

## EDITORS' PREFACE TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

### Sufism, Pluralism and Democracy

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Three out of four of the articles published in the following pages are part of a larger project, *Sufism, Pluralism and Democracy* which will include a forthcoming Equinox volume, and this special journal edition. Recent events in France as well as atrocities committed by the “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” have provoked new discussion about the relationship between Islam and terrorists who claim to act in its name. In the USA, the Obama administration no longer uses the term Islamic terrorism in an effort to distinguish the huge majority of more than a billion peaceful Muslims from the tiny number of self-defined Muslims who engage in terrorism. Calling ISIS “Islamic” gives them the very religious legitimacy they crave. Others, especially in the more conservative media outlets object to this, claiming that these terrorists are Muslim and that there is a link between their acts and Islam. Indeed Islam, these commentators allege, is inherently violent and ultimately destined to clash with Western civilization. Discussion has also touched on whether Muslims can live as loyal citizens of European and other non-Muslim majority states, or must either try to subvert these states or create mini-states, so called “no-go zones” within them where *shariah* law is practiced and non-Muslims, even police, dare not enter. Following the terrorist attack at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris January 7 2015 commentators on the Fox

News channel began to speak about the existence of such alleged “no-go zones” of unassimilated Muslims across Europe. While Fox subsequently apologized, saying there is no evidence for the existence of any such spaces, Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana—a contender for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination—has unapologetically repeated the claim. Doing so while visiting London, although pressed to identify their location, he refused to do so (Lerner 2015). This type of talk can incite hostility toward Muslims who live in the West. Certainly, there are nonassimilated Muslims in Europe but many are well integrated into society. In the UK, Muslims occupy elected posts at every level. They are represented across all major professions. The current Lord Mayor of one so-called no-go city, Birmingham, is a Muslim. As it happens, the notion of such zones existing, though, was probably first suggested by the former Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir Ali in an interview with J. Wynne-Jones published by the *Daily Telegraph* (Jan 6 2008).

The failure of the much heralded Arab spring to bring about democratic reform has led to renewed skepticism about Islam's and democracy's compatibility as some claim that Islam cannot tolerate religious or political pluralism. Totalitarianism, some assert, is the only form of governance that Islam allows, while non-Muslims in Muslim-majority space will be subject to human rights abuses and suffer discrimination. As debate continues, some speak about the need for a reformed Islam, calling for moderates to speak out with louder voices against the abuse of their own religion. A few point to Sufi Islam's reputation for toleration, love of peace and even an openness toward pluralism as a possible counter to so-called radical Islam. One possible weakness with this appeal to Sufism is its historic reputation of disengagement from politics in order to focus on spiritual health. Another has to do with the debate about Sufi orthodoxy, challenged by Wahhabi (Muwahhidin) and by some other forms of Islam. If Sufism is heterodox, any reformist impetus it influences will be rejected as suspect. The usual charge is that Sufis overstress the esoteric at the cost of external conformity, compromise divine unity and borrow too much from outside Islam. Discussion about whether Muslims must combine religion and the political system, or can separate these; about how law is to be understood and applied, and about the acceptability of democracy is ongoing in Islamic discourse, regardless of any role that Sufism may or may not play. Farid Esack, among others, champions affirming pluralism. and does so without any obvious or declared Sufi influence (see Esack, 1997).

Few academic studies, however, have focused on Sufi engagement with politics, although in colonial times especially in French ruled territories officials saw Sufi brotherhoods as militaristic, fanatical and anti-colonial. The Mahdi led rebellion in Sudan, too, saw a Sufi Muslim leader confront the British in battle, and initially win. Stories about Sufi warriors in South Asia spreading Islam by the sword have also caused some to question the view that Sufis are inevitably peace loving. Eaton, who helped popularize these stories in his *Sufis of Bijapur* (1978) subsequently realized that these accounts were apocryphal, conforming to later ideals about the Muslim conquest of India and of other territories (correspondence with D. Eaton, July 8 2013). Similar stories exist in the Bengal region, and in Turkish literature, as Eaton noted in his later text, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (1993) (see pp. 72–73). His 1978 book, though, is still cited in support of a warrior-Sufi paradigm. Today, however the dominant motif is probably that Sufi Islam is too heterodox and politically quietist to offer much hope for democratic reform in Muslim-majority space. On a contrary note to claims of political quietism, anthropologist Charles Lindholm's work suggests that the very existence of Sufi orders, with their social welfare and other programs, under their Sheikhs historically challenged the caliphate by providing small-scale alternatives to how authentically Islamic society was or was not at the macro-level (2002, 189). Many Muslim rulers in India looked to Sufi masters as validators of their rule, preferring this to the legitimacy that a distant, foreign Caliph might offer. In the volume *Sufis in South Asia*, co-edited by C. Bennett and C. Ramsey, who are both involved in this project, several chapters touched on a relatively recent development of Sufi-related political parties offering alternatives to Islamist and other politically affiliated movements. However, that book's main focus was on how traditional Sufi orders retain vitality and how these and newer organizations adapt to contemporary challenges, not on political engagement. Yet in Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia and elsewhere, Sufi or neo-Sufi-related parties now exist. This presents new opportunity for research and analysis. Key issues and questions are: what policies do they propose; how do they differ from those of Islamist parties; how would "law" be understood; what is the relationship between secular and Sufi ideas about the role of religion in society; how do Sufi views about how to structure the state in Muslim majority space differ from alternatives and are Sufis actually more likely to support democracy? On the surface, the view that Sufis and democracy are a

natural fit is less obvious than Sufism's ability to affirm pluralism which belief in the unity-of-truth and of being suggests. After all, Sufi masters are unelected, while their organizations are far from democratic. Former Bangladesh dictator General H. M. Ershad regularly consulted his Sufi master during a very undemocratic period of his country's history. Possibly, Sufi preference for Islam's spiritual dimension leaves open more scope for democratic mechanisms in the political arena.

There is some literature available on Sufis and political engagement, including Diouf on Senegal (2013), Rozehnal (2007) on Pakistan and Nimtze (1980) on Tanzania but this remains an underexplored field, which this project aims to expand. The project also aims to cast a wide net across Muslim majority space—and to touch on places where Muslims are a minority, too—by including analysis of as many contexts as possible. One initial criticism of the original proposal was that it focused too much on South Asia. This led to more effort to extend our geographical scope. There will still be gaps where attempts to recruit contributors were unsuccessful, but hopefully these will be addressed in other publications. Anticipated contributions in the forthcoming book will discuss Turkey's *Gülen movement* (international in scope), Sufis political engagement in post-Mubarak Egypt, Sufis role in bridging Sunni-Shi'a divisions and Sufi-related political parties in Bangladesh and Indonesia, among other topics.

Any research examining the relationship between religion and politics is by definition inter-disciplinary, involving at the very least literary analysis and contextualization of each topic historically, geographically or both. Contributors to the project are encouraged to draw on theoretical tools and research methods from a variety of disciplines, such as anthropology and sociology as well as political science and the study of religion. While there is an emphasis on the contemporary, some papers explore historical precedents on the relations between Sufis, pluralism and political engagement. Thus, the preliminary papers included in this journal meet the comparative requirements of its editorial policy, and hopefully will generate interest in the larger work that will follow later.

First, Ahmad Hamid takes us to Malaysia. He explores the Darul Arqam organization which, banned in 1994, promotes ethno-religious pluralism in a state better known for ethnic (Malay-Chinese) and religious tensions (Muslim-Christian). Christians cannot call God Allah. Hamid demonstrates how, though popular, the organization's "perceived unorthodoxy" limits its ability to influence reform in Malaysia where Wah-

habi-style Islam controls the government. Reference to anthropological research and to the political context in this informative paper crosses disciplines.

Next, Mohamed Mosaad Abdelaziz visits historical tension between Sufism and legalist Islam by exploring the life and thought of Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Sakandarī (d. 1309) in early Mamluk Egypt. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 504/1111), who features in this chapter, is often credited with reconciling legal and mystical Islam, under the tutelage of the Saljuq vizier Nizam al-Mulk. Here, we see a Sufi master who even forged an alliance with the Sultan that helped create political stability after years of turmoil, as well as establishing a place for Sufi studies at one of Islam's premier seats of learning. In the process of this important analysis, an iconic figure of modern Salafi Islam, renowned for hostility toward Sufism, Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373), is shown to have had a somewhat more positive stance than he is usually attributed. The forthcoming book will analyse in detail how a number of contemporary Salafi and Islamist organizations actually relate to Sufi orders organizationally, and in their social welfare activism.

Then our co-editor, Sarwar Alam, examines the complex and contested notion of Bengali Islam. In Bangladesh, a historically Sufi flavoured, pluralism-accepting Islam today clashes with Islamist sympathizers who cannot win at the ballot but who do destabilize society by fomenting Muslim-non-Muslim hostility. Christians who form less than 1% of the population have recently started to follow Hindus in emigrating elsewhere. When Bennett first visited Bangladesh in the late 1970s hardly any Bangladeshi Christians lived in diaspora. Now, Britain's second city has a vibrant Bangladeshi Christian community, rather ironic given that Birmingham was recently characterized, as noted above, as a Muslim city where non-Muslims dare not go. Recent political discourse in Bangladesh has tended to juxtapose what is seen as a stricter Islamic identity (Bangladeshi) and a more secular, pluralist one (Bengali), represented by the two largest political parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AW) (both currently led by women). Alam, who combines textual, historical and fieldwork research, shows that Sufis in Bengal did contribute to a traditionally religiously inclusive bias in what is now Bangladesh, perhaps leaving open the question of whether this heritage can survive new threats. Bangladesh restored secularism as a principle of state in its 15th Constitutional Amendment (2011), which had been removed from the original 1972 Constitution during military rule when, in 1977, General

Zia ur-Rahman (BNP's founder) substituted "belief in Almighty Allah." However, with BNP at present boycotting Parliament, issues about the legitimacy of the current AW government after the uncontested 2014 election, the 15th Amendment might be vulnerable.

The final paper in this issue of the journal by Vardit Rispler-Chaim explores recent interpretations of the laws of *zakāt* with regard to persons with disabilities. Under the laws of *zakāt* taxpayers with more than adequate economic resources are required to remit to the state treasury some of their wealth, which is in turn used to provide the minimal necessities of life for individuals with disabilities and his or her dependents according to the Qur'an's eight categories of beneficiaries of *zakāt* funding. Rispler-Chaim traces interpretations of the *zakāt* laws on people with disabilities both in the past and in the present

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