

Stephen Schwartz, *The Other Islam: Sufism and the Road to Global Harmony* (New York and London: Doubleday, 2008), pp. x + 275, £15.94, ISBN 978-0385518192 (hbk).

The Other Islam: Sufism and the Road to Global Harmony is an ambitious and inspired intellectual endeavour on many levels. In this work Stephen Schwartz undertakes to encapsulate on an encyclopaedic scale the story of Sufism, one of the most fascinating and so far relatively unknown and largely ignored, underestimated, abused and often persecuted 'sects' of Islam both in the Muslim world and globally, covering almost everything of importance regarding its achievements and setbacks from its inception in the twelfth century (perhaps earlier) until the start of the twenty-first century.

According to Schwartz, Sufism has contributed considerably in spreading Islam perhaps from the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the four Caliphs onwards. It is debatable whether, as Schwartz often claims, Islam spread across the globe primarily through peaceful means, but Schwartz makes a strong case in this book that Islam owes much of its expansion to the peaceful preaching of Sufi orders. So, for instance, he holds that, following the destruction of the Baghdad caliphate in 1258, it was mainly by the Sufi path that, like their ethnic Turkic cousins, the Mongol rulers of Iran and Iraq came to Islam (pp. 123–4).

Schwartz sees Sufism as an early genuine effort on the part of some Muslim scholars and mystics to offer some form of resistance to tendencies to 'Arabize' Islam and Sufi orders, and as a manifestation of Islamic pluralism. The grouping of Sufi students, after Sufi mysticism became institutionalized in Islam, argues Schwartz, is indicative of what Sufism has in common with Christian monastic institutions, the Jewish schools of traditional Kabbalah and sacred communities of Chasidism (p. 8). In this context, referring to Khalid Durán, one of the most important points Schwartz highlights in his book is the claim equating the rise of Sufism with protests against corruption and wealth (p. 40). This, together with the 'fracture' running through Islamic history between the 'legalists', who are hunters of heresy and haters, and the mystics, who are pluralists and lovers, indicates that the early students of Sufism were, to some extent, trying to do for Islam what Franciscans and Dominicans in the thirteenth century were doing for Christianity: preach the significance of leading a simple and fully devoted religious life at a time when it was becoming obvious that the church was becoming increasingly concerned with amassing wealth, a tendency which, as it became stronger, was one of the reasons that led to Reformation.

Schwartz's book is a welcome publication at a time when, following the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, misperceptions of and bigotry against Islam and Muslims have increased, especially in the global west. Yet, the book is not intended to exonerate Islam; one of its purposes is to inform readers of how little they know of a faith that continues to be largely misunderstood, pigeonholed and demonized as a result of externals as much as internal factors. Likewise, Schwartz is critical of Sufi scholars who, in his view, fail to realize what Sufis have contributed to

Islam. In referring to the Sufi scholar G. F. Haddad of the Naqshbandi order, Schwarz is critical of his attempt to 'enclose Sufism in a framework of orthodoxy' (p. 151).

Schwartz believes that Sufis' traditional superior adherence to legal and intellectual pluralism makes it more imperative for the west to 'abandon dismissive insults' (p. 29) about Sufism as 'folk Islam', especially now when it has become clear that relations with the community of Muhammad can no longer be handled only through Sunni and Shia intermediaries. Sufism is a natural bridge builder between Islam and the global west; in particular, they need each other to win 'their common battle against Islamist radicalism'.

One of Schwartz's claims that will take by surprise readers influenced by the 'Islam-as-a-threat' discourse, is that Islam, as the history of Sufism reveals, has from the start attempted, sometimes successfully and other times less so, to foster pluralism in its midst, that it has benefited from and inspired both Jewish and Christian mysticism, and that it has influenced and inspired some of the best writers in the global west including Dante, Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau and Lessing.

One cannot help thinking after reading this book that rather than a two-branch faith—Sunni and Shi'ite—Islam is a three-branch religion: Sunni, Shi'ite and Sufi. I understand this is not the reason Schwartz wrote the book, neither is it what he believes he has conveyed in the work. The best of books, in my view, generate their own meanings. The fact that *The Other Islam* is such a book is yet another proof of Schwartz's outstanding erudition and veneration for Islam in general and especially Sufism as an important player in our collective endeavours to achieve global harmony.

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