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Conceptualization of Islamic Mysticism in European Thinking of the 19th and 20th Centuries

A Summary of Ph.D. Thesis

Author: Mgr. Karel Pikeš

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Questions, thesis and methodologies

The Orientalism of the Palestinian-American literary critic Edward W. Said (1935-2003) has caused a lot of debate in the world of Islamic studies, and his critique led many Western researchers to rethink critically their academic work and to improve awareness of their position of researchers. Alexander Knysh points out that this critique, suprisingly, had little impact on the „sufhiologists“ of the last decade of the 20th century.¹ In his critique, Said remarks that the colonial background of „cabinet academics“, travellers, „colonial academics“, etc, those studying Islam and the „Orient“ led to „distortions and stereotypes“ that served to define the Western „Self“ to legitimize the colonization of „another

¹ Alexander Knysh, „Historiography of Sufi Studies in the West“. In Youssef M. Choueiri (ed.), *A Companion to the History of the Middle East*, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, Vol. 1, 2005 (pp. 106-135), p. 121.

East.“² The distortions were continually reproduced and served the Orientalists to define themselves in the world as such at the same time.³

Said's work was criticized for many reasons, one of them is being too Anglocentric. However, investigators later filled this gap by research of non english-speaking scholars, which led to knowledge expansion about Western historiography of Sufi's research. Another criticism of Said comes from the Albert Hourani (1915-1993). According to this historian Said does not distinguish between different types of Orientalists.⁴ Knysh differentiates two main currents in the study of Sufism: an academic current represented by „cabinet“ academics, philologist who translated, edited and commented on „classical“ Sufi

² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin, 2003, pp. 43-44, 96, 202-203.

³ Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, Boston and London, Shambhala, 1997, p. 202.

⁴ Gaby Piterberg, „Albert Hourani and Orientalism“. In Ilan Pappé and Moshe Ma'oz (eds.), *Middle Eastern Politics and Ideas. A History of Within*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1997 (pp.75-88), pp. 77- 80.

texts, and pragmatic current focused on social aspects of Sufism from the perspective of European colonial policy.⁵ In this context, Edmund Burke III. points out that while „academics“ showed a certain taken of sympathy to the subject of investigation, „pragmatists“ focused on „living Islam here and now“ with its ethnographic and sociological background, and their approach to Sufism was therefore, in general, less empathetic.⁶

This thesis concerns with what influenced the attitudes of Western scholars towards Sufism, what is the distortion extent of western investigation towards Sufism, and how these influenced both Western and Muslims attitude. This work is a critical probe into secondary literature, with the aim of revealing gaps that need to be filled in by means of

⁵ Knysh, „Historiography of Sufi Studies in the West“, s. 118-119.

⁶ Edmund Burke III., „The sociology of Islam: The French Tradition“. In Edmund Burke III. and David Prochaska (eds.), *Genealogies of Orientalism: History, Theory, Politics*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008 (pp. 154-173), pp. 168-169.

further research, so that our comprehension of Sufism improved on the one hand, and some issues concerning Orientalism were asked, on the other.

The main aim of this work is not the analysis of Sufism (although we will not avoid this topic) but the analysis of debates on Sufism from the western perspective (both the „academic“ and the „colonial“), which were often (and sometime still are), as indicated from above, led by ideological and geopolitical view. These debates are analyzed and assessed with the maximum measure of objectivity and impartiality, nevertheless owe to say, no researcher on Sufism (or any other phenomenon) is totally immune to certain „empathy“ for the subject of research. However, as mentioned above, our aim is to be as objective as possible leaving our personal preferences unspoken.

Concerning the methodology of the work, we do not use any specific theory. In contrast to various methodologies used by sociologist, anthropologists,

cultural historians, etc., we use methodologies and theories in cases that shed new light on the aspects we are dealing with. The main aim of this work is to analyze different views and different treatment of western researchers (with a partial contribution of „insiders“) with the phenomenon of Sufism and o present a analyze Western research of this phenomenon.

Structure of thesis – main topic and chapter layout

Contextualization and Categorization of Islamic Mysticism

In the first part of the thesis we work with Sufism as such. In this part of the thesis, we analyse what we consider to be the most important issues related to Sufism in Western provenance, and which resonate in Western scholarly society. The first, and probably the most common question concerning Sufism that we address in this connection, is whether Sufism can be considered a mysticism. In this section, we address possible grounds and arguments for why Sufism can or cannot be considered a form of mysticism as the term is generally understood, pointing to the roots of the term mysticism from which our designation of Sufism as a form of Islamic mysticism springs. Another important question, which is not even now fully resolved, is whether

there is only Islamic Sufism and what reasons lead us to emphasize the adjective Islamic, pointing out the possible cultural and religious clashes that may relate to this term. The third question in this section focuses on Sufism itself. In this section we try to show what the most important issues and problems are related to Sufism. This section introduces Sufism as a phenomenon that should be treated as something that cannot be so easily defined, as it encompasses a huge number of themes and directions. These themes and future challenges conclude Part Four, of this chapter, in which we address the viability of Sufism and possible future challenges.

The West and Sufism – Basic Questions and Challenges

This part of the thesis is devoted to an introduction to the Western study of Sufism and the possible prejudices that Western scholars have had towards Sufism. In this chapter, we want to emphasize the

importance of the personal assumptions of a scholar who is dealing with a foreign phenomenon and who wants to discuss this phenomenon in an erudite manner. Furthermore, we address here what problems Western scholars have had and have to deal with when researching Sufism.

Research on Sufism in the 17th to 19th centuries

In chapter three, we address Western research on Sufism itself. Although the primary focus of this thesis is on nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship on Sufism, we find it necessary to mention in this thesis how the West became at least practically familiar with Sufism, how these scholars discussed it, and what possible preconceptions from this period persist to this day. Therefore, the thesis goes back a few centuries earlier, before the nineteenth century. We thus show how travellers to exotic countries reported on Sufism and what their relationship to Islam and Sufism was. It was then

19th century scholars who are responsible for the emergence of academic research on Sufism. It is to these scholars and the issues that these authors addressed in the colonial period of the 19th century in relation to Sufism that the second part of this thesis is devoted, and in this chapter we show, among other things, that research on Sufism in this period is of a dual nature that to some extent divides these scholars.

At this point we must justify our choice of scholars, whether we are dealing with this period, the previous period or a later period. We are aware that the selection of the scholars we analyse in this thesis is selective, but this selection is unavoidable, as it is simply not possible, due to the diversity, to 'analyse' all the scholars who are and have been concerned with Sufism, also because Sufism has often been a marginal interest of these scholars. In the selection of authors to be examined, we will analyze in particular those mentioned and dealt with

by such contemporary authorities in the field of Sufism as Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003), Luboš Kropáček, Carl W. Ernst and Alexander Knysh.

Research on Sufism at the turn of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century

In this part of the thesis, we analyze the presentation of Sufism by selected researchers and their specific approach from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. On the basis of these specific analyses, we can state that although the views of some of these researchers on Sufism (including origins, sources, etc.) are often rejected today, the basis of research on Sufism was built by these several pioneers of this time, who created a considerable amount of scholarly literature, including critical translations of Sufi literature and studies, as well as biographies of individual Sufi masters and scholars. Simultaneously we conclude, that the approaches of

these specific researchers to Sufism differed and often reflected their academic interests on the one hand, and their personal, intellectual and religious predispositions on the other.

On the grounds of the analyzes of these researchers, we also highlight the fact that in this era essentially two approaches to sufism appear (with a certain degree of simplification): the first one can be characterized as a historical. This approach emphasizes the specific circumstances of progress of Sufism in time and space. From this point of view Sufism is considered as continuous linear evolution of concepts, practices and ideas. Simultaneously with this approach researchers of this era tend to consider Sufism being kind of „trans-historical“ spirituality that despite not being immune against its particular social, cultural and political environment, enjoys certain independence stemming from the „constancy“ of human psyche.

Research on Sufism in the second half of the 20th century

In the penultimate chapter we deal with the Western study of Sufism in the second half of the 20th century. In this chapter a few trends associated with this research are shown: First, there were the works of Western researchers of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century that laid real and word basis for later study of Sufism in the West. Second, a lot of Western „Sufiologists“ of the 1950s and 1960s, likewise their predecessors, relied primarily on philological methods, in terms of Sufism. Besides original Sufi texts publishing researchers of this period tried to spread their understanding and perception of Sufism among (educated) lay readers by translating selected Sufi authors into European languages. Thirdly, although in the 19th and first half of the 20th century the most of publications on Sufism were published by European researchers mainly from Great Britain, Germany and the

Netherlands, in the 1960s the study of Sufism becomes more diverse in other countries due to better base for students. Fourth, the history of Sufi studies in the West in the second half of the 20th century can be seen as a chain of continuity, or even as a „chain of intellectual dynasty“, when younger colleagues picks up the baton from the older ones. Lastly, similarly to some researchers at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, in this period, besides objective academic studies of Sufism, a group of researchers appears that makes Sufism the subject of their personal and religious interest.

Based on our analysis we can state that in many aspects Western research on Sufism in the second half of the 20th century does not differ from the previous one, since almost every researcher consider seeking the Sufism roots in a tradition which he was interested in, as his „obligation“. Therefore, Sufism was a product of sophisticated Iranian/Persian spirituality for „iranologists“, a

Muslim appropriation of Indian religious and philosophical systems for Indologists, and Muslim extension of the Christian monastic tradition for many Western scholars. We point out in this chapter, however, that it cannot be denied that the problem of the Sufism origin served for Western scholars as an impulse to contemplate Islamic mysticism in a comparative perspective.

In this chapter we address other issues that are related to Western research on Sufism in the second half of the 20th century somehow, particularly the issue of the „prosperity“ and „degeneration“ of Sufism. Within this we draw attention to the fact that this western imagination of „degeneration“ and „decline“ of later Sufism is (at least partly) known because of the „complaints“ of medieval and modern Sufi authors. In addition to the topics mentioned above, in this chapter we also touch lightly on the research of Sufism in the 21st century and its possible potential.

Criticism of „Sufis Orientalism“ and Western research

In the last chapter, we are occupied with the critique of „Sufi Orientalism“, where Orientalist do not allow „natives“ to speak themselves, allegedly, and where Orientalists distort the image of Sufism. The Orientalists are, therefore, those who are largely responsible for the current attitude toward Sufism and Islam, by distorting Sufism as a foreign entity in Islam. We are trying to show that Orientalists are certainly not the only one party often separating Sufism from Islam. History examples show many Muslim authorities exist that separate these two phenomena, in a similar way to Orientalists and other Western scholars did. It was Muslim authorities from whom some Orientalists uncritically accepted Sufism not being an Islamic element.

Based on the above, we do not want to claim that the Orientalists did not or do not play a role in

current assumptions and ideas about Sufism, on the contrary. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that one of the major gap that need to be filled when analyzing the history of Western research on Sufism is the gap in our understanding of how the „people of the East“ themselves contributed to the „misrepresentation“ of Orientalist research.

Conclusion

Based on our research in the dissertation, we can state that Western research on Sufism has undergone considerable progress in the last two hundred years, when much knowledge was made not only about Sufism, but also about Islam as such. One of these advances in knowledge is that the history of Sufism shows greater continuity and complexity than researchers, especially in the early 19th century, admitted. Another of these Western findings is that Sufism is not a marginal phenomenon within Islam, which is practiced by several individuals, but is the product of the collective efforts of both Muslim initiates and "outsiders," both of whom interact. It is precisely the combination of the "inner" and often so criticized "outer" view that can be described as the key to our understanding of Sufism as a historical phenomenon. In the words of the Danish-American Orientalist Patricia Crone (1945-2015), when

people see things from their own perspective, much of what they say contributes to the direct propaganda of themselves and the group to which these people belong, without seeing that what they are doing is propaganda and bias, which they cannot see from their own position.⁷ In other words, bias is invisible until seen from the outside. For the sake of the above, it is necessary to take into account both the view and description of "insiders" and "outsiders" for the sake of a certain accuracy when describing a phenomenon. This combination can then contribute to the fact that "initiated insiders" will approach their tradition from a wider and from a more complex point of view.

What nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Orientalists did in relation to Sufism was to transform Sufi ideas into publications for the Western scholarly public, with varying degrees of

⁷ Patricia Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies: Anatomy of the PreModern World*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2003, p. 136.

success and accuracy. In pursuit of this educational goal, European authors of texts on Sufism often reproduced in these texts not only hidden but quite obvious prejudices that they uncritically accepted from their sources. At the same time, these researchers and authors put their own, personal assumptions, beliefs and prejudices into the interpretation of their sources. As is evident from recent and some critical studies on Orientalism, the prejudices of Western scholars have been largely shaped by various categories that were specific socio-cultural constructs.⁸ At this point, it is appropriate to add that, similarly to Sufism, this was also the case with the approach to religion, since the very concept of religion arose in the specific conditions of Christian Europe and served as a basic standard and paradigm for the study of „other religions.“ The same applies to the category

⁸ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion. Post-Colonial Theory, India and „The Mystic East“*, London: Routledge, 1999, s. 185.

"mysticism" (with the adjective Islamic), which clearly refers to Sufism. The unreflective and general application of this Western (European) category of "mysticism" seems to be all the more problematic if we want to apply it to Sufism, but also to the non-Abrahamic religious traditions of India and the Far East, due to significant cultural, social and religious differences between Eastern and Western societies.

One of the aims of this work was to explore and analyze not only what Sufism is, but especially how it has been approached by Western researchers over the past centuries. In our work, we tried not to get bogged down in the blind defense of Sufism on the one hand and biased criticism on the other. However, as Richard King notes, the hope of achieving absolute objectivity is inherently unattainable⁹ and, like other researchers, we too should admit our own shortcomings in the study of

⁹ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, s. 49.

Sufism, which arise from our cultural and scientific milieu. At the same time, as the American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910) exemplifies, leaving us with the hope that we have been at least partly objective in this work, a doctor does not have to be drunk to understand the causes of drunkenness.¹⁰ In other words, in order to understand Sufism objectively and speak about it, we need not be Sufis in this premise, we need not accept the principles and teachings of Sufism as our own. On the contrary, in order to maintain at least a minimum of objectivity, the researcher should remain immune to the attraction of Sufism¹¹, which we hope we have achieved in this thesis.

¹⁰ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, London: Longmans, Green, 1928, s. 448.

¹¹ Knysh, *Sufism*, s. 8.

Activities

Conference Papers

- 2017 – *Selected Questions of Understanding Mysticism in Western View* (European Association for the Study of Religion, Leuven)
- 2019 – *Islámská mystika z evropského pohledu 19. století* (České Budějovice – Jihočeská univerzita v Českých Budějovicích)
- 2020 – *Orientalistický přístup k súfismu* (České Budějovice – Jihočeská univerzita v Českých Budějovicích – Online)
- 2021 – *Je súfismus západní konstrukt?* (České Budějovice – Jihočeská univerzita v Českých Budějovicích)