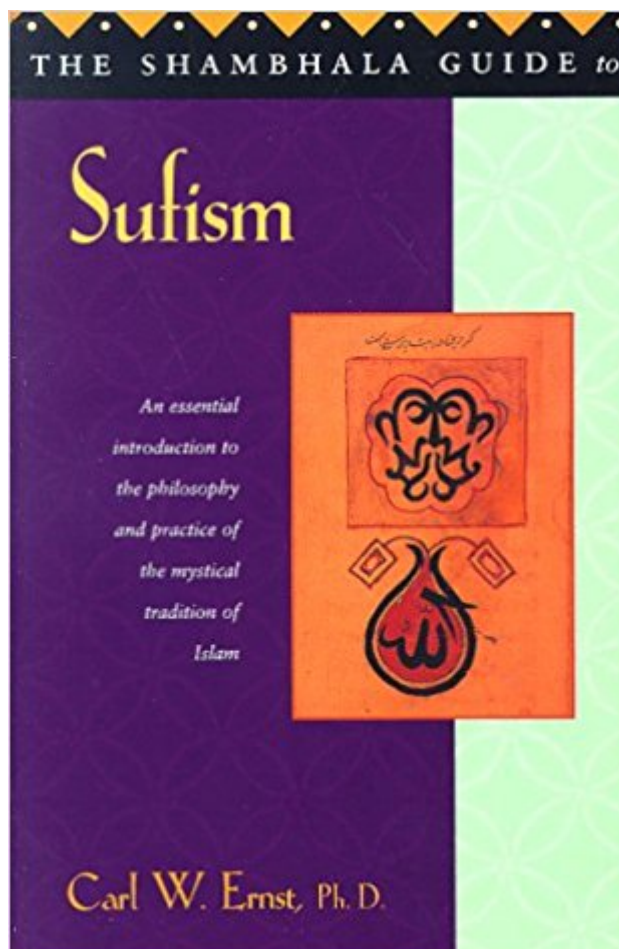


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The Shambhala Guide To Sufism



Synopsis

The soaring voice of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the ecstatic dance of the Whirling Dervishes, the rapturous verse of Jalaluddin Rumi—all are expressions of Sufism, often regarded as the mystical tradition of Islam. Who are the Sufis? They are more than mystics; they are empowered by the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad. They are guided by saints and masters. They belong to orders ranging from North Africa and Turkey to India and Central Asia. In addition to prayer and fasting, they practice techniques of meditation. They recite poetry, delight in music, and perform dance, all towards one goal—union with God, the Divine Beloved. This comprehensive introduction clarifies the concept of Sufism and discusses its origin and development. In addition, the author discusses the important issues of Sufism's relationship with the larger Islamic world and its encounters with fundamentalism and modern secularism, along with the appropriation of Sufism by non-Muslims and the development of Sufi traditions in the West.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Shambhala; 1st edition (September 23, 1997)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1570621802

ISBN-13: 978-1570621802

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 0.8 x 8.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #491,699 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #161 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > Sufism

Customer Reviews

It's difficult to find a more meticulous introduction to Sufism than the Shambhala Guide. Professor of Islamic studies Carl W. Ernst shows us the many facets of Sufism, from the time of Mohammad to contemporary Sufic leaders. He introduces both the political sphere of Sufism--how the orders have played significant social roles and because of this are persecuted by modern fundamentalists--and the personal sphere--the relationship between master and disciple, the sacred texts, the mystical experience. Ernst also provides critical background information for poetry, music, and dance that is difficult to find in the many Sufi literary anthologies. Shambhala Publications may have gotten more scholarship than they expected from Ernst, but the occasional hairsplitting is welcome for its

absence elsewhere in English Sufic literature.

Carl W. Ernst, Ph.D., is professor and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. A specialist in Islamic mysticism, he has spent research tours in Pakistan, India, and Turkey. He is also the author of *Words and Ecstasy in Sufism* and the translator of *The Unveiling of Secrets: Diary of a Sufi Master* by Ruzbihan Baqli.

Average needed for the class

it is a good read

This book's greatest strength is also its greatest weakness: Ernst writes his introduction to Sufism from a strong socio-historical standpoint with both eyes focused on Orientalism, that is, how the West has portrayed Islam (among other traditions) in ways that have been less than accurate. This is welcome. Yet, in focusing so much on socio-historical issues, Ernst ends up sacrificing the larger picture of what it is that Sufism is about phenomenologically and theologically. Ernst does explain some things quite well, though, such as the development of Sufi orders, the role of the shaik to the disciple, art, dance, and meditation practices. Particularly fascinating is the brief discussion on the relationship between Islamic fundamentalism and Sufism. Sufism is viewed by the fundamentalists as a type of heretical pseudo-Islam, and the Sufis have been persecuted and killed in many places by over-zealous fundamentalists. What Ernst's book shows is that many of these supposedly heretical practices are actually rather traditional expressions of Islamic mysticism and spirituality, with roots stretching back quite far. Socio-historical perspectives aside, though, you won't learn much about the spirit of Sufism. For that, I would recommend Annemarie Schimmel's *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* as an excellent place to start. Then, for a greater insight into socio-historical issues, you may continue with reading Ernst's book.

It's probably easier to define what this book is NOT, rather than what it is. It is not a compendium of Sufic thought or Sufi lore, so if that's what you're looking for, look elsewhere. Fortunately, there are any number of other books that can satisfy your curiosity in these areas. What this book tries to do is perhaps more difficult - sort out the various Sufi organizations worldwide and provide some intelligent guidance on their affiliations, origins and characteristic beliefs. Some may balk at the suggestion of approaching Sufism in this way; however, anybody who has spent some time in the

Middle East can confirm that on a day-to-day level the Sufic brotherhoods often act as nothing more esoteric than any other faith-based fraternal organization you may find in the West, and most of their members are far from being spiritual masters. On this basis the book purports to help the would-be spiritual seeker get his bearings. I would say there is a need for such a book, and anyone interested in Islamic spirituality as it is currently practiced would probably gain much from this guide.

For those studying Islam, Ernst's introduction to the "mystical" tradition of tasawwuf provides a well-rounded overview of the significance of Sufi practices, interpretation, and philosophy. He makes little attempt to solidify the term "Sufism," however, insisting that in orientalist usage it has been a construct of recent origin, with the aim of splitting the more highly respected esotericism from the dry legalism of Islam (partially in attempting to explain the Sufi tradition as an offshoot of other mystical traditions, rather than "native" to Islam). Ironically, many Islamicist reformers (which he traces to some extent from the puritanical 'Abdul-Wahhab, who ravaged shrines of Sufi saints and Shi'a notables in an effort to purify Islam of their perceived taint) attempting to excise perceived extraneous and thus corrupting influences to pristine Islam, have tried to do nearly the same thing. Though I find his post-modernist disavowal to dismiss the fantastical elements of Islamic and Sufi belief as tripe, and his over-reaching aim to find the most congenial face of Islam all too typical, I felt I profited by reading Ernst's book. His PhD training certainly didn't aid him in creative writing, however, and if his stated purpose was to reach those outside of his specialty, his style of writing is an abysmal failure. But I suppose I am just spoiled by those writers who are able to introduce novel angles towards longstanding subjects, who rather than writing merely from a skeletal outline, are able to infuse their pages with chutzpah. In other words, they provide a helping of entertainment with their edification. If he had gone so far as to get out of the library (other than the few short and dull remarks he makes about being present at a few Sufi functions), I thought that he could have interviewed Sufi personalities, fans of qawwali (a type of Sufi music), etc. But I would suppose that would abolish the pretenses of the "objective" scholar, disdainful of mere journalism, living solely in a dimension of pure thought energy, free from emotion of any stripe.

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