From East to West: Carl W. Ernst's insight into sufism's impact on islamic studies in America

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ABSTRACT

With its global expansion and incorporation of elements from other religions, Sufism presents an intriguing field of study for Western scholars interested in the mystical and societal influence of Islam. This article aims to explore the impact of Sufism on existing Islamic studies in America. The study adopts a qualitative approach, relying on library research to analyze the origin, development, and evolution of ideas through the works of Carl W. Ernst. The research findings demonstrate that Sufism has had a significant impact on the advancement of Islamic studies, particularly in fostering a deeper understanding and respect between American society and Muslims. By promoting love, compassion, and unity, Sufism plays a vital role in bridging misconceptions and facilitating peaceful coexistence.

Introduction

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an American-Pakistani Muslim scholar, asserted that Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) serves as a transformative journey leading individuals from the depths of humiliation to the pinnacle of glory, ultimately enabling them to discover their authentic selves (Nasr, 2019). By embarking on Sufism, individuals liberate themselves from the bounds of their ego's illusions, ultimately reaching their ultimate destination, God. Fazlur Rahman explained that Sufism, from a socio-historical perspective, was a response to an increasingly hedonistic social environment and a reaction to the secular attitude to life. It originated from a spirit of ascetic piety (Rahman, 2020). It developed the doctrine of human relationship with God and methods of the spiritual path to God, in contrast to the piety of previous Muslim friends and caliphs. The fundamental teachings of Sufism are rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunna of Prophet Muhammad. These are the sources from which the spiritual guidance and practices of Sufism are derived, forming the basis of Islam's mystical, spiritual side (Erawadi, 2023). Moreover, the spiritual teachers of Sufism, known as

murshids, can be traced back to the companions of Prophet Muhammad, establishing a direct lineage from the early Islamic period to the present day. Sufi teachings were believed to originate from Allah through the angel Gabriel. The renunciation set by Prophet Muhammad greatly influenced the development of Sufism (Danner, 2013; Davis, 1948). Thus, the mystical teachings of the Qur'an and the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad have laid the foundation for Sufism. Recognized as the first and greatest Sufi master, Prophet Muhammad played a significant role in shaping the development of Sufism through his renunciation.

Sufism developed in different stages. It is the main mystical tradition in Islam and came from renunciatory modes of piety (*zuhd*) between the late eighth and early tenth centuries (Karamustafa, 2007). It began with early asceticism based on the teachings of Hasan al-Basri, followed by the classical mysticism of divine love promoted by al-Ghazali. Later, fraternal orders of mystics rose and proliferated, marking the third stage in the development of Islamic mysticism (A Schimmel, 2024). Early Sufism is also known for its rituals and beliefs, and it was present in every Muslim town or village during the late medieval period. During its early stages, Sufism was shaped by various factors, such as a focus on asceticism, the development of Islamic jurisprudence, the assertion of imamate by Shia factions, the rise of Islamic philosophy, the growing rigidity of the legal framework, and the desire to connect the message of revelation with Sufi teachings (Danner, 2013). Those factors led to the rise of Sufism, which emphasized inner purification, mystical experiences, and a direct relationship with the divine. Sufism provided a way for individuals to transcend the strict legalism of traditional Islamic practices and find a deeper, more personal connection to their faith. Furthermore, Sufism evolved into a more practical and mystical school of thought. Eventually, it developed into a formalized organization of Sufi orders (*ṭarīqa*), with spiritual teachers at the center of their followers' obedience (Hill, 2019). As a transnational movement, Sufism has brought progressive Islamic teachings to various parts of the world, including Western countries. In this way, Sufism has transformed from a local phenomenon to a worldwide movement with substantial influence on the Islamic tradition. It has become a compelling study area in Islamic and Western countries.

Sufism Studies in America

Over centuries, Sufism has grown beyond its origins in the Middle East and has spread to various regions, adapting to local Islamic cultures and traditions. This process of adaptation and incorporation has enriched Sufism and allowed it to resonate with diverse communities within the broader Islamic world. In South Asia, Sufism has adapted to the local Islamic traditions of the region, incorporating elements from the teachings of prominent Sufi saints such as Rumi, Ibn Arabi, and Al-Ghazali (Cook, 2015). Sufi shrines and tombs play a central role in the spiritual life

of South Asian Muslims, serving as centers of devotion and pilgrimage. Meanwhile, in Turkey, Sufism has integrated with the local Anatolian culture, resulting in a unique expression of Sufi. Sufism places a strong emphasis on community and hospitality, reflecting the values of Turkish society. The Mevlevi Order, also known as the Whirling Dervishes, is a prominent Sufi order in Turkey known for its mesmerizing Sufi dance rituals, which symbolize the soul's journey towards spiritual enlightenment (Isik, 2022).

In Iran, Sufism has merged with the Persian culture's rich literary and artistic traditions. This fusion has given rise to a distinct form of Sufism known as Persian Sufism, characterized by its emphasis on poetry, music, and art as vehicles for spiritual expression (Lewisohn, 1998). The masterpieces of celebrated Persian poets like Rumi and Hafez play a vital role in this rich tradition, seamlessly intertwining the spiritual depth of Islamic mysticism with the exquisite elegance of the Persian language and vivid imagery. This ability to blend with different cultural and religious contexts while maintaining its core spiritual teachings is a testament to the universal appeal and enduring relevance of Sufism within the Islamic tradition. In addition, the expansion has made Sufism an exciting field of study for religious scholars in Western countries. Scholars are interested in exploring the mystical and spiritual aspects of Sufism and its impact on society and culture. Mircea Eliade, a renowned scholar of comparative religion and a pioneer in studying Sufism, played a significant role in introducing and popularizing the study of Sufism in the United States. Eliade's expertise in religious studies, particularly his deep understanding of the concept of the sacred, provided a solid foundation for his exploration of Sufism and its mystical traditions.

Eliade's work on the sacred, as outlined in his seminal book "The Sacred and the Profane," emphasized the importance of understanding religious experiences and symbols in different cultural contexts (Rennie, 2007). His insights into the nature of the sacred and the role of ritual in religious practice increased his sympathy for the field of Sufism in Europe and America, as he recognized the profound spiritual significance of Sufi teachings and practices. European scholars of Sufism, such as Miguel Asin Palacios, Louis Massignon, and his student Paul Nwyia, were noted for their connections to Catholic monastic orders (M. Hermansen, 2007). They played a crucial role in establishing the study of Sufism in America and Europe. Their work helped introduce Sufism to a broader audience, increasing interest in understanding this mystical tradition. Today, the study of Sufism continues to attract scholars and researchers worldwide, contributing to ongoing scholarship and understanding of this important aspect of Islamic spirituality. The 1970s were the start of a great time for studying Sufism in America. Well-known Sufi scholars came to North America, making the study of Sufism an essential part of Islamic studies in American universities. Notable American scholars such as Annemarie Schimmel, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Carl Ernst, James Morris, William Chittick, Vincent Cornell, Marcia Hermansen, Alexander Knysh,

Ahmet T. Kara Mustafa, Michael Sells, Valerie Hoffman, and John Renard, among others, made significant contributions to Sufi studies (Khalil & Sheikh, 2016). Affiliated with reputable universities, they enhanced the comprehension of Sufism in the Western world. American scholars in Sufi studies brighten different aspects of Sufism, such as its history, practices, and philosophy. Their research eliminated misunderstandings, fostering interfaith communication and understanding. Sufi studies remain vibrant in America today, and the tradition of these innovative scholars motivates new generations of researchers and scholars.

The 1990s marked a significant development in the study of Islam and Sufism in America, with the rise of white American intellectuals who actively supported this field of study. Many held positions as university professors who started programs in Islamic studies, East Asia, and Asian studies. Unlike their Orientalist predecessors, they were characterized by a more sympathetic and objective approach to Islamic culture and religion. This group of scholars is now known as the post-Orientalism generation (Guhin & Wyrtzen, 2013). The impact of this post-Orientalism generation of scholars has been profound, both in academia and beyond. Their work has helped to shape our understanding of Islam and its role in American society and has inspired a new generation of scholars to follow in their footsteps. As a result, the study of Islam and Sufism in America has become more robust and provided us with a deeper appreciation for the rich diversity of human culture and religion. Post-Orientalism, also known as Cosmopolitanism, is a critical response to Orientalism. It aims to overcome the limitations of Orientalism and develop a more nuanced and sensitive understanding of the Islamic world and the East. Post-Orientalist scholars build on Edward Said's critique of Western Orientalism by further examining the authority and power dynamics in representation (Dabashi, 2017). Moreover, they know their assumptions, preconceptions, goals, and methodologies for studying other parts of the world (M. Ali, 2018). These scholars try incorporating local voices and perspectives to achieve a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the Islamic world. They also examine the relationships between Islam and other cultures, including the West, and focus on globalization, modernity, and identity. By doing so, they hope to develop more constructive dialogues between diverse cultures and promote mutual understanding and respect.

The current trend of Sufism studies in America reveals a growing focus on studying specific Sufi orders, such as the Naqshbandi, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, or Alami Tariqa. While this trend has contributed to a deeper understanding of these groups, it also raises concerns about the potential for a narrow understanding of Sufism in America. This matter could lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes and misconceptions about Sufism within Western society, particularly in the United States. To combat this, scholars increasingly recognize the importance of an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach to Sufi studies, considering the various social, cultural, and historical

contexts in which Sufi practices and beliefs have appeared and evolved. By adopting a broader perspective, scholars can avoid essentializing or oversimplifying the complex and diverse nature of Sufism as a spiritual and cultural tradition. This article aims to explore Carl W. Ernst's views on the influence of Sufism on Islamic studies in America. He is a prominent American scholar of Sufism, contributing to the development of Sufi studies in contemporary America. Ernst has made significant contributions to the field through his interdisciplinary approach, which draws from various disciplines such as history, anthropology, and literary studies.

Carl W. Ernst's professional career as a teacher began in 1981, when he was Chair of the Religious Studies Program at Pomona College, California, until 1992. He then moved to UNC, where he earned the title of Professor (1992–2000), served as Chair of the Religious Studies Study Program (1995–2000), was a Zachary Smith Distinguished Term Professor (2000–2005), and received the highest title in an academic position with the title William R. Kenan Jr. Distinguished Professor (2005–2022). Apart from being a lecturer at these two universities, Pomona College and UNC, Ernst also has experience as a regular guest lecturer in Paris (EHESS, 1991, 2003, and every May 2018–2020), at the University of Sevilla (2001), and the University of Malaya (2005 and 2010), (Writers Directory, 2005). As a lecturer at UNC, Ernst was the founder and first director of the Carolina Center for the Study of the Middle East and Muslim Civilization. He has served on the board of directors of the Association for Middle Eastern Studies, director of the Center for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, and president *of the American Society for the Study of Religion* (Hinton, 2021).

As a scientist in Islamic studies, Ernst consistently studies Islamic studies topics, especially Sufism. Ernst also focused heavily on studies of the West and South Asian regions. Therefore, he mastered Persian (speaking and reading), Urdu, Spanish, and French and could read texts in classical Arabic, German, Italian, Greek, and Latin (The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2020). Mastering various languages, especially those of Eastern nations, is a crucial factor that drives Ernst's productivity and success as a scientist in Islamic studies, particularly Sufism. His proficiency in multiple languages allows him to access primary sources, research materials, and academic literature in different languages, enhancing his understanding of the subject matter. Additionally, these language skills facilitate effective communication and collaboration with scientists from diverse backgrounds, enabling a more comprehensive research approach. Furthermore, Ernst's language skills provide him with unique insights and perspectives on problems within his field, enriching his work and contributing to his success. However, while language proficiency is a significant factor, other elements such as research methodology, approaches, and cultural awareness also play a role in Ernst's achievements as a scientist.

Literature Review

The terms "*taṣawwuf*" or "*ṣufiy*" do not appear explicitly in the *qurān* and *ḥadīth* of the prophet Muhammad. However, these terms have developed over time to describe the beliefs and practices of spiritualism that were seen by the scholars and companions of the Prophet in the past. The meaning and scope of Sufism have been debated among scholars, with some defining it as a science of the soul and others as a form of Islamic mysticism. Sufism, also known as *taṣawwuf*, derives from the Arabic verb *taṣawwafa*, which means "to wear coarse woolen cloth." The noun form of the verb is taṣawwuf, which refers to the practice of wearing woolen cloth. Meanwhile, the term Sufism is commonly used in English, while in other languages, such as German, French, and Russian, it has variations such as *Sufitums*, *Soufism*, and *Sufizm,* respectively. In English, Muslims who practice mystical rituals are called Sufis, or *mutaṣawwif*, *ṣufiyya*, or *mutaṣawwifa* (Knysh, 2000). Although the term taṣawwuf is not explicitly mentioned in the *qurān* or *ḥadīth*, it is believed to have developed from the spiritual practices of the companions and scholars of the prophet Muhammad. The interpretation of the term may vary among scholars and include various beliefs and practices associated with spiritualism.

Terminologically, comprehensive definitions of Sufism are challenging to find due to the tendency of early writers to focus on aspects of Sufism based on their emphasis. One such area of emphasis is the primary concern of Sufism with the inner state of the soul as opposed to outward actions. As a result, defining Sufism can be problematic (Ansari & Budiman, 1993). Moreover, some writers have resorted to abstract meanings with symbolic language to depict the behavior of Sufis. Therefore, new references from the latest authors must determine the definition. This complexity illustrates that Sufism has developed in Islamic history with various definitions and interpretations. Although a comprehensive definition of Sufism is elusive, a multidisciplinary approach can ease a more holistic understanding. The study of Sufism from different perspectives, such as Islamic psychology (Abidi, 2021), music and poetry (Shayakhmetova, 2022), and spiritual and psychological exercises (Sides & Gross, 2013), allows for a comprehensive exploration of its various dimensions. By combining these different approaches, a more complete understanding of Sufism can be achieved, encompassing its philosophical, aesthetic, religious, and ethical aspects. The multidisciplinary approach enhances the contemporary understanding of Sufism and expands fields such as psychology and musicology.

It is important to note that the definition of Sufism is constantly evolving and is influenced by contemporary perspectives and the passage of time. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Sufism is a path that transcends the limits of human existence and leads one towards attaining one's true self. It is a comprehensive approach to spirituality that looks to liberate individuals from the illusions and limitations of the ego and guides them toward the goal of God (Nasr, 2019). The

definition posits that Sufism stands for the apex of Islamic spirituality, providing a means to transcend the lower states of human existence and reach higher levels of being. On the other hand, Fazlur Rahman offers a socio-historical perspective on the emergence of Sufism (Rahman, 2020). He argues that the movement responded to the increasingly hedonistic social environment of its time, which promoted worldly pleasures and secular attitudes that contradicted the piety of earlier Muslim companions and caliphs. Sufism, then, developed to return to the original teachings of Islam and restore the connection between man and God. In conclusion, Sufism is a multifaceted concept that scholars have approached from various angles throughout history. It is both a path toward attaining one's true self and a response to the social and historical context in which it appears. Sufism developed doctrines and methods that aimed to restore the connection between man and God and cultivate spiritual awareness and presence.

This study is library research, which is part of qualitative research. The qualitative data was derived from reviews of works and the exploration of relevant resources. Library research is an activity related to collecting, reading, and taking notes on library data. The characteristics of library research are: Firstly, it involves written texts. It does not involve direct interaction with eyewitnesses to events, individuals, or objects. Secondly, library data is accessible within the library (either physical or digital) and is ready for use (Zed, 2014). Through library research, the origin, development, and evolution of ideas are explored using a range of written sources, including correspondence interviews with Carl W. Ernst and his significant books as primary data, along with his other works such as academic journals, videos, and relevant documents as secondary data. This approach was chosen due to the scholarly nature of the primary data involved in the research process.

Discussion

Sufism and the Development of Islamic Studies in America

Sufism and Islamic studies in the United States have garnered attention and recognition in recent decades (M. K. Hermansen, 1993). The growing interest in Sufism and Islamic studies can be seen as a reflection of Western society's increasing longing to understand and delve into the spiritual and intellectual legacy of Islam. This is also influenced by the involvement of Western scholars, such as Carl W. Ernst at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Omid Safi at Duke University, and Marcia Hermansen at Loyola University Chicago, who study Sufism at different American universities. Ernst is one of the crucial figures who played an essential role in developing the academic study of Sufism in United States universities. Through his work, he has expanded the study of Islam beyond legal and doctrinal aspects, further emphasizing the importance of studying spirituality, mysticism, and the inner dimension of Islamic studies. Ernst's research on Sufism has

been acknowledged for promoting an interdisciplinary approach to cultural studies and fostering a more comprehensive understanding of Sufism. Additionally, he has shed light on the diversity within Sufism, challenging oversimplified portrayals and emphasizing the multiplicity within the Sufi tradition (Mohammed, 2024; Srivastava, 2020).

The Development of Academic Research on Sufism

The academic exploration of Sufism in American universities has played a crucial role in diversifying the field of Islamic studies in the United States. Kurzman and Ernst highlight the rise of Sufism studies at various American universities since the 1970s (Kurzman & Ernst, 2012). This is evident in the significant increase, up to 4%, of doctoral dissertations focusing on Islamic topics by the end of 2001. As a result, including these studies has expanded the scope of the Islamic study program, offering a more comprehensive understanding. The rise of Sufism in Islamic studies in America has captivated scholars, particularly in its expansion and evolution within non-Muslim societies. As a prominent scholar in Islamic studies, Ernst has made a substantial contribution to this discourse by examining the development of diverse Sufi beliefs and practices in the United States. Ernst's perspective provides valuable insights into the complex relationship between religious tradition, cultural context, and the adaptability of Sufism to the Western environment.

Ernst argues that the presence of Sufism discourse in the intellectual sphere of the Western world, encompassing Europe and America, cannot be separated from the influence of scholars during the colonial era known as orientalists. Ernst said, "The history of the study of Sufism shows how powerfully the Orientalist discourse on religion reformulated aspects of Islamic culture into a separate category called Sufism. At the same time, growing fundamentalist movements in Muslim countries have isolated and rejected many aspects of what we call Sufism as part of a struggle over the ownership of Islamic religious symbolism." (Ernst, 2018a). Through this statement, it can be understood that the history of the study of Sufism in the West has been significantly influenced by the discourse of Orientalist scholars about religion, which played an essential role in formulating various aspects of Islamic culture and forming a category of Sufism that is separate from Islam. However, Ernst emphasized that the Orientalists' approach to Sufism contained racial bias and assumptions about the superiority of Western civilization over the East, leading to the construction of Sufism as a separate entity from Islam.

Ernst indicated that during the Romantic period in Europe, Orientalist scholars played a pivotal role in shaping the Western world's perception and understanding of Sufism. A prevalent perspective among these scholars was the characterization of Sufism as a form of mysticism originating from India (Ernst, 2003). Starting from Ernst' statement, it is understandable that during the romantic period in Europe, Orientalist scholars shaped the perception and understanding of Sufism in the West. One common perspective among these scholars is the

definition of Sufism as mysticism originating in India. This point of view originates from the discourse of the Orientalists, who emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries. They explore and interpret Eastern cultures, religions, and languages, including India and Islam.

The Orientalist scholars' perspective on the Indian origin of Sufism can be attributed to reasoning. First, these scholars were deeply impacted by India's diverse and profound mystical traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism (an ancient Indian religion that emphasizes non-violence, self-discipline, and spiritual development). They observed striking similarities between certain mystical practices and ideas in Sufism and other parts of India (Mratkhuzina et al., 2019). Thus, this leads to the assumption that mystical traditions from India must have influenced Sufism. Second, the Orientalist scholars operated within a framework that attempted to categorize diverse religious and cultural phenomena. By associating Sufism with Indian mysticism, they attempted to establish a distinct category of Sufism within a broader framework of religious and cultural classification (Hamilton, 2007). This categorization reinforces the idea that Sufism exists as a separate part of mainstream Islam, positioning it as a mystical tradition with its origins and influences.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that the Orientalist scholars' perspective on the Indian origins of Sufism has faced valid criticism. Contemporary scholars argue that the categorization of Sufism as Indian mysticism by Orientalist scholars oversimplifies and reduces the complexities of both Sufism and Indian religious traditions. Ernst emphasizes that this classification fails to acknowledge the significant contributions of Persian and Arab cultures to developing Sufism (Ernst, 2006). Similarly, Schimmel argues that while Sufism does interact with various mystical traditions, it is fundamentally rooted in Islamic teachings and cannot be reduced to just one source of influence (Annemarie Schimmel, 2013). Chittik echoes this sentiment, highlighting the diverse origins of Sufism and the multitude of spiritual schools that have contributed to its development (Chittick, 2000). Hence, Sufism emerged as a response to the internal dimensions of Islam, transcending any singular cultural or geographical origin. It arose as a profound reaction to the spiritual and inner dimensions of Islamic teachings, which emphasize concepts such as divine love, selflessness, and purification of the heart. It is important to acknowledge that Ernst acknowledged that Sufism possesses a complex and diverse history with many influences. While it is true that Sufism interacted with various mystical traditions, its origins can be traced back to the formation of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula (7th century CE).

Ernst's analysis regarding the Orientalists' perspective on Sufism indicates that two primary factors influenced their tendency. Firstly, the racial attitudes prevalent in the 19th century played a significant role in shaping their views. Secondly, the assumption that religions remained static and unchanging further influenced their perspective (Ernst, 2003). However, as we reflect on the

late 20th century, we can critically examine these influences, recognizing the necessity for a more comprehensive and contextual understanding of Sufism and other religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. This underscores the importance of adopting a broader perspective that considers the complexities and dynamics of any religious traditions.

In the past two decades of the 21st century, there has been a significant increase in the American public's interest in studying Islam. This can be observed through the notable increase in educational programs and teaching initiatives focusing on regional studies of Islamic-majority countries like the Middle East, East Asia, South Asia, and Africa. Furthermore, there has been a specific emphasis on the Islamic world across different regions (Nelson, 2020). As a result, there has been a significant growth in interdisciplinary social science publications and thematic research, highlighting a newfound focus on the relationship between religion and national identity (Tekelioglu, 2018). Consequently, Islamic studies has gained prominence within several religion departments in North American universities. Discussions and studies related to Sufism can now be observed in classrooms, bookstores, professional organizations, and international conferences dedicated to exploring various aspects of Islam. Scholars have taken a keen interest in understanding the reasons behind this rapid increase in interest (Ernst & Martin, 2010).

The study of Sufism in the United States is a relatively new field, gaining attention among scholars in the 1990s and early 2000s (Dickson, 2021). The subject is now well documented, with numerous academic reviews and research exploring the emergence of Sufism in contemporary America (Sepehri, 2020). They examine the position of Sufism in the broader curriculum with various themes and approaches used by American scholars. Additionally, Islamists explore the academic context in which Sufi studies are situated and the influence of contemporary positions in Islamic and American thought in shaping its academic studies (M. Hermansen, 2007). Two reasons can explain this increase in interest in Islam. Firstly, there is a recognized need for a better understanding of Islam and the Muslim world. While progress has been made in understanding Islam among Americans, there are still common misconceptions and challenges that need to be addressed (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2003). These misconceptions can lead to misunderstandings, prejudice, and discrimination against Muslims, highlighting the importance of addressing these challenges through education and dialogue.

Secondly, the growing diversity of the student population on American campuses has played a significant role in fueling this increased interest. The student body in America now comprises individuals from diverse religious backgrounds, beliefs, and ethnicities, representing various parts of the world (Patel, 2007). According to data from the American government's Department of Education, the percentage of Muslims in American universities has increased from 0.9% in 2001 to 2.1% in 2019 (Coley et al., 2022). The rise in the number of Muslim students has led to an

increased demand for education related to Islam and the Muslim world. In response to this demand, American campuses offer courses in Islamic studies and actively recruit more specialized teachers. Among the central Islamic studies offered by American universities is Sufism. Ernst stated, "Many Islamicists have offered courses on Sufism at North American colleges and universities or have discussed Sufism in their classes on Islam, and several academics who offer courses on mysticism have attempted to incorporate some Sufi material into their surveys on this topic." (Ernst, 2018a).

Ernst's statement highlights a growing trend among American universities offering studies on Sufism and including Sufism materials in classes related to Islam. This has important implications for American students' understanding and exposure to mysticism in Islam. Scholars who do this challenge the dominant narrative of Islam as a monolithic religion. They aim to give students a deeper understanding of Sufism and its role in Islamic society and culture. The inclusion of Sufism in Islamic study material has two important influences. Firstly, it allows students to develop a holistic understanding of Islam, moving beyond the narrow image often presented in mainstream discourse. This broader perspective promotes cultural sensitivity and appreciation for religious diversity, which is crucial today. Secondly, incorporating Sufism into mysticism courses offers students a unique opportunity to explore the similarities and differences between various mystical traditions. Students can identify themes and practices that deepen their understanding of the human quest for transcendence and spiritual fulfillment by studying Sufi and other religious texts.

In a recent interview, Ernst emphasized the importance of involving Sufism in Islamic studies to create a better understanding. Ernst (Personal communication, June 21, 2023) said, "The study of Sufism contributes to a better understanding of Islamic thought and practice diversity. It also demonstrates that fundamentalism does not monopolize Islamic teachings." Ernst's statement implies his view that the study of Sufism recognizes the variety within Islamic tradition and rejects the idea of a singular religious narrative. Therefore, Sufism plays an important role in showcasing the diversity of Islamic thought and practice through several events. How Sufism contributes to this diversity are: Firstly, Sufism emphasizes the spiritual dimension of Islam, which focuses on the inner dimensions of a religion. In the American context, Sufism played an important role in shaping the understanding of Islam by introducing a broader perspective and enriching the spiritual experience of Muslims. It emphasizes the importance of individual spiritual experience and bridging the gap between theory and practice in Islam. Moreover, Sufism has served as a valuable resource for Muslims in America, helping them navigate challenges such as discrimination and alienation.

Providing a robust spiritual framework enables individuals to achieve deeper self-awareness

and inner peace. In this way, Sufism has empowered American Muslims to find solace and strength amidst adversity. Secondly, Sufism plays a significant role in the cultural and historical development of Muslims. According to Mursalat, in the Indonesian context, Sufism was essential to the spread of Islam and the formation of Islamic civilization (Mursalat, 2023). Drawing parallels to the Western world, particularly in America, the Indonesian context serves as a compelling example of how Sufism has historically contributed to disseminating Islamic teachings and establishing vibrant Muslim communities. The influence of Sufism in Indonesia can offer valuable insights for understanding the role of Sufism in shaping Islamic practices and beliefs in diverse cultural settings, including those found in the United States.

Sufism has promoted spiritual and social harmony, countering the puritanical current within Islam. Karamustafa provides a comprehensive account of Sufism's development since the 9th century, highlighting its rapid expansion across the Islamic world (Karamustafa, 2007). In the American context, Sufism emerges as a prominent expression of Islamic spirituality and other spiritual paths unrelated to Islam. It offers a mystical and personal approach to pursuing divine love and knowledge and resonates with the American Muslim community (Dickson, 2021). Studying Sufism within Islamic Studies helps students gain insight into the rich traditions, practices, and contributions of Sufi saints, poets, and scholars throughout history. This provides a deeper understanding of the cultural and intellectual heritage shaped by Sufism. Thirdly, Sufism intersects with various scientific disciplines such as literature, art, music, psychology, and philosophy. Aždajić highlights how Sufism provides precious interdisciplinary insights for practical theology by focusing on spirituality and its associated practices (Aždajić, 2020).

In the American context, an interdisciplinary approach allows researchers and scholars to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Sufism and apply it to their respective fields of study. Additionally, Sufism has influenced the fields of art and literature in America. Its impact can be seen in literary works and fine art that explore spiritual themes, the quest for meaning, and personal journeys. For example, the works of Rumi and Hafez have been widely celebrated for their profound spiritual insights and poetic beauty, resonating with audiences across cultures. American writers who have drawn inspiration from Sufi themes and the works of Rumi and Hafez include "The Conference of the Birds" by Peter Sís, "The Illuminated Rumi" by Michael Green, and "The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master" translated by Daniel Ladinsky. These works showcase the influence of Sufism on American literature and art, exploring spiritual themes and personal journeys uniquely and engagingly.

Fourthly, Sufism represents various practices, schools, and interpretations within Islamic traditions. Studying Sufism fosters an appreciation for the diversity of Muslim experiences and beliefs, promoting an inclusive and pluralistic understanding of Islam (Irawan, 2022). This is

because Sufism emphasizes Islam's mystical and experiential aspects, focusing on personal connection with the divine rather than strict adherence to external rituals and dogma. Its diverse expression contributes to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the Islamic faith, fostering tolerance and understanding among different communities.

Fifthly, Sufism offers valuable practices such as meditation, contemplation, and spiritual retreats. These tools facilitate personal growth, self-reflection, and the development of a deeper relationship with the Divine. Incorporating Sufism into Islamic studies programs provides students opportunities for spiritual exploration and self-development. This integration can be achieved through various activities, including dedicated courses of Sufism, integration of Sufi texts and teachings into existing courses, guest lectures and workshops by Sufi scholars and practitioners, and opportunities for spiritual retreats and contemplative practices (Abitolkha & Mas'ud, 2021; A Schimmel, 2024). Ernst's understanding implies that Sufism doctrine rejects the notion of a singular or monolithic interpretation of Islam. This highlights the dynamic nature of religion, which is not a fixed doctrine but rather a living tradition capable of adapting to different cultural contexts and personal interpretations. By exploring the various Sufi orders, practices, and philosophies, scholars can appreciate the fluidity or adaptability inherent in Islam. These understanding challenges the assumption that fundamentalism represents the only legitimate or pure form of Islamic practice. It showcases the multitude of legitimate expressions of faith among Muslims, demonstrating how individuals engage with their religion.

This plurality inherent in the understanding and practice of Sufism is evident in America's wide range of Sufi practices and beliefs (Dickson, 2021). From the ecstatic dances of the *Mawlāwiya* order, known as the dances of the Dervishes, to the introspective silence of the Sufis of the Naqshabandia order, the diversity of Sufi traditions is genuinely remarkable. Each congregation emphasizes different aspects of the spiritual journey, ranging from intense devotion to intellectual exploration. In addition, Sufism in America has found a diverse presence in cyberspace, or the internet, which is reflected in various forms and expressions. These variations not only enrich the study of Islam but also restate the depth and complexity of the Islamic tradition itself. In conclusion, Carl W. Ernst believes studying Sufism within the context of Islamic studies in America is crucial. It reveals the pluralistic nature of Islamic thought and practice. Sufism serves as a counterpoint to prevailing stereotypes about Islam by highlighting its spiritual dimension and diversity.

The study of Sufism has significantly impacted the field of Islamic studies in America, enriching it with a more comprehensive understanding of Islam. It engages with spiritual dimensions, promotes diversity, and encourages a holistic approach to the study of religion. Indeed, valuable insight into the spiritual dimensions of Islam has been brought to light through the dedicated

research of scholars like Annemarie Schimmel. Her extensive studies of Sufi poetry and the mystical have provided a deeper understanding of Sufism's spiritual essence. Similarly, scholars such as Carl W. Ernst, William C. Chittick, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr have explored the philosophical and metaphysical aspects of Sufism. Their scholarly contributions have shed light on the intellectual richness of Sufism and its profound impact on Islamic thought. Ernst (personal communication, 21 June 2023) further said, "The study of Sufism has expanded the understanding of Islam in ways that expand the knowledge of Islamic spirituality as well as non-Arab cultures." This statement highlights the significance of the contribution of Sufism studies to expanding understanding of Islam, especially in its spiritual aspects and its relationship with non-Arab cultures. The study of Sufism deepens understanding of Islamic spirituality and provides valuable insight into diverse cultural expressions outside the Arab world. The study of Sufism has demonstrated the richness of Islamic cultural expressions in non-Arab societies. Sufi orders have played an important role in shaping the religious and cultural landscape of regions such as South Asia, Central Asia, and West Africa (Alvi, 2009; A Schimmel, 2024; Siddiqa, 2018). Scholars specializing in Sufism have diligently researched these Sufi orders' distinctive practices, rituals, and beliefs, unveiling the diverse and intricate nature of Islamic traditions outside the Arab world.

Paradigm Shifts in Islamic Studies in America

Sufism has significantly impacted the paradigm shift in the understanding of Islam in America, challenging traditional approaches such as strict adherence to legal interpretations and doctrinal teachings. In this section, we will examine the relationship between Sufism and the paradigm shift while exploring Ernst's views on a more inclusive understanding of Islam, emphasizing spirituality, personal experience, and inner transformation over rigid dogma. This will analyze Ernst's critique of the traditional focus on legal and doctrinal aspects, arguing for a more holistic and experiential approach to Islam that incorporates the diversity of human spiritual expression. The presence of Sufism in the West poses a challenge regarding its adaption to Western culture while maintaining the essence of its origins in the Middle East and South Asia. One area of concern is the role of women in the public sphere. In Western society, women enjoy broader opportunities and visibility compared to certain Muslim societies, where Sufism has its roots. Consequently, the presence of female Sufi teachers remains rare in these traditional contexts.

Ernst said, "The transplantation of Sufism to Europe and America raises several issues, including the degree to which acculturation to a Middle Eastern or South Asian homeland is encouraged. One of the most distinctive developments of Sufism in the West is probably around gender relations. Most Muslim societies where Sufism has been a living force have practiced some form of gender segregation. Female Sufi masters and saints, while known, have not been common in the past." (Ernst, 2018b). Nevertheless, the role of women within Sufi organizations in America

showcases a range of diversity. In certain instances, female members of Sufi leaders' families serve as role models for female Sufi members (M. Hermansen, 2006). Ernst believes that including women in leadership positions within Sufi organizations has empowered women in spiritual matters. Moreover, it challenges the traditional patriarchal norms prevalent in many Muslim societies, promoting a more egalitarian understanding of religious teachings.

The transition of Sufism in the Western world has also been considered to have encouraged a reconsideration of the gender paradigm in the Sufi tradition. Several important developments have emerged, including gender inclusivity. Sufi communities in Europe and America have taken a prominent stance against traditional gender barriers. Many Sufi groups have embraced more inclusive practices, allowing men and women to participate equally in spiritual activities, rituals, and leadership roles. Sufi communities in Canada and Toronto, such as the Jerahi and Rifai orders, have implemented gender-inclusive practices (Xavier, 2023). This shift toward gender inclusivity aligns with Western values regarding gender equality and has led to significant transformations in Sufi traditions as well as in Islam in America. Secondly, women's spiritual leadership. The transplantation of Sufism to the West has created opportunities for the rise of women as Sufi leaders and spiritual guides. This stands in contrast to the historical landscape in Middle Eastern and South Asian countries, where the visibility of female Sufi teachers and saints has been limited by the patriarchal solid culture (Pemberton, 2004). Western Sufi communities have displayed more excellent receptiveness to accepting and recognizing the authority of female spiritual leaders, challenging traditional gender roles in the process.

Thirdly, reinterpretation of Sufi texts and teachings. Sufi scholars and practitioners in Europe and America have embarked on a reinterpretation of classical Sufi texts, aiming to promote gender equality and inclusivity. They emphasize the mystical and spiritual dimensions of Sufism, emphasizing ideas such as transformation, unity of the universe, intuition, tolerance, inclusiveness, and affirmation of life (Shah, 2018). The reinterpretation has not only reshaped the role of women within the Sufi community but has also attracted a more diverse and inclusive group of followers. Ernst provides an example of the Mawlāwi Sufi order in America, which has embraced a more inclusive approach to gender relations. Ernst said, "American women in this Mevlevi tradition have recreated what is, in effect, a parallel female initiative lineage that parallels the standard patriarchal silsila, or chain of male teachers that constitutes the backbone of the Sufi order." (Ernst, 2018b). This development holds important historical and cultural implications as it challenges longstanding gender perspectives within the Sufi context. Establishing a spiritual lineage through women's lines represents a transformative step towards inclusivity, broadening the scope of spiritual leadership beyond traditional norms reliant on patriarchal lineages.

The *Mawlāwy* tradition is a Sufi order that traces its roots back to the renowned poet and

mystic Jalaludin Rumi, also known as *Mawlana*. The *Mawlāwiya* congregation has a rich history of significantly contributing to Islamic civilization through artistic and spiritual movements, especially in Turkey, where Sultan Veled Celebi officially endorsed it. This congregation is known for its practice of spinning dances, which serve as a form of dhikr, or remembrance of God (Tasbihi, 2015). Ernst's observation highlights the historical aspect of the Mevlevi tradition, which has traditionally been characterized by a male-centered intellectual lineage, indicating the presence of patriarchal tradition inherent within the Sufi order. Therefore, the emergence of an intellectual lineage from women's paths disrupts this historical pattern and presents a different perspective on gender inclusivity in the spiritual realm. In terms of culture, the establishment of an intellectual lineage from women's paths signifies a more significant societal shift towards recognizing and respecting the spiritual contribution of women within the Sufi tradition. This departure from traditional norms fosters an ethos of equality, recognizing the diverse spiritual capabilities of both genders. Its cultural implications extend beyond the Mevlevi tradition, resonating with broader Sufi orders and prompting a reconsideration of gender dynamics within various Sufi traditions.

However, it is important to note that in specific Sufi communities where these teachings originated, the role of women in many tariqa organizations is still marginalized and confined to domestic spaces. While women engage in various devotional and service activities, their contribution may not receive the same recognition and status as their male counterparts (Hassan, 2023). The development of Sufism has marked a transformative shift, especially in modern American and European culture, where men and women are included in a shared participatory space. This stands in contrast to the gender separation norms prevalent in premodern Muslim societies, such as some conservative regions in the Middle East and South Asia, where gender segregation norms are still maintained in religious spaces and social gatherings. Moreover, this paradigmatic evolution towards gender inclusivity reflects an egalitarian ethos that respects the spiritual contributions of both genders. Furthermore, this transformation challenges long-standing perceptions regarding gender roles in religious contexts. By fostering collective participation, Sufi communities in the West demonstrate a willingness to adapt and develop, recognizing both men and women's spiritual abilities and contributions. This signifies a progressive reinterpretation of traditional teachings, emphasizing the fundamental principles of unity and spiritual connectedness that transcend gender differences.

Sufism as a bridge to understanding Islamic studies

The end of the 20th century brought controversy for Islam in America, especially after the 9/11 attack. The focus shifted to the war on terrorism, which unfortunately led to Islam being seen as a threat. While the war involved only a small group of Muslims, the negative impact was felt by the majority of Muslims in America, who faced prejudice and hostility from society (Sides & Gross,

2013). Consequently, anyone teaching or writing about Islam was suspected of supporting terrorism. The portrayal of Islam in the American media during that time further contributed to the negative image (Ernst, 2018a). The fear and prejudice towards Islam in the West, commonly known as Islamophobia, had already been present prior to the events of 9/11. However, these attacks intensified and spread the term, making it more widespread. According to a study conducted by YouGov in 2015, 55% of Americans held a negative view of Islam (Desmond-Harris, 2020). This marginalization of Muslims as minority citizens in America has led to a decrease in appreciation for Islamic teachings among most Americans. In such a context, Sufism plays a crucial role in bridging the understanding of Islamic teachings among Americans, especially at a time when public trust has been eroded due to the extreme actions carried out by certain Muslim groups.

Sufism focuses on pursuing a personal and direct connection with the Divine. Ernst portrays "I prefer to describe it (Sufism) as a teaching of ethical and spiritual ideals, which has been historically embodied in lineages of teachers who held prominent positions in Muslim societies." (Ernst, 2018b). The teachings of Sufism emphasize spirituality, peace, love, and universal values. The practice of Sufism encompasses tolerance, compassion, and the nurturing of spiritual development. However, it is a dynamic and diverse tradition that continuously adapts to changing contexts and times (Samsel, 2015). Ernst's statement highlights his comprehension of the distinctive features of Sufism as a conduit for ethical and spiritual development, underscoring their significance within the Islamic tradition. Grounded in mysticism, Sufism encompasses a multifaceted approach to spirituality, emphasizing the quest for inner knowledge, selflessness, and transcendence. This mystical dimension is transmitted through a lineage of teachers who serve as custodians of spiritual wisdom and moral guidance within Muslim societies.

Sufism differs from the perspective of Islamic extremist and fundamentalist groups in several keyways: Firstly, Sufism emphasizes the universality of God's love and compassion, rejecting notions of one group's superiority over another. Sufis respect and value the diversity of God's creation, actively seeking to learn from other religions and traditions. This stands in contrast to fundamentalist groups that view religious diversity as a competing ideology that must be vanquished. As Ernst clearly expresses, "The rhetoric of fundamentalism has already accepted the notion of multiple religions as competing ideologies; the fundamentalist solution to this dilemma is simply to defeat all rivals (Ernst, 2017). Ernst's statement highlights the rhetoric promoted by fundamentalist and extremist groups, which stresses the superiority and exclusivity of their religious ideology. This way of thinking often results in seeing religious diversity as a contest for competition rather than aiming for peace. Fundamentalist groups indeed tend to promote strict conformity to sacred texts. They can dismiss the validity of other belief systems, as they believe in

the absolute authority of their religious doctrines (Azarian, 2018). This can lead to a narrow-minded perspective that does not acknowledge the legitimacy of religious pluralism. This perspective can be seen as a resistance to modernity and a form of social and epistemic isolation within the group (Peels & Kindermann, 2022; Razaghi et al., 2020).

Unlike extremist groups, Sufis believe in multiple paths to reach God, recognizing that no one possesses a monopoly on truth. As a result, Sufis embrace tolerance and inclusivity, refraining from imposing their beliefs or practices on others. This stands in stark contrast to extremist groups, who often propagate rigid and exclusive interpretations of religion. Secondly, Sufism advocates for a balance between the internal and external dimensions of religious practice, acknowledging Muslims' social and ethical responsibilities. On the one hand, Sufism emphasizes individuals' inner development and relationship with Allah, centered on spirituality and soul purification. On the other hand, Sufism also recognizes the importance of engaging with the world and fulfilling one's duties towards society. This includes acts of charity, compassion, and justice, reflecting the teachings of Islam on social responsibility. This encourages followers to detach themselves from worldly desires and material pursuits (Sattorov, 2023). However, progressive Sufis also recognize that a true Sufi can actively engage in worldly activities, work, and earn a living while utilizing their resources to empower and assist those in need (Baried, 2023). Thus, a Sufi is not an escapist or isolationist but actively participates as a member of society. Sufis strive to serve God and humanity, upholding values of justice, peace, and generosity. They renounce violence and aggression, opting for peaceful and non-violent means. Consequently, Sufis reject terrorism and extremism, instead combating them with wisdom and love.

Regarding the balance of internal and external aspects of religion in the teachings of Sufism, Ernst said, "Stressing the notion of God as the inner aspect (*baṭin*) of all things required an articulation of the relationship between the inner and the outer. This was expressed most fully in a threefold rhyming structure commonly employed in oral instruction: the outward form is Islamic law (*sharia*), the inner approach is the path (*ṭariqa*), and God is the reality (*ḥaqiqa*) (Ernst, 2017). Ernst's belief shows that the teachings of Sufism, which emphasize the idea of God as the inner aspect of everything, require clarity of the relationship between the inner and the outer. This is usually expressed through a rhyme structure known as the monotheism triangle, where the outer shape symbolizes Islamic law (*sharia*), the internal approach as the path (*ṭariqa*), and God as the ultimate reality (*ḥaqiqa*). In Islamic belief, Islamic law includes guidelines that regulate Muslims' basic religious practices and obligations. It is an outward form or visible manifestation of the Divine will and is considered how Muslims understand and fulfill their religious obligations. On the other hand, the inner approach, often called the path, is a means Muslims use to get closer to God and achieve spiritual enlightenment. This involves exploring various spiritual practices,

rituals, and traditions that can lead to increased faith and a closer relationship with God.

The monotheism triangle mentioned above emphasizes that everything, including sharia, ṭariqa, and ḥaqiqa, ultimately leads to God, the highest reality. In this view, sharia is a means for Muslims to understand and fulfill their religious obligations, while ṭariqa provides a path to spiritual awakening. By emphasizing the importance of the inner dimension of Islam, this doctrine fosters a deeper understanding of their faith and a search for a deeper and more personal relationship with God. This framework provides a comprehensive understanding of Sufism's teachings on the relationship between the inner and outer aspects. It underlines the importance of recognizing the divine essence in every aspect of human life. It reflects the profound influence of Islamic spiritual thought and underscores the multifaceted nature of the Islamic tradition, including both the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of the faith. Third, Sufis do not adhere to a rigid or literal interpretation of the sacred scriptures but strive to attain a profound and symbolic understanding of divine revelation. They possess open-mindedness and flexibility, eschewing dogmatism and fanaticism (Laude, 2005; Sonia Nasir Khan & Muhammad Ahsan Bilal, 2021).

Consequently, they are unafraid to question or challenge the prevailing norms, actively seeking to reform and rejuvenate themselves and their communities rather than seeking to reform and renew themselves and their communities. Ernst provides a comprehensive discussion on the characteristics of Sufi groups' interpretations of the sacred scriptures, which often involve mystical interpretations that can run counter to the perspectives of fundamentalists. Ernst affirms, Since fundamentalists typically portray their interpretations as literal and therefore unchallengeable true, any kind of psychological or mystical interpretation of the sacred text is a basic threat to the monopoly that they wish to claim over tradition (Ernst, 2017). Ernst's explanation views his perspective regarding fundamentalists, who view the mystical interpretations of Sufis as threatening their desire for a monopoly over tradition. The fundamentalists' resistance to mystical interpretations stems from their aim to uphold their strict and literal interpretation as the sole authoritative understanding. However, mystical interpretations challenge this dominance by presenting diverse perspectives that can enhance and expand our understanding of religious traditions. Ultimately, this contributes to a more inclusive and diverse approach to spiritual beliefs. Ultimately, this contributes to a more inclusive and diverse approach to spiritual beliefs by acknowledging the complexity and richness of religious traditions.

Sufism has helped bridge the gap in Americans' understanding of Islamic teachings by highlighting the diversity and richness of Islamic traditions while emphasizing the shared values and principles that unite Muslims and non-Muslims. These crucial roles are expressed in the following forms:

a. Sufi poetry, including the works of renowned poets like Rumi and Hafiz, has gained immense popularity and influence among readers and writers of American literature. These poems have captivated and moved millions of Americans with their timeless and universal message of love, joy, and harmony. Rumi's poetry holds a special place as one of the most beloved collections of poetry in America. Various authors have translated it into English, including Coleman Barks, Andrew Harvey, and Deepak Chopra (R. Ali, 2017).

b. Sufi communities in America, including the Tijaniya Sufi Order International, Inayati, Naqshbandi-Haqqani, and American Mawlawi orders, have experienced growth and development. These communities and organizations have served as spiritual guidance and support sources for numerous followers and practitioners. They are actively engaged in interfaith dialogue and social service initiatives. Nevertheless, Ernst suggests the need to scrutinize the effectiveness of their involvement in such activities. He states, "Senegalese Sufis of the Tijaniyya have been active in dialogue, as have some Sufi groups in Jordan. However, it remains to be seen whether interreligious dialogue will significantly impact the US (Personal Communication, June 21, 2023). In addition, they have organized and participated in various activities and programs, such as Sufi music concerts, dervishes' whirling dance ceremonies, and Sufi lodges and festivals.

c. Contribution and recognition of scientists and academics in the field of Sufism, such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, William Chittick, Kabir Helminski, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, and Zainab Alwani, among American academics and intellectuals. These scholars have written and lectured extensively on various aspects of Sufism, such as history, philosophy, theology, ethics, art, and Sufi literature. In addition, these scholars also discuss contemporary issues and challenges, such as pluralism, ecology, feminism, and human rights, from a Sufi perspective. In this context, cooperation and collaboration between scientists from various disciplinary backgrounds and traditions was formed on a massive scale, such as collaboration with Christian mystical figures, Jewish cabalists, Buddhists, and Hindu yoga.

Ernst further stated, "The existence of Sufi traditions in America is not the point for scholarship." Although some scholars of Sufism are personally engaged with Sufi practice, that does not guarantee good scholarship. But the study of Sufism has expanded the understanding of Islam in ways that expand the knowledge of Islamic spirituality as well as non-Arab cultures." (Personal communication, June 21, 2023). Ernst's statement elucidates the crucial role of Sufism in Islamic studies, particularly in America, in comprehending the spiritual aspects of Islam. While it is valid to acknowledge that personal involvement in Sufi practices does not automatically equate to scholarly excellence, it is essential to recognize the impact of Sufism on expanding our

understanding of Islam. This expansion of knowledge encompasses Islamic spirituality and non-Arab spiritual cultures. By studying Sufism, Americans can develop a deeper appreciation for the spiritual dimension of Islam and its significance in shaping their perception of the world. Furthermore, Sufism serves as a counterforce against negative stereotypes and prejudices perpetuated by the media, political discourse, and the actions of a small fraction of extremists who wrongfully claim to represent Islam. Equally important, Sufism plays a visible role in offering positive and constructive narratives that serve as alternatives to the narratives of hatred and violence propagated by extremist and terrorist groups.

The involvement of these scientists has played a crucial role in establishing Sufism as a subject of research and study in various American universities. Ernst suggests that while the study of Sufism in different historical contexts has reached a mature stage, there is a need for further theoretical development. "The study of Sufism in different historical contexts has emerged as a mature area of research in Islamic studies, but it still needs to do more to enhance theoretical sophistication and move away from the replication of the authority of texts" (Personal Communication, June 21, 2023). Therefore, contemporary Sufism in America holds immense value as an Islamic resource in fostering mutual understanding and respect between American society and Muslims, particularly in the wake 9/11 attacks. Sufism has played a crucial role in dispelling misunderstandings that have bred fear and hostility by fostering connections and bridges that instill hope and harmony.

Conclusion

The dissemination of Sufism in Western societies, particularly in the United States of America, is inextricably linked to the pivotal role played by esteemed Academic scholars specializing in Islamic studies who have been affiliated with prestigious universities of international repute. Notably, among these distinguished experts, Carl W. Ernst has emerged as a prominent figure of considerable influence who has developed innovative theories and methodologies to study Islam and Sufism through his extensive and diverse academic works, which have profoundly impacted the field of Islamic studies. The development and study of Sufism has demonstrated tremendous potential for cultivating a profound understanding and mutual respect between American society and the Muslim community, thereby bridging the cultural gap that exists between the two. By strongly emphasizing the fundamental principles of unconditional love, compassion, and unity, Sufism has played a vital role in shaping the landscape of Islamic studies across various countries worldwide, including those in the Western hemisphere, where it has gained significant traction in recent years. Carl W. Ernst has observed that Sufism has played a vital role in the development of Islamic studies in America, encompassing several key aspects, including the diversification of the

field of Islamic studies in America, thereby broadening its scope and depth. Secondly, a paradigmatic shift in the perception of Islam in American society fosters a more nuanced and informed understanding of this rich and complex religion. Thirdly, bridging the gap towards a better understanding of Islam by counteracting against negative stereotypes and prejudices that have long plagued American society. However, further research and exploration must be undertaken to fully grasp the profound significance and influence of Sufism, as well as its theoretical complexities and far-reaching implications for other crucial aspects of American social life, such as interfaith dialogue, social cohesion, and community building, which are essential for promoting mutual respect, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence.

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