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ANNIKA SCHMEDING. *SUFI CIVILITIES: RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN AFGHANISTAN.* STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 2023. 348 P. ISBN: 9781503637535

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In *Sufi civilities*, Annika Schmeding presents an intimate ethnography of contemporary Sufi communities in Afghanistan, weaving together questions of civil sociality, religious authority, gender, transformation and hope through political turmoil. It offers a careful portrait of Afghanistan's various mystical communities as a 'civil society', a sociosphere that she argues is distinct and far more rooted than the foreign NGO landscape that conceptually dominates academic and policy discussions of Afghanistan.

One of Schmeding's central concerns is exploring the diversity of Sufi communities in Afghanistan, demonstrating through attentive and richly textured historical and anthropological detail that Sufis in Afghanistan have wide-ranging spiritual, organisational, and political practices. As such, she argues that 'Sufism' is not a united category. This necessarily raises the question of exactly what it is that binds the category together, such that it is analytically useful. Schmeding is careful not to seek to define Sufism, but rather suggests its main ethos — the 'search for an experiential encounter with the Divine' (7) — and lists some of the characteristics and practices that anchor it: participation in *zikr* (vocalised chanting or silent, collective or individual, musically accompanied or not), and engagement with poetry and dreams, with contention between different Sufi communities over some practices including *ziyarat* (shrine visitation associated with saint veneration), and musical accompaniments to *zikr*. Schmeding's depiction of Sufism is thus somewhat practice-centric, though she also does, more implicitly, rely on a more organisational understanding of Sufism — the orders that she mainly engages with are those that are associated with or comprise the Sufi Council (Shura-e Tasawwuf) in Afghanistan, who strategically organise on behalf of the main *tariqas* to legitimise their religious authority and challenge the communities that are antagonistic towards practices like *ziyarat* and musical accompaniments to – or loud, rhythmic – *zikr* (*zikr jahr*).

However, for all its ethnographic nuance and even cautions to the contrary, *Sufi civilities* falls into a familiar trap: a subtle moral typology that casts Sufis as 'good Muslims' — refined and 'civil' — against an implied foil of 'bad Muslims' epitomized by groups like the Taliban. This dichotomy not only simplifies the complexity of Muslim lifeworlds but also forecloses a more radical anthropological question: what if the Taliban, too, can be read through the lens of an *'irfani* devotion-inspired spiritual discipline?

Schmeding's Sufis are, at times, overly idealised as members of 'civil society' that are — quite correctly — not captured by mainstream NGO-influenced conceptions of civil society

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in Afghanistan. Schmeding lists their varying positionalities — they appear in civil society as 'resistance fighters and aid workers in refugee camps, as politicians and businessmen, as actors and musicians, as university professors and students, mullahs and mobile phone sellers' (5), as 'public intellectuals, educators, and artists' in the public sphere (201). Schmeding explores how these diverse Sufis in Afghanistan take varying political positions — against, with, and selectively aligning with the state. She reaches a limit, however, when it comes to the overlap between the Taliban and Sufism — expressing some shock when faced with the realities of Taliban members attending communal *zikr* or being involved with various *tariqas*. The confluences are more than just shared membership, and to Schmeding's credit, she explores (though with palpable discomfort) the overlaps between the origins of the Taliban and Sufism through their Deobandi-style education.

The dominant tone of the book is one of admiration towards Afghanistan's Sufi communities — a sentiment that, for perhaps obvious reasons, she does not extend to the Taliban. Afghanistan's Sufi orders become, in effect, the moral counterpoint to the Taliban. In this way, the book risks reproducing a liberal-secular framing of religion in which the 'good Muslim' is poetic, mystical, driven by the imperatives of *adab* (ethical self-conduct), and invested in bettering the public sphere, compatible with pluralism and civility — while the 'bad Muslim' is the dogmatic antithesis, the anti-Sufi Taliban.

This binary is not unique to Schmeding's work. It echoes a broader trend in post-9/11 anthropology, where Sufism is often valorised as an antidote to Islamic 'extremism'. While this may serve liberal political desires, it is anthropologically limiting. Although this stance is understandable given Schmeding's deep relationships in the field, it occasionally compromises her exploration of alternative ways of thinking about the Taliban in relation to 'civil society', and how movements like the Taliban might share organisational and spiritual logics with Sufism.

Indeed, if one steps back from the normative frame, striking similarities emerge. The Taliban's internal structure is deeply hierarchical, centred on absolute allegiance to an emir who functions, in many ways, like a Sufi shaykh. Disciples (or fighters) display extreme deference to their leader, seeing him as a spiritual and political guide. The Taliban also emphasise ritual discipline, long-term spiritual training (through madrasas), and the cultivation of humility and obedience. As Schmeding points out, the fact that many Taliban leaders have backgrounds in Sufi or Deobandi traditions — which themselves grew out of reformist Sufism — complicates any clean separation between 'mystical' and 'militant' Islam. To extend her argument, however, these continuities are not only historical but remain active in shaping how authority and piety are lived.

By framing Sufism and the Taliban as counterposed movements beyond common genealogies and some shared membership, Schmeding misses an opportunity to explore the implications of these shared genealogies. What if, instead, we read the Taliban as one of Sufism's potential iterations? What if the very tools of spiritual discipline — submission to authority, bodily comportment, ethical self-cultivation — can be mobilised toward radically different ends? This is not to equate Sufi ethics with Taliban ideology, but to acknowledge that the grammar of devotion and hierarchy is not confined to forms of liberal religiosity. Such a perspective would open richer, and more unsettling, anthropological questions.

Sufi civilities is an important and beautifully written book. Its contribution to the anthropology of Islam is significant, particularly in its contestation of Western NGO-defined civil society and instead turning attention to more rooted forms of everyday piety. But it also exemplifies a common pitfall: the subtle reification of a moral binary between Sufis and their more difficult Muslim counterparts. A more radical reading would push us to see how even groups like the Taliban might be understood not outside the logic of Sufism, but as its

disquieting mirror. Only by holding open this possibility can we begin to unravel the full complexity of Muslim lifeworlds.

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