Review:

Cyber Sufis: Virtual Expressions of the American Muslim Experience (Islam in the Twenty-First Century)

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Abstract

If you have made up your mind that the embodied rituals are the main dominant phenomenon in modern Sufism and the cyberspace can only contribute to the marginalization of religious experience, this book is out to persuade you otherwise. This is an ethnographic study that investigates the virtualization of Sufi rituals, religious education, spiritual practices, and public outreach adopted by the Inyati Sufi order. It is also an attempt to explore an American Sufi digital paradigm that helps to balance the traditional ways of performing rituals and coping with the new age of shifting to cyber rituals.

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The embodied Sufi studies are the most common ones in Sufi literature due to the significance of the body in the Sufi realm. While this is true, this study also comes to be one of the first disembodied Sufi studies that examine the relatively recent cyber Sufism phenomenon. In short, the body is central in the Sufi practices, and that makes the absence of the body unimaginable given the remarkable role of corporeality in classical and modern Sufism. However, the Internet revolution coupled with the increasing social media avenues has created an extremely competitive, and some might even go as far as to say a substitute for traditional ways that dominate the Sufi world

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for ages. To achieve this goal, Rozehnal has successfully selected as a case study one of the oldest and largest Sufi orders in the West and the United States, namely the Inyati Sufi order which was founded by Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882–1927). Rozehnal surveyed the most influential Islamic affiliated groups in the US, and he selected a Sufi one to represent disembodied Islam on account of its wide, hybrid, and diverse audience.

The argument of this book is well-stated and easy to grasp. As Rozehnal succinctly put it, "the 21st century Sufi cyberspace now serves as critical sites and alternative spaces for the American Muslim narratives and networking, identity making and community building, experience and expression…" (p. 20). Substantially, due to its significance in constituting the individual personality and communities and even shaping the public and political behaviors, the identity-making process, as a revolutionary, multilayered, and changing narrative expressed in the cyberspace religious experience, seems to act as a focal point in several places in the book. Simply, Rozehnal argues that unlike the fixed and stable sense of identity, cyber identity is fluid and contingent. "It is 'relational and incomplete' and always under construction…" (p. 12).

In terms of method, the study is an ethnographic study that investigates the virtualization of Sufi rituals, religious education, spiritual practices, and public outreach adopted by the Inyati Sufi order. The author analyses the contents of tens of webpages, blogs, and social media platforms operated and sponsored by the Inyati Sufi order.

As it stands, this book is structured in a way that not only educates its audience but also engages them and calls for critical thought in order to fully comprehend its content. It consists of an introduction and seven chapters in which the first three chapters are theoretical, while chapters four to six are case studies of Inyati Sufi order in the US, and the last chapter is an attempt to find "shared patterns and resonant themes in the broader landscape of contemporary American Sufi digital media…" (p. 17). The introduction situates the American Sufi cyber experience within a broader digital religious framework analyzing the aspects and repercussions caused by this new form

of digital religion. These repercussions have impacted the shaping of identity, altering the religious authority, and even reformulating of the Muslim communities as a whole.

In chapter one, titled *Mapping digital religion and Cyber-Islam*, the author traces the prominent thinkers' theories and methods on the tremendous shift in the religious experience during the digital age. The author brilliantly evaluates the literature on the digital religion and divides it into three phases. Phase one (the mid-1990s) was distinguished by being of a revolutionary, regenerative, and renewal nature. Phase two began in the early of 2000s which directed an emphasis on the "critical reflection and methodological rigor to the field…"(p. 23) Afterwards, phase three with an expansive growth stage has emerged and it is still growing to the present time. Both chapters two and three, *Misinterpreting Sufism* and *Sufism in American religious landscape*, respectively, deeply delve into defining the *tasawaf* (Sufism) which is misinterpreted by the West as well as Islamists alike. The author explains how the term Sufism is an invention of the late 18th century's Orientalist scholarship. Likewise, it was misinterpreted by the Sunni Islamists who were backed by Saudi Arabia and Arab Gulf countries to demonize the tasawaf. In addition, these two chapters situate Sufism in the diverse, hybrid, and multi-identity American religious spectrum.

From chapter four through chapter six, the study offers an extended case study of the oldest and the largest Sufi community in the US and the West, that is the Inayati order that was established by hazrat Inayat Khan in 1910 and had a major institutional engagement under the leadership of his grandson Pir Zia Khan (born 1971). The study narrates the origin and development of this Sufi group drawing the boundaries of its preservation of traditions and the limits of its acceptance of the digital world updates. In further detail, chapter four intensively explains the doctrinal principles of Inayati Sufi group and its systematic institutional transformations manifested in the digital platforms in which they operate. The universality of the spiritual activities offered by Inayati order's websites is affirmed in chapter five that is referred to as "the church for all" based on the diversity and hybridity of the audience interested in these spiritual activities. In chapter

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six, the author explains that these Sufi websites are not restricted to spiritual practices, rather they go beyond that to engage in social services that help the civil society in terms of education, nursery, health care, and public outreach. One of the strengths of chapter six is that it makes good use of the previous literature and builds on the recent outcomes of the digital studies done by pioneers of the media and digital religion such as Christopher Helland, Heidi Campbell, and Gary Bunt.

In the concluding chapter, Rozehnal offers new voices and pulls many accounts from other Sufi camps especially those of Siri Lankan and Turkish roots comparatively with Inayati digital experience, which is singled out for its fluidity, hybridity, and adaptability. Lastly, he concludes with his expectation about the future of cyber Sufism in the US to be more engaged in the virtual world which is proven to be an active tool for the Sufi experience and expression. He optimistically hopes that some ethnographic scholars will complete the other half of his journey in this book to identify the overlapping, reciprocity, and complementary online and offline Sufi worlds.

Although the author has successfully chosen the most leading and dominant Sufi order in the US and even in some European countries, the online platforms used by this Sufi order for its rituals or religious education are only a glimpse of the cyber shift in American Sufism, and further research is necessary in order to have a valuable reflection on the cyber shift in the American Sufism. It would be more fruitful if the study covered more than one leading Sufi orders in the US to properly accomplish the purpose of the book: "The Internet's unique affordance along with its underlying messiness facilitate what Homi Bhabha calls 'a contradictory and ambivalent space for enunciation' opening up new avenues for individual agency, social transformation and the inversion of offline real world power dynamics…" (p. 6–7). In addition, Sufi rituals that are crucial in drawing an integrated picture of cyber Sufism have not received enough discussion in terms of their impact on constituting the religious community and shaping the identity within the chapters of the book. Instead, the author predominantly details how Sufi spiritual activities are received and interacted by the targeted audience. Another point of criticism is that when stating his method, the author

acknowledges that he uses an incomplete method that relies exclusively on analyzing the webpages, blogs, and social media as ends in themselves. Instead, this work would have required intensive fieldwork, interviews, and surveys within the actual Sufi community of Inayati, in order to build an integrated picture of the cyber Sufi experience in the US. The urgency for such fieldwork is much-needed especially when a challenging crucial question is left unanswered. The crucial question that the study raised is if the practice of online blessings and ritual performances is achieved successfully with the same value as if they were performed in person. I think this question needs intensive interviews with Sufi religious leaders, disciples, and even the followers of these Sufi online platforms from various religious affiliations.

This criticism aside, this is a fascinating book in exploring an American Sufi digital paradigm that helps to balance the traditional ways of performing rituals and coping with the new age of shifting to cyber rituals. It is a very strong introduction to these traditions, and it should be read by students, academics, and nonspecialists who are interested in digital religion, cyber Sufism, and cyber spirituality, and who would find great benefit by using this book as a starting point for their studies.