

*Series Section I:*  
*Perceptions of Islamic History and Institutions*

**JOHN A. SUBHAN, *SUFISM: ITS SAINTS  
AND SHRINES***

John A Subhan, a convert from the Qadiri Order of Sufism to Christianity, is well-known for his seminal work, *Sufism: Its Saints and Shrines*. The continuing significance of his book on Sufism owes not primarily to any sort of academic credentials (although his work does not lack much in referencing the available sources—some of which are only found in Islamic languages) but to who he was as a person—an illustrious Qadiri Sufi from Mughal ancestry, a leader and teacher at the Henry Martyn School of Islamics in Lahore (now *the Henry Martyn Institute: International centre for Research, Interfaith Relations and Reconciliation* in Hyderabad) and as a Bishop with the Methodist Church in India. Subhan taught at the Henry Martyn School from the 20s to the 30s. As Avril A. Powell points out concerning another convert from Islam, Subhan's background enabled him to explain Sufism to others and his insights did not owe to academic but immediate knowledge of Sufism as an insider (see R. Frykenberg and A. M. Low, eds, *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500*, Grand Rapids, 2003).

In his 1942 autobiography, *How a Sufi Found his Lord*, Subhan speaks of his ethnic and cultural linkage with the Mughals. With continuing decline and eventual loss of the empire in 1857 the family moved to Calcutta the centre of a new empire where Subhan's grandfather made a complete break with the family's political associations with the start of the Banares art of gold embroidery. This is where Subhan was born in 1897. Although he was officially named Fazlur Rahman he was called by his informal family name, Abdul Subhan. His choice to keep this name even after his conversion shows how deeply he appreciated his Muslim parents (especially his mother whose piety had a deep impact on him, something

reminiscent of Sadhu Sunder Singh) and the sound aspects of his Sufi background and upbringing. His family's association with the Hindu city of Banares was special as it meant security and escape from the conflicts of the imperial city of Delhi. Subhan's awareness of this part of the history of his family, the natural eclecticism of Sufism, and its deep inculturation with Hindu/Buddhist India perhaps inspired the most interesting and original comparative chapter in his *Sufism*.

His personal search began with the Qur'an which testifies to the books of Moses, David, and Jesus. Instead of seeking to understand this testimony through the means of literalism and traditional scholarship, Subhan sought to approach it by means of the spirituality of Sufism. At the heart of it all was the deep urge of his soul to reach out to God. As a Sufi his purpose in life became that of a spiritual traveller seeking the company of the great prophets like Adam, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad through whose guidance he would eventually reach God. The strong desire to meet God enabled him to overcome his suspicion of the New Testament (Injil), the reading of which led to his conversion.

Subhan's *Sufism* is therefore not a product of a reactionary, a rebel, or an apostate seeking to discredit his former faith, or prove the excellence of his adoptive faith, or to expose the hidden darkness of Islam but is a serious attempt by a saint who saw Islam and the Qur'an as a real preparation for the Gospel (although, one must add, Subhan was sufficiently critical of certain practices of Sufism he termed as 'degenerated into these strange orgies of emotion'). The idea that Sufism prepared him for faith in Jesus and his Injil was something demonstrated by his own life. The purpose of his work, *Sufism*, was to present a personal and systematic review of the great spiritual phenomenon called Sufism for the sake of others like him but most importantly for the benefit of Christians who might be ignorant of this tradition of Islam. Indeed, he spent a considerable part of his life teaching Christians through the Henry Martyn School.

*Sufism* contains ten chapters. The first two chapters trace the general development of Sufism from its early emotional phase to the later speculative phase, represented by 'Attar, Rumi, Hafiz, and Jami. Chapters three and four expound particular speculative ideas in Sufism such as 'Haqiqat al-Muhammadiyah' and 'Lata'if', Illumination, Fana, Annihilation, most of which are relevant for his com-

parative discussion of 'Indian Thought' found in Chapter Eight. Before moving on to Sufism in India, Subhan dedicates two chapters, five and six, to certain practices that generally characterise Sufism: the role of the Pir in Sufi devotion (particularly focussing on the acts); veneration of the Saints, (Wali), friends of God or those near God, and their hierarchy; the practice of visiting the tombs of the Saints; celebrations and certain manifestations of Sufi proximity with God; Karamat (miracles); and Sama' (Sufi practice that initiates ecstasy or the experience of God, often the means of illumination or revelatory knowledge).

Chapters seven to twenty focus on Indian Sufism. Subhan's review of Indian Sufis such as Hujwiri or Data Ganj Baksh (990–1077), whose tomb in Lahore is an important place of pilgrimage of Sufis, and whose *Kashf al-Mahjub* Subhan uses as a source, is interesting as also his review of the major and minor Indian Sufi Orders, (he belonged to one of the major orders, Qadiriyya). The comparative discussion in chapter eight may seem to some as Subhan reading too much of Hinduism into Sufism, however, this chapter is by far the most interesting and original section in *Sufism*, containing Subhan's reflections on the relationship of Sufi ideas to Indian thought. One reason why Sufism was so hugely successful in India owes to the fusing of ideas both at the philosophical and ordinary levels. Although the great 12<sup>th</sup> century Sufi master Ibn 'Arabi does not feature very prominently (there are two passing references on pages 24 and 37), he does compare one of his foundational ideas, Wahdat al-Wujud/Shuhud with Advaita (monism) and Vishistadvaita (qualified monism) of Hinduism. The other interesting comparative ideas that are discussed here are the Lata'if of Sufism and Chakras of Hinduism; and Fana of Sufism and Nirvana/Moksha of Buddhism/Hinduism. All of these are interesting areas for further academic research.

One of the great and abiding values of this work is to be found in quite an unexpected place, the appendices. Although, a lot of research has been done on Sufism, a large number of Sufis of the Indian subcontinent remain as it were in the dark. The republication of this work should fulfil several purposes: to keep the memory of a distinguished saint, scholar, religious leader, and convert of the 20<sup>th</sup> century alive; to invite scholars and students to appreciate a fascinating world of Sufism where Islam transcends itself by embracing a new and alien Hindu/Buddhist culture of India; to

encourage scholars to consider researching Indian Sufism not necessarily from the angle of the official Orders but from the side of the saints and their adversaries, many almost unknown to scholarship and ordinary Muslims. Few are remembered on annual Urs and a real appreciation of their historical contributions and roles continue to remain hidden from view.

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To  
WILLIAM PATON

AND  
MURRAY TITUS

IN GRATEFUL RECOGNITION OF THE FACT THAT IT  
WAS THROUGH THEIR INSTRUMENTALITY THAT  
I UNDERTOOK THE SPECIAL WORK IN WHICH  
I AM NOW ENGAGED.

