

Book Review: *Sufism in Canada: Weaving Islamic Practice and Contemporary Spirituality*, edited by Geneviève Mercier-Dalphond and Merin Shobhana Xavier. UBC Press: Vancouver, 2025. ISBN: 9780774870702

TANG Zhu (汤 铸), PhD Student

University of Alberta, History, Classics, and Religion

As the first edited volume of its kind, *Sufism in Canada: Weaving Islamic Practice and Contemporary Spirituality* provides a trailblazing collage of discussions on Sufism and popular spirituality in Canada that is both coherent and sophisticated. The editors of the book, Geneviève Mercier-Dalphond and Merin Shobhana Xavier, engage scholars from a variety of disciplines to delineate a set of crucial and complex issues concerning Sufism in Canada, including its history, institutionalization, practices and rituals, debates on Sufism and Islamic orthodoxy, gendered and racialized experiences in Sufism, and more. With combined expertise from Islamic studies, sociology, anthropology, musicology, gender studies, and religion and diaspora, the editors and authors contribute to the void left by “the missing coherent discussion of Sufism in Canada” (p. 7). This book encourages further discussion and debates on Sufism, Islam and popular spirituality in Canada and the Global North writ large.

The four chapters in Part One of the book illustrate the historical development of major Sufi figures and their communities across Canada, emphasizing the diversity of Sufism and Sufi experiences. Geneviève Mercier-Dalphond’s examination of the history of universal Sufism in Canada outlines the inherent and intricate connections between Canadian Inayati followers (the Inayati Order and the Sufi Circle Canada) and their South Asian Islamic heritage. Similarly, Atif Khalil’s study of the Halveti-Jerrahi community in Toronto traces its development with Anatolian/Turkish influence. Probing into the ecological focus of Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee’s group, and Inayat Khan’s followers’ emphasis on spiritual ecology, Chapter 3 encapsulates the convergence of Sufism and reverential naturalism in Western Canada. Marcia Hermansen’s

detailed interviews with Joel Ibrahim Kreps in Chapter 4, exemplify the trajectory of development of Canadian Sufism that intersects with humanistic psychology, Indian yogic ideals, Tibetan Buddhism, and Chishti Sufi teachings. These case studies substantiate the multilayered complexity and plurality of Sufism in Canada. On the one hand, Sufi traditions and Sufi communities in different localities evolved in various paths, each corresponding to particular historical and cultural contexts; on the other hand, Sufism in Canada has been in constant interaction with a wide range of social movements and ideologies, including New Age movements, various forms of countercultures, and diverse religious traditions from South Asia, the Middle East, the US and beyond. This multilayered complexity requires not a simplistic analytical category or labelling, but a nuanced approach that honors particularities of each specific Sufi community. As Merin Shobhana Xavier put it, we shall not see a single unified “Sufism in Canada” but many “*Sufisms in Canada*” (89).

The three chapters in Part Two of the book further destabilize the concept of “Sufism in Canada” as a monolithic category. The Sufi nature of the Montreal Sufi Center is underpinned by the presence (physical or metaphorical) of a shaykh, a musical repertoire, aesthetic decorations, and a multitude of other forms of self-representation, which indicates that “Sufism” is a concrete concept based on intentional efforts of self-construction. In addition, the MTO Shahmaghsoudi Order’s adjusted interpretation and application of classical Sufi concepts, such as emphasizing the social etiquette aspect of “adab” (an essential and multilayered concept in Sufism that is sometimes translated as “culture”), and integrating community service and environmental advocacy into the principle of ‘*ubudiyya*’ (another intricate term that is sometimes translated as “servanthood”), suggest an adaptational endeavor in an ever-changing environment. These adaptations demonstrate that Sufism should be understood as evolving in its particular time and space instead of diverging from a static historical prototype. Moreover, the intrareligious coalescence across different Sufi traditions, and the collective-oriented modes of being studied in Chapter 7 point to the fluidity and flexibility of boundaries between different Sufi communities. Combined, these three chapters effectively problematize essentialist understandings of Sufism and further illustrate that the complexity and plurality of Sufism in Canada lie in not only the history and cultural context, but also practice and rituals.

A riveting component of the volume is its emphasis on Muslim subjectivity, which is evident in the methodologies of the later chapters, especially in Parts Two and Three. Chapter 7 pivots around the spiritual journey of four individuals in the Halveti-Jerrahi Order and the Masjid al-Wali community. The author made it clear that the interior spiritual journey of individual Sufi practitioners, instead of exterior dimensions of reality (*al-dhahir*), is the primary object of study (193). Their subjective sensations in religious spaces, especially aurality, are decisive factors in the spiritual path they chose. Furthermore, all three chapters in Part Three center on first-person accounts and auto-ethnographic narratives on the subjective experiences of Sufi practitioners and scholars, which persuasively unpack the entangled relationships between Sufism and gender, race, and perceptions of Islamic ‘orthodoxy’. In particular, Chapter 9 takes the form of self-imposed questions and responses, and presents a narrative that employs consciously constructed subjective storytelling from two racialized Sufi women to elucidate the gendered reality of Sufism in Canada. Contrary to academic writings that feature participant observation and a third-person perspective, this approach implements Muslim subjectivity as both the method and the aim of study, while acknowledging limitations of positionality, which is both refreshing and compelling.

Chapters in this volume are intentionally organized to facilitate understanding, moving from historical contexts to the pragmatic and quotidian aspects of Sufi experience, and finally to specific individuals' spiritual journeys. This layered structure signifies a gradual zooming-in of analytical perspective, from historical dimensions to lived experiences, in a largely inductive manner. The book does not, however, conclude with a chapter articulating an overarching argument. While the editors foreground the plurality of Sufism in Canada in the introduction, describing it as "a tapestry of numerous threads" (p. 4), the book does not finish with a comparable synthesis. Arguably, the absence of a conclusive chapter can be read as reflecting epistemic restraint rather than as a deficiency. It underscores the difficulty of pinning down Sufism in Canada to a definitive statement. In doing so, the book approaches Sufism in Canada as an intricate assemblage of interconnected communities rather than a fixed definition, positioning plurality not as a problem to be resolved but as an analytical starting point. After all, the ten chapters already establish the complexity and plurality of the various Sufi traditions and their communities in cogent ways. In this sense, the volume emphasizes the necessity of contextualizing studies of Sufism in Canada, while still acknowledging the historical and cultural connections between Canadian Sufi communities and other parts of the Ummah.

A further unresolved question concerns the analytical basis upon which the diversity of Sufism in Canada should be understood. Are the various "*Sufisms in Canada*" distinct primarily because of their different historical roots tied to other parts of the Muslim world, or because they have been developing within different geographical localities in Canada? The ten chapters in this volume demonstrate that various Canadian Sufi traditions intersect with not only broader sociopolitical issues such as race, gender, neoliberalism, and religious orthodoxy, but also transnational influences from a myriad of cultural contexts, most notably South Asia, Türkiye, and Iran. What remains less clear, however, is whether these cultural and geographical factors alone are sufficient to account for the unique characteristics of Sufism in Canada. Given that Sufi traditions globally have long been evolving through constant interactions with broader social and cultural environments, further attention to factors beyond ethnic/cultural origin and geographical location would help inform a better understanding of what distinguishes Sufism in the Canadian context.

Aside from these further points of consideration, *Sufism in Canada* provides a comprehensive overview of Sufism and popular spirituality in Canada, highlighting the diversity of Sufi experiences and the entangled relationship between Sufism and crucial sociocultural issues, such as gender, race, Islamic orthodoxy, Muslim subjectivity, among others. It compellingly dispels an essentialist and simplistic understanding of Sufism that confines it in static analytical categories, and advocates for a nuanced and interdisciplinary approach. Considering its comprehensive scope of inquiry and groundbreaking originality, this volume will benefit readers interested in Sufism and spirituality in Canada, and encourages further studies in the field.

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