American Sufi: From Texas to the Taliban, and Back”, *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 12, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-10-12/american-sufi> (accessed 15 December 2016).
70. *Ibid.*
71. *Ibid.*
72. In Islam, Sufism (*ihsan*) is usually regarded as the third phase in religion and it comes after Islam (submission) and Iman (belief). *Ihsan* requires that one “worship God as if you saw Him”. The spiritual realization to which *Ihsan* leads is generally the fruit of long effort, and it implies the practice of spiritual exercise and initiatory methods. See E. Geoffroy and R. Gaetani, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*, Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010.