

Sufi Reform in Eighteenth Century
India: Khwaja Mir Dard of Delhi
(1721–1785)

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Stephan Conermann

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To wonderful Soroush

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Notes on Transliteration

Transliteration for Arabic and Persian words follows the system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES), with the exception of short vowels *e* and *o* and the diphthong *ow* instead of *i*, *u* and *aw* in Persian words. Transliterations in the titles of works published in Western languages as well as in cited references are preserved. Book titles in Arabic are transliterated in the Arabic system, regardless of whether their content is in another language such as Persian. For the purpose of readability, diacritics are not added to personal names, place names, and names of organizations (except in the cases of ‘*ayn* and *hamza*).

Introduction

It was in the year 2008, when I had begun reading Annemarie Schimmel's *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India*,¹ that the initial spark for the idea of writing about reform and transformation in modern Sufism² came into my mind. Before propounding an analysis of the background of eighteenth century Delhi in the first chapter of the book, in its foreword, Schimmel criticized historians for having ignored the great alteration that took place in eighteenth century Sufism. She disagreed with the then well-accepted idea that the thirteenth or at best the fifteenth century had been the end of the history of Sufism, thus classifying the following period as decadent.³ The key phrase: "great change in the eighteenth century Sufism," sounded a motivating idea to me and it prompted the start of my investigation into the existence and quality of such asserted alteration. My curiosity in this regard was rooted in the general approach of Iranian academia to the history of Sufism, in which I had received my pre-doctoral education. There, the history of Sufism was usually described as beginning with proto-Sufi asceticism, continuing with love and ecstatic Sufism, and finally reaching its zenith in the mystical theosophy of the thirteenth century. Such a hegemonic understanding is reflected in major Persian literature of recent decades, read by both scholars and students of the history of Sufism, including 'Abd al-Husayn Zarrinkub's two-volume *Justujū dar Taṣavvuf-i Īrān* ("Investigating Iranian Sufism")⁴ and *Dunbāla-i Justujū dar Taṣavvuf-i Īrān* ("The

¹ This book, which was first published by E.J. Brill in 1976, consists of two major parts, the first studying Mir Dard's life, poetry and religious thought in the form of an introductory report, and the second dealing with the same for Shah 'Abdul Latif (d. 1752), the famous mystical poet of Sindh. Its title alludes to the names Dard ("Pain") and 'Abdul Latif ("The Servant of the Gracious").

² Whenever "modern Sufism" is used in the present work, it should be understood as referring to Sufism from the seventeenth to nineteenth century, with a particular focus on the eighteenth century.

³ Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), xi.

⁴ 'Abd al-Husayn Zarrinkub, *Justujū dar Taṣavvuf-i Īrān* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1978). Zarrinkub begins the history of Sufism here with the heritage of pre-Islamic Iranian religions adopted by Sufis and ends with the Malamatiyya and Qalandars, after dealing with Rumi and al-Ghazali as representatives of the Bagdad and Khorasan schools of Sufism respectively.

Sequel of Investigating Iranian Sufism”),⁵ his *Arzish-i Mirās-i Šūfiyya* (“The Value of Sufi Heritage”)⁶ and the second volume of *Baḥṣ dar Āṣār va Afkār va Ahvāl-i Ḥāfiẓ* (“Discussion of the Works, Ideas, and States of Hafiz”) in which the author, Qasim Ghani, deals with the history of Sufism up until the fourteenth century, the time of Shams al-Din Muhammad Hafiz-i Shirazi (d. 1390), a wellknown Persian poet and Sufi who lauded the joys of love while targeting religious hypocrisy.⁷ In these works, the era of Ibn al-‘Arabi (d. 1240) and Rumi (d. 1273), the most significant Sufi thinkers of the thirteenth century, is considered as the “golden age” of Sufism, after which it witnessed only echoes of this magnificent bygone epoch, if not its degeneration. They give the impression that expressions of Sufism after this age are undeserving or unworthy of being the focus of serious examination. In addition, Sayyid Dhia al-Din Sajjadi, while discussing the history of Sufism in three general periods in his *Muqaddama-yi bar Mabāni‘-e ‘Irfān wa Taṣawwuf* (“An Introduction to the Foundations of Mysticism and Sufism”), explicitly categorizes the third period from the tenth century of the hijri calendar onwards under the rubric of stagnation. The two other timespans in his model are: (a) Sufism’s formation from its beginning to the end of the fifth hijri century, followed by (b) the period in which one witnesses the spread of practical mysticism, the zenith of theoretical and theosophical mysticism and Sufi literature until the end of the ninth century.⁸

In such a scholarly environment, which is not unique to only Iran in the Islamic world, one seldom encounters topics dealing with modern

⁵ Idem, *Dunbāla-i Justujū dar Taṣavvuf-i Īrān* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1981).

⁶ Idem, *Arzish-i Mirās-i Šūfiyya* (Tehran: Arya, 1965), 246–66. This monograph includes themes such as the origin of Sufism, asceticism, Sufi elements such as intuition and mystical stages and states, the establishment of *khānaqāhs*, as well as Sufi theosophy, poetry and literature. However, the book only deals with modern Sufi orders such as the Dhahabiyya very briefly in its third chapter, and points out the decay of Sufism in modern times in its sixth chapter, while explaining the critics of Sufis along with the relationship between Sufism and shari‘a. Yet the author does deal with modern Sufism in his *Dunbāla-i Justujū dar Taṣavvuf-i Īrān*, and furthers his discussion by going on to cover Mulla Sadra (d. 1640), Fayyaz-i Lahiji (d. ca. 1661) and Fayz-i Kashani (d. 1680). There he emphasizes the continuity of Sufism in modern Islam and expresses the idea of decay in several aspects of the Sufism of that time.

⁷ Qasim Ghani, *Baḥṣ dar Āṣār va Afkār va Ahvāl-i Ḥāfiẓ*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Zawwar, 1983).

⁸ Sayyid Dia al-Din Sajjadi, *Muqaddama-yi bar Mabāni‘-e ‘Irfān wa Taṣawwuf* (Tehran: Samt, 2000).

Sufism, in either courses and seminars or in conferences and academic discussions on Islamic mysticism.

The question of continuity or transformation in modern Sufism motivated me to read other literature in the field, one significant example of which was Jamal Malik's "Muslim Culture and Reform in 18th Century South Asia."⁹ The article puts the question of continuity and decay versus change in modern Sufism in the framework of the controversies over Sufi reform, connecting it with the debates concerning the Muslim world in the eighteenth century and the notion of an Islamic enlightenment. Being linked to these discussions, the question became more stable and clear for me, and it could then take root in a proper background, namely the wider discourse of Sufi reform. Further investigation led me to trace the important scholars who have been involved in the discussion concerning transformation and continuity in modern Sufism. Fazlur Rahman, for instance, propounds the debated notion of "Neo-Sufism,"¹⁰ which has been discussed widely by both advocates and opponents of Sufi reform. John O. Voll deals with change in organizational Sufism and discusses the centrality of the Haramayn, that is Mecca and Medina, in spreading Islamic revivalism that included elements of Sufi orders during the eighteenth century.¹¹ Reinhardt Schulze asserts that a transformation took place in Sufism

⁹ Jamal Malik, "Muslim Culture and Reform in 18th Century South Asia," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 13, no. 2 (2003): 231. Here, Malik points to the phenomenon of a dichotomy between Europe and Asia that arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. According to him, in the wake of a change of paradigm into modernity, a sense of intellectual superiority arose in European self-consciousness which caused Europeans to dissociate themselves from the "orient" and "Islam" in order to define their own identity. This dissociation took place alongside the idea that the eighteenth century in the orient was an era of political and societal decay and intellectual stagnation. Malik attempts to rethink this dichotomy and brings forth the question of whether a kind of change in paradigms started even before colonial penetration into eighteenth century South Asian culture. He discusses the theme of Sufi transformation as an important factor in analyzing such indigenous change. *Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1979), 195. For details regarding "Neo-Sufism," see the chapter "Pre-Modernist Reform Movements" in this book as well as idem, "Revival and Reform in Islam," in *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 2B, eds., P.M. Holt et. al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

¹¹ John Obert Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 51. Voll considers Mecca and Medina as major centers for Islamic studies in the eighteenth century, during which the teachers of the Haramayn held a great significance for the entire Muslim world. According to him, it was in these centers that an interregional network of hadith scholars and teachers, who carried their experiences from Mecca and Medina to their respective homelands, was formed and

during that time in support of his theory of an “Islamic enlightenment,”¹² which was criticized by a group of scholars denying the existence of any enlightened tendencies in the worldview of the Islamic eighteenth century.¹³ Such debates show that the question of continuity versus transformation in modern Sufism can serve as a proper basis for examination and discussion in the field of Islamic mysticism in particular and the history of Islam and Muslim culture in a more general sense. As far as the field of Islamic mysticism is concerned, the idea of a degeneration of Sufism after its golden era is not limited to only Iranian or Muslim scholarship. It is also not only the early Western historians of Sufism like A.J. Arberry, the author of the first concise history of Sufism entitled *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam*, who argue quite radically and explicitly for the degeneration of Sufism after the fifteenth century,¹⁴ but also more recent Western works dealing with the history of Sufism, such as Alexander Knysh’s *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*, to a large extent follow the same framework. In his “general” history of Sufism, Knysh mostly concentrates on its early and medieval period, dedicating only one chapter to modern Sufism under the title “Sufi Institutions in Regional Contexts Over the Last Six Centuries,” which briefly tackles the entire issue of the development and activities of Sufi orders from the thirteenth century to the present.¹⁵ In his

would become involved in the reorientation of Sufi tradition. Twelve of the most prominent teachers of this core group were major figures from different backgrounds, all of whom were involved in hadith scholarship and had *tariqa* affiliations with orders that were involved in the development of Neo-Sufism. For more information about eighteenth century reform, see John Obert Voll, “Foundations for Renewal and Reform: Islamic Movements in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹² Reinhard Schulze, “Was ist die islamische Aufklärung,” *Die Welt des Islams* 36, no. 3 (1996).

¹³ Some of the criticisms of Schulze’s idea are addressed below.

¹⁴ Arthur John Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950), 119–33. Arberry asserts that although the history of the decline varies from country to country according to the circumstances, its general pattern is fairly consistent throughout the Islamic world: “It was inevitable, as soon as legends of miracles became attached to the names of the great mystics, that the credulous masses should applaud imposture more than true devotion; the cult of saints, against which orthodox Islam ineffectually protested, promoted ignorance and superstition, and confounded charlatanry with lofty speculation. To live scandalously, to act impudently, to speak unintelligibly—this was the easy highroad to fame wealth and power.” *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁵ Alexander D. Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). The author brings forth a historical overview of the evolution of Sufism according to which he considers the Sufism of the eighteenth century as exhibiting continuity with medieval Sufism

recent *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism*, however, Knysh took the approach of seriously considering modern developments in Sufism and mentioned that from the eighteenth century on, Sufism in its regional and institutional forms has come to serve as a major vehicle for reform and spiritual rejuvenation in some, although by no means all, Muslim societies. He asserts that since his approach to Sufism in this book is novel in many respects and departs from traditional historicist perspectives that he himself had adopted in his earlier works, thus the title describing it as “a new history” of Islamic mysticism.¹⁶ The examination of modern Sufism can thus compensate for the lack of studies on Sufism and Sufi figures of the modern era, and duly expose this era to the focus of further academic investigation.

Regarding the field of the history of Islam and Muslim culture in general, the debates over Muslim reform in the the eighteenth century nurtures recent disputed topics such as transformations in the beliefs and attitudes of Muslims in the modern era, indigenous Muslim modernity, Islamic enlightenment in the eighteenth century and the role of Muslims in the construction and formation of the modern world. The transformation of Sufism in modern times is a crucial element that can make analysis of these topics in the context of Islamic culture more feasible. The question of change and reform in eighteenth century Islam has been discussed by a broad spectrum of scholars from specialists in Islamic mysticism to scholars of the history of Islam and historians with a sociological approach to Muslim culture. Among the latter, the abovementioned Schulze, for example, held that there had been a major historical transformation and radical change that distinguished the Islamic eighteenth century from the previous periods of Islamic history. During the 1990s, Schulze initiated a controversial debate by asserting the possibility of considering an experience

and being another stage in the development of the the largely twelfth century institution of the *ṭarīqa*. He propounds a process of Sufi development from primitive ascetic communities of the seventh and eighth centuries, who were the first Muslim devotees and “moral athletes,” to a series of highly sophisticated doctrines that circulated within a hierarchical institutional framework known as the *ṭarīqa* in the twelfth century, which became a dominant feature of the Muslim social order and flourished from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries. These orders, in his point of view, suffered a profound spiritual and institutional decline at the beginning of the twentieth century and, more recently, are experiencing an incipient revival.

¹⁶ Alexander D. Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 10, 177.

similar to the European enlightenment in eighteenth century Muslim culture, calling for an examination of the traces of autochthonous processes of Islamic Enlightenment during that period. He particularly emphasized the necessity of research into mystical and poetic texts of eighteenth century Muslims.¹⁷ Being a proponent of Schulze's theory, Malik categorizes the history of Sufism into different historical phases, the fifth of which, spanning roughly from 1700 to 1900, is characterized by transformation and is an era of political, social and cultural reform taking place simultaneously in various areas across the Muslim world, from South East Asia to North Africa. This phase, according to him, exhibits a powerful wave of Sufi rethinking, the important feature of which is an ethical concept related to immediate access to the Prophet, making direct initiation into Sufism increasingly possible.¹⁸

Long before such categorization of the history of Sufism and prior to Schulze's aforesaid debate, in 1953, H.A.R. Gibb drew attention to nineteenth century revivalism in Sufism in territories such as India and Central Asia. He noted developments in the early decades of that century that involved the formation of reformist missionary congregations on a strict orthodox basis, which were organized along the lines of the Sufi

¹⁷ Schulze, "Was ist die islamische Aufklärung," 296. See also idem, "Das islamische achtzehnte Jahrhundert: Versuch einer historiographischen Kritik," *Die Welt des Islams* 30, no. 1–4 (1990), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1571049>; and Albrecht Hofheinz, "Illumination and Enlightenment Revisited, or Pietism and the Roots of Islamic Modernity," accessed December 15, 2018, http://folk.uio.no/albrech/Hofheinz_IllumEnlightenment.pdf. Schulze's postulating a worldwide process of eighteenth century enlightenment encompassing all cultures, but particularly in the lands of Islamic civilization, was confronted by several critics. In addition to Radtke's criticism addressed below, see Rudolf Peters, "Reinhard Schulze's Quest for an Islamic Enlightenment," *Die Welt des Islams* 30, no. 1–4 (1990): 160–62, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1571050>; Tilman Nagel, "Autochthone Wurzeln des islamischen Modernismus: Bemerkungen zum Werk des Damaszener Ibn 'Abidin (1784–1836)," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft* 146, no. 1 (1996); and Gottfried Hagen and Tilman Seidensticker, "Reinhard Schulzes Hypothese einer islamischen Aufklärung. Kritik einer historiographischen Kritik," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlaendischen Gesellschaft* 148, no. 1 (1998). A balanced view is also taken by scholars such as Ulrich Haarmann, "'Ein Mißgrieff des Geschicks'. Muslimische und westliche Standpunkte zur Geschichte der islamischen Welt im achtzehnten Jahrhundert," in *Geschichtsdiskurs*, vol. 2, eds., Wolfgang Kuettler et. al. (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994).

¹⁸ Jamal Malik, "Introduction," in *Sufism in the West*, eds., Jamal Malik and John Hinnells (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 8–9. Malik categorizes the history of Sufism into seven phases, from the development of individual mysticism around the year 700 until the contemporary phase of Sufism in diaspora.