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Sufism as “Mysticism”: A Global Religious History Approach

It is rare to see Sufism mentioned without immediately stating that it is Islam’s “mysticism”. Using the method of global religious history, this lecture examines the genealogy of that approximation through twentieth-century Orientalist, Traditionalist, and Perennialist discourses (Louis Massignon, René Guénon, Henry Corbin), while foregrounding the role of Muslim intellectual agents working in postcolonial, entangled contexts, such as Inayat Khan, Muhammad Iqbal, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Seyyed Naquib al-Attas. This convergence facilitated the academic consolidation of “Islamic mysticism” as a field largely synonymous with Sufism. Corbin’s work, and later Nasr’s, notably centred Shi’ism within discourses on “mystical Islam,” responding to earlier paradigms that separated Sufism and Shi’i esotericism, yet doing so within a perennialist framework that construed both as expressions of a universal mystical tradition.

Drawing on Talal Asad’s critique of universal definition of “mysticism” and Richard King’s analysis of “mysticism” as a modern, Western, and Christian-inflected category, the paper argues it is primarily a marker of twentieth-century comparative and translational processes grappling with *al-bāṭinīyya* – Islamic esotericism – which is a more historically grounded framework for understanding how Sufi and Shi’i traditions articulated modes of divine knowledge, authority, and mediation within Islam via esoteric exegesis. Read in this way, “mysticism” does not name an indigenous Islamic phenomenon but signals a dense field of entanglements between Orientalist comparativism, Muslim projects of globalisation and modernity, Western esoteric appropriations, and late-capitalist rebrandings of Islamic esoteric legacies, most visibly in the phenomenon of “Rumimania.”



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