Sufism: History, Politics and Culture
A CONVERSATION WITH CARL ERNST

INTERVIEWED BY LLEWELLYN SMITH

Sufism is a mystical path based on universal truths that transcend culture, politics and history. At the same time, the trends and practices of Sufism, like those of any spiritual tradition, have been shaped by historical, political and cultural contexts. In this regard Sufi communities in the contemporary world can be seen as dynamic movements whose expressions embrace and are intimately influenced by the cultures of the peoples attracted to these teachings.

No one is better suited to explore these ideas than Carl Ernst, one of the world’s leading scholars of Islamic Studies and Contemporary Sufism. As the William R. Kenan, Jr, Distinguished Professor, Ernst co-directs the Carolina Center for the Study of the Middle East and Muslim Civilizations at the University of North Carolina.

Our conversation in Raleigh-Durham considered questions such as what Rumi might say today, what Ibn Arabi never said, and legacies of European racism that affected how both were understood in the West. We discussed the historical impact of political movements on Sufi communities and the influence of expanding technologies, especially the emergence of print, on the spread of Sufism in the world.

We also examined political and religious forces that have affected Sufism and will continue to threaten it in the future, including the fundamentalist threat to Sufi shrines and mass pilgrimages to these sites all over Asia.

Professor Ernst is the lead academic advisor for an international conference, “Practice and Performance of Sufi Shrines in South Asia and Beyond,” that opens in Aurangabad, India in August, 2014. The focus is the central role of Sufi shrines in Southeast Asia, North Africa, West Africa and other regions.
Much has been made of the need for religious literacy, to know more about the faith and beliefs of others. In your encounters, are you ever dismayed by the pervasive lack of religious literacy? Well, absolutely. The study of religion is an extremely important field in the United States; it’s one of the key ways we deal with diversity. I feel my professional activity is designed to encourage the notion that you can deeply understand another person’s religious or spiritual trajectory without having to join in. We have to retrain academics to write in a less specialized way, to reach a wider, popular readership. And that’s one of my goals.

Research surveys tell us the group most knowledgeable about religion in America are atheists. The least knowledgeable are Catholics and mainline Christians. Mormons know a lot about other religions and minority groups. But a lot of people don’t know really basic information about Muslims, for example, the fact that Muslims accept Jesus as a prophet and revere Mary and worship the same God as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did.

That’s extraordinary—I’m still reeling at what you just said about atheists! No, atheists seem to know a lot. [laughs] I think they probably feel somewhat threatened and feel the need to be aware—people in America say one of the most important qualities in a presidential candidate is their faith in God. Can you imagine an atheist running for President in the US?

No—I don’t think we’re there yet, not even close. Let’s talk for a moment about the spread and influence of Sufism today—in terms of the lived practice, what’s different now? Many people don’t have access to a teacher or master. Has direct access to a master continued to be the central transmission for Sufism in these communities? Well, this is really an interesting point. This direct teaching used to happen much more through personal networks, sometimes overlapping with family and kin structures and so forth, or simply through pilgrimages to shrines, but events like the shift from handwritten manuscript to the printed book changed things.

In Europe, for instance, the printing press and circulation of books made it possible for the average person, or at least a lot of people, to gain new personal access to the Bible. Until then they’d always had it through the authority of the Church.

Are you saying the same thing happened with Sufism? That’s right. Print hit the Middle East and Asia in the 19th century. Until then, these were manuscript cultures. Partly through missionaries and through colonial administrations, printing came to India, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. And Sufi communities were very interested, partly because of the prominence of Sufism in the literatures of the Persian and Arabic world, where many Sufi writings were considered classics, and were soon published and distributed as books.

Imagine that previous to that time, a particular work of Ibn Arabi—the great metaphysical author from Andalus in the 13th century—might have existed in only a hundred hand-copied manuscripts in the entire world. Suddenly there are 500 copies printed, all available in a corner bookshop in Cairo. Just show up with the price in your pocket and take one home. You didn’t have to have access to the royal library—

And suddenly one didn’t require special permission from the shaikh to connect with those teachings or access them. That’s right. And by late 19th-early 20th century in North Africa and India, Sufi groups began publishing their own periodicals with letter columns and the travel schedule of the shaikh.

Then audio recording came along. Remember that prior to around 1900, the only way you could hear music was if the musician was right there. The advent of sound recordings changed everything. For instance in India, what we know as qawwali music, a very popular musical performance related to the Chishti Sufi order, became available on long-playing records. Later you get Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the great Pakistani singer, who recorded over 100 CDs, even fusion albums with Peter Gabriel, things like that. And so Sufi music arose to become a world music phenomenon, with a new audience beyond its traditional listeners.

Now we’re seeing the spread of Sufi websites. Some Sufi groups in India put up a very basic, simple website about their shrine, about the history of their order; others have a very interactive presence, with messages, updates, and downloadable audio talks and videos. There are even interesting discussions among one group on whether people can be initiated via email [laughs]. And that’s all I’ll say about that.

So if Jalal al-Din Rumi were to return, what would he see? What do you think would surprise him most? [Laughs] Well, I think like anybody else from the 13th century, he’d be taken aback by our technological obsessions. And he would probably wonder: are we really still able to get to the substance of things, with all this distracting paraphernalia around us? But Rumi was also an embracing figure. There’s a story told
about him—there’s an old tradition in Islam that there are 73 different religious sects, all going to hell except for one that’s going to be saved. But Rumi said that he approved of them all. So an outraged scholar challenged Rumi’s heresy. And when the guy exploded into his objections Rumi said to him, And I also agree with you, too [laughs].

Would Rumi feel shocked or amused by the popularity of his writing in the world? I think he predicted it. And this is another interesting dilemma, because some European scholars have watched the wide spread of Sufism from its earliest private circles into these mass public followings often associated with pilgrimage shrines, and see this as a decline from original purity into crude vulgarization. It’s kind of a Protestant attitude—when you look at the language of these scholars it’s very apparent their anti-Catholic bias became the lens to interpret this phenomenon. Even so, the astonishing popularity of Sufism over the centuries is well documented.

But Rumi says at the beginning of the *Masnavi* a line I’ll never forget: *har kasi az zen’ne khot, shod yare man*—‘Everyone became my friend from his own opinion.’ And then *az durune man najost asrare man*—‘But he did not seek the secrets that are within me.’ He’s talking about the challenge, the impossibility of communicating the insights, the encounters, the experiences to which he repeatedly drew attention in his work. His literary output is vast, but always he retreated into silence, saying the thing is impossible to express. He was well aware people might not get the full meaning. He wouldn’t be surprised.

But people are still drawn, even where meaning is elusive. That’s right. And that’s not a bad thing. With the Chishtis,
If you’re sitting with people who are overcome by the experience, it communicates itself to you. So sit with the people who are moved by the songs about the Beloved and possessed by longing and the pain of love, and you may catch it.

there’s an interesting, important aspect of their practice. It’s often said that Sufi music is about obtaining ecstasy. So it’s interesting to ask, how do you set about to create ecstasy deliberately? They have a word for ecstasy which is wajd. It’s a very interesting word. It’s an Arabic word used in Persian and other languages. It means “finding,” literally. So on some level, with wajd, either you’ve got it or you don’t. So what do you do if you don’t have it and you want it? There’s a whole series of Sufi writings on this, on the ethics of music and listening (sama). In the discussion of ecstasy, the worst possible thing is to fake ecstasy. It’s hypocrisy. So you can imagine being at a concert, you’re trying to show how groovy you are, so you go through the moves. And this ‘ecstasy-faking’ is condemned very strongly. But there can be something called ‘seeking ecstasy’ or ‘empathetic ecstasy,’ which they called tawajud. With the word tawajud—you can see that wajd is part of the root—the meaning is ‘wanting to find ecstasy.’ They quote the Prophet: ‘If you can’t weep, sit with those who do weep.’ If you’re sitting with people who are overcome by the experience, it communicates itself to you. So sit with the people who are moved by the songs about the Beloved and possessed by longing and the pain of love, and you may catch it. So I don’t think Rumi would be horrified by this in the least, but would accept it as part of human nature.

Wajd—as in wahdat al-Wujud—the phrase often translated as ‘unity of being’—how do the challenges of the current era address or affect our understanding of such a concept? Let’s look more closely to see what we’re talking about. This phrase is commonly used in writings about Sufism: wahdat al-Wujud, which literally means the “unity of existence.” Most people would translate it, “unity of being.” Wujud gets translated as ‘existence’ but suggests encountering something. Not an abstract concept of being, but an encounter with reality. It’s often associated with Ibn Arabi and his metaphysical school. He authored an immense range of complex spiritual teachings. What’s interesting is wahdat al-Wujud is a slogan that he never uses—the expression was developed as a kind of a shorthand to explain his philosophy, which is actually pretty hard to summarize in a single phrase, but was presented in simplified forms, particularly in Persian poetry. And the shorthand version of wahdat al-Wujud was understood by some people as meaning “Everything is God.” In European thought, this was called the philosophical view of pantheism initially associated with Spinoza and European thinkers who said that God is nature. So this particular simple version of wahdat al-Wujud was rejected by lots of people, including conservative Muslim thinkers who thought it was heretical and would lead people into immorality. Because if everything is God, then you can do whatever you want, because you can authorize yourself to do it—
...As God—supposedly—But on a more sophisticated level, when you look at what Ibn Arabi is saying, he’s talking about the difficulty, the complexity of describing the relationship between God and us.

What he does more typically is use formulas that are simultaneously affirming and denying this relationship, to point up the limitations of language and logic. For example the formula: He, not He. In other words, ‘Yes, we are God but we are not God.’ Important qualifications must be considered. What is inspiring is how this opens up the connection of the individual, of nature, of society, of the world, to God as the fundamental order of existence.

But I think the caution here is that there are limitations which exist in our mentalities, potentials and in how we relate to that divine reality, that should warn us against thinking that because we are perhaps such an intimate part of God, we can do whatever we want. So I don’t think he was trying to erase all distinctions.

I have a PhD advisee whose dissertation examines how Ibn Arabi was interpreted in European thought. And it’s quite striking because what most of these European thinkers say about Ibn Arabi—and they often say the same thing about Rumi—is that his greatness is that he was a universal mystic who wasn’t really a Muslim.

**Who was saying this?** European writers. It’s surprising the
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extent to which, starting with people like [Reynold A.] Nicholson [scholar and translator of Rumi and other Islamic mystical texts] over 100 years ago, they still really believed in the racial theories of the Semitic and Aryan races. It was accepted that these fundamental racial differences would show up in the culture and mentality of these people. And so the poetry of Ibn Arabi and Rumi—to the extent that it was approved of by these European scholars—was considered to be 'redeemed' because it had escaped its Semitic environment and become more Aryan. And they're still writing about this. There are racist mentalities everywhere. We know this. Many of the tensions in the Middle East about Arabs versus Persians really draws upon this kind of racist dichotomy. The fact is Ibn Arabi was not somebody who thought it was groovy to say all religions are the same. He actually didn't say that. He was a Muslim. Ibn Arabi wrote in one of his poems, 'My heart is a pasture for gazelles and a place for Christian monks,' and he talks about the Torah and the Gospel, and says, 'My religion is the religion of love. Wherever its camels turn, there is my religion and there is my faith.' It's beautiful. But people have taken this in a simplistic way to say that there are no distinctions, that religions don't actually signify anything anymore. In the case of Rumi and Ibn Arabi, there's a simple way to read them and there's a deeper way to read them.

Let's talk about Sufism as a phenomenon, a world presence; earlier we were talking about numbers of people around the world who identify as Sufis. If we have somewhere around 1.5 billion Muslims around the world, I think most scholars would agree the majority of Muslims—more than half—have some kind of Sufi orientation, even though for 150 years there have been campaigns against Sufism, partly fundamentalist in origin. And there are major local Sufi traditions, as we were discussing, that are enormously popular—often not well known outside of their own region, attracting many non-Muslims to their Sufi shrines.

And the numbers of people who visit these Sufi shrines each year is phenomenal. It's quite phenomenal. The shrine in Senegal of Ahmadou Bamba who opposed French colonization in Senegal (1853–1927)—attracts over two million people annually in the city of Tuba. Senegal is an amazing country because 90% of the population is connected to a Sufi order. They run the country. [For more on Sufism in Senegalese politics, see Sufi Journal, issue #84.]

In Tanta, Egypt the shrine of Ahmad Badawi attracts over a million people. And in northern India, the tomb of Moinuddin Chishti—the founder of the Chishti Sufi Order 1141–1236—has over a million and a half people a year attending the annual pilgrimage festival. And many, if not the majority, are non-Muslims: Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and others. In India many believe it's good to respect the holy people of all different faiths.

In other places governments try to regulate the Sufi shrines, because they attract substantial donations, there's lots of money involved. So in Pakistan and in Egypt you have these official bureaus that are supposed to regulate the Sufi orders and the shrines. In (Saudi) Arabia, there's basically no public presence of Sufi groups at all.

And fundamentalists threaten these shrines? Yes. This is a trend that we've been seeing. And as I mentioned, there have been movements in Muslim societies against Sufism, beginning with the rise of the Wahabi movement in the late 18th century. One of its targets was Sufi shrines, seen as a concentration of wealth, power, and idolatry.

Which shrines were they concerned with? Well, actually they were opposed to all of them. After the Wahabis rose to power in 1925 in Saudi Arabia, they razed to the ground the tombs of all of the Prophet Muhammad's family in Medina—made them a parking lot—not literally, but essentially so. Wahabists insisted these were places of idolatrous worship of human beings.

We know of course about the Taliban and their assault on Buddhist shrines in Afghanistan and Mali, and other places—that's an interesting comparison. There's a kind of theater of destruction that carries propaganda value. In India, Hindu fundamentalists destroyed the tomb of the Sufi poet Wali Deccani in Gujarat ten years ago. He's an unbelievably beloved figure, deeply admired by people of all different religions. The destruction of his tomb was a meaningless, violent act, but created a huge propagandistic impact. In Mali we've seen in the past year an al-Qaeda affiliate ally itself with a local rebellion by Tuareg groups and then go into places revered for centuries in Timbuktu where shrines of Sufi saints are, and destroy them. It's caused a lot of heartache.

The narrative of fundamentalism is both modern, and it's anti-modernist. They claim a rhetoric that reaches back to the so-called 'original purity' of the religion, as if through time travel. The problem is that time travel doesn't actually work. This rhetoric claims purity by arguing all these ideas and practices from medieval times were wrong and should be eliminated. We can compare this reclamation of purity to the Protestant Reformation, when people gave themselves an iconoclastic mission to go into churches, destroy the graven images, get rid of monasteries, and create the possibility of an unmediated relationship between God and the believer.
were extremely cautious. Their leader had been arrested and on the remaining Sufi groups there. They maintain a very high profile and have been openly attacked and put on trial for various imagined crimes. In Afghanistan, the Sufi groups were more or less sidelined when the American and Pakistani governments decided to support the jihadi groups against the Soviets in the eighties. And they're still technically illegal. And in Iran, after the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic has been very hard on the remaining Sufi groups there. They maintain a very low profile and have been openly attacked and put on trial. In the former Soviet Union, which succeeded in effectively eradicating religion of every kind, many people really don't know what Islam is, or Sufism, but they're trying to rediscover it.

It's a very unsettling proposition, I think. Well, it's part of the modern world. I think we're going to have to deal with that for some time.

In that vein, what have been the political challenges for Sufism as a living tradition in modern history and today? One of the main things that we haven't talked about is the nation state, which has emerged as the most powerful type of organization in the world. In 1925 the nation state of the new secular country of Turkey suppressed all Sufi orders in that country. And they're still technically illegal. And in Iran, after the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic has been very hard on the remaining Sufi groups there. They maintain a very low profile and have been openly attacked and put on trial for various imagined crimes. In Afghanistan, the Sufi groups were more or less sidelined when the American and Pakistani governments decided to support the jihadi groups against the Soviets in the eighties.

But historically Sufism has often had its own strong political dimensions, even militant responses to political authority and invasion. In 18th-century Africa—in what is now Nigeria and Cameroon—you have the jihad campaign of Usman dan Fodio (1754–1817). Deeply involved in Sufi traditions. In West and East African history, Sufism is extraordinarily prominent. The Sudanese Mahdi and the revolt against the British in the late 1800s were basically the actions of a Sufi order, with a messianic leader. Sufis resisted Russian invasions in the Caucasus—for example Sheikh Shamil in what is now Chechnya in the 1800s, who's still well remembered. We can also talk about Sufis’ resistance in northwestern China, in parts of India and so forth. Nowadays few Sufi groups are involved directly in that kind of activity, although occasionally one hears about it in Iraq.

And today Sufi communities continue to have to deal with state authority and politics to manage their own existence. Yes. Colonialism is something Americans don't appreciate much, because we think of it in terms of our own colonial history, which is so remote and popularly romanticized. But the colonial invasion and conquest by European powers of eighty-percent of Muslim countries—from the time of Napoleon up to World War I—overthrew all of the traditional sources of patronage and support for Islamic culture, education, spiritual institutions, etc. Before World War I, research tells us one out of eight men in Istanbul was a member of a Sufi lodge. One out of eight. Just in terms of formal organization, that's pretty amazing.

But at the same time, there are Sufi communities that are active in Turkey, yes? In the past 20 years, there's been an increasing presence of Sufi groups, to the consternation of hard core secularists. When I first visited Turkey in 1991, I was invited to a private Sufi dhikr ceremony in Istanbul. They were extremely cautious. Their leader had been arrested and beaten by the police on a number of occasions. This ceremony had to be kept very private. Now it's starting to become more accepted.

In places like Indonesia, also a secular country, there are now television programs about Sufism. They would be familiar to Americans; it's linked up with global ideas, including New Age concepts. In the former Soviet Union, which succeeded in effectively eradicating religion of every kind, many people really don't know what Islam is, or Sufism, but they're trying to rediscover it. In places like Indonesia, also a secular country, there are now television programs about Sufism. They would be familiar to Americans; it's linked up with global ideas, including New Age concepts.

We've talked about the interest of some in the American government to use Sufism politically as the acceptable face of Islam. And you were opposed to that. What you're referring to is the interest of modern governments to exploit Sufism for their own objectives. For example in India the state has seen Sufism as a way of advancing a secular agenda that will be disassociated from Islam. And so Sufis are presented by official publications and media as tolerant figures who are not really Muslim, and therefore should be admired as national figures without a Muslim religious identity.

Now, in certain circles close to the US government, officials have proposed that Sufism would be an acceptable form of Islam that would be friendly to American interests. For instance, a study by the Rand Corporation proposed that Sufi groups could become useful allies in American foreign policy. And I think that's a bad idea. This represents a colonial approach to manipulate particular groups—to make them tools of foreign policy interests. And as an American I don't like that. I think it's a bad idea for spiritual groups to become dependent on political patronage, and it can be corrupting.

How could it not be sooner or later? Yes. I think there's always this question: what should be the relationship between spirituality and political power? Should you stay away from political power because it's inevitably corrupt? Or is there a possibility of providing some kind of positive guidance and direction? These are the tradeoff questions that people are going to have to ask themselves.

Are you hearing that conversation in your travels? It's an old conversation. One of my PhD students did a dissertation recently on debates between reformist Muslims who are critical of Sufi shrines and the defenders of shrine-based Sufism. She found the shrine-based Sufis were actually very proud of the fact that non-Muslims were coming to these places, because it demonstrated in their view the true stature and spiritual greatness of these figures.

Demonstrates its universality. Right, it's a view that does move beyond narrow framings of religious identity. There are those on the other hand who say that Sufism is not really so much about necessarily going to shrines, although that can be perfectly fine, but it's about the way in which spiritual discipline and concentration can liberate you and open up possibilities for you that are not otherwise available.

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