

Book Review

Muhammad, Atta. *Sufis in Medieval Baghdad: Agency and the Public Sphere in the Late Abbasid Caliphate*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2024. ISBN 9780755647590. viii + 192 pp. \$115 cloth. \$39.95 paper. \$35.95 ebook.

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In this study, Atta Muhammad seeks to shed light on the roles Sufis played in the public sphere of late Abbasid Baghdad (1000–1258). It proposes, in short, that Sufis emerged as key players in the public sphere of Baghdad during this time, facilitated by the rapid growth of Sufi institutions (*ribāṭ* and *zāwiya*), which gave them a platform for spreading their teaching, ethical guidance, and charitable activities. In this manner, according to the author, Sufis became middlemen between the ruling elites and their subjects, a position that they used to improve the lives of common people, either by criticizing rulers for their failing policies or by advising and collaborating with them. By extension, the study seeks to highlight the active participation of regular people, in a broader sense, in social, economic, and political aspects of the Abbasid public sphere. According to the author, the functioning of medieval Baghdadi society was not so much a result of the rulers' efforts as it was a result of the contribution of ordinary citizens (p. 1).

The first half of the book (the introduction and chapters 1–3) is devoted to setting the stage for the main discussion in the second half (chapters 4–5) by defining concepts central to the study and providing relevant background information. Overall, the study relies mainly on standard chronicles but also draws on biographical dictionaries, geographical works, mirrors for princes, and other genres (oftentimes in translation). There is, however, hardly any reference to Sufi literature.¹ In the introduction of the book, Muhammad takes

1. Some of the most important works related to Islamic mysticism and piety for late Abbasid Baghdad are: Yūsuf al-Hamadānī, *Rutbat al-ḥayāt* ([Tehran]: Intishārāt-i Tūs, 1362 [1983]); Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs* (Cairo: Idāra al-Ṭabāʿa al-Muniriyya, 1928); idem, *Baḥr al-dumūʿ* (Tanta: Dār al-Ṣahāba li-l-Turāth, 1992); idem, *Ṣifat*

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the opportunity to define such terms as “public sphere,” “Sufism,” and “agency” (pp. 4–6). The first chapter seeks to situate the concept of the public sphere in medieval Islam by proposing that it was essentially based on the *sharī‘a* and also closely linked to the notion of the Muslim community (*umma*). Given the unique position of religious scholars (*‘ulamā’*) as guardians of the *sharī‘a* and as public preachers, the framing of the public sphere and, based on that, of public opinion was in this context usually their prerogative. In other words, religious scholars were able to define “common good” or “common interest” (*maṣlaḥa*) on behalf of society (pp. 15–25).

In the following chapter, the book elaborates on spaces, or institutions, of common good in medieval Baghdad. As such, it associates *zakāt* with people in general, alms (*ṣadaqa*), especially in the form of endowments (*waqf*), with ruling circles, and civic associations of religious or secular nature, such as *futuwwa* groups or professional guilds, with regular people (pp. 28–41). Guilds acted, for example, as representatives for certain professions, or assisted in the collection of taxes, which contributed to a properly functioning society. In line with highlighted cases of charity and the endowment of madrasas, mosques, and Sufi institutions by ruling elites, the author suggests that rulers in medieval Islamic society were in fact concerned with public welfare, as opposed to the traditional view attributed to S. D. Goitein (pp. 30–31) that denies this. Thus, different echelons of society were engaged in the creation of the broader public sphere, which, in turn, consisted of different smaller public spheres created by each group involved.

The third chapter aims to provide the historical context, outlining the political, social, religious, and cultural circumstances in Baghdad at the time. In connection with this, the study gives a brief account of Sufism as well as of the religious minorities in the city (pp. 49–61). The subsequent fourth chapter starts the second half of the study, concerned with the impact of Sufis on the public sphere. The first focal point for this is the institution of the Sufi lodge (*ribāt*), which, as part of the public sphere, afforded Sufis the platform to spread their teaching, ethical guidance, and charitable work to benefit society at large. In connection with this, the author discerns a two-step transformation of Sufism. First, it morphed into a set of “religious organizations” in the eleventh century, placing greater emphasis on communal aspects and becoming increasingly attractive to the general public (pp. 67–70). Then, in the subsequent century, centered on a growing number of Sufi lodges, which were visible “social institutions,” Sufism turned from its original ascetic and mystical mode into a “social phenomenon” and as such into an important player in the public sphere. Sufi lodges offered spiritual and material support for people, in the form of instruction and

al-ṣafwa (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 2012); idem, *Ṣayd al-khāṭir* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1992); idem, *Salwāt al-aḥzān bi-mā ruwiya ‘an dhawī al-‘irfān* (Alexandria: Mansha’at al-Ma‘ārif, 1970); ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī, *al-Ghunya li-ṭālibī ṭarīq al-ḥaqq* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1996); idem, *Futūḥ al-ghayb* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya li-l-Turāth, 2004); idem, *al-Fatḥ al-rabbānī* (Giza: Dār al-Rayān li-Turāth, n.d.); Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī, *Adāb al-murīdīn* ([Jerusalem]: Institute of Asian and African Studies, Hebrew University, 1978); Abū Ḥafṣ ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī, *‘Awārif al-ma‘ārif* (Cairo: Maktaba al-Thaqāfa al-diniyya, 2006); Najm al-Dīn Rāzī, *Mirṣād al-‘ibād* (Tehran: Sherikat-i Intishārāt-i ‘Ilmī wa-Farhangī, 1988). While some of these works are listed in the bibliography of the reviewed book, especially in translated form, a proper examination of them does not happen.

Sufi practices, but also in the form of shelter and sustenance for the needy. They became meeting points for different walks of life and in this manner important public spaces (pp. 70–77).

The final chapter looks at the growing influence of Sufis on the public sphere through the lens of their relations with the ruling elites as well as with other segments of society. Even though the political establishment was crucial to the proliferation of the Sufi lodges by endowing a large proportion of them, the study finds no uniform attitude among Sufis towards politics; some Sufis cooperated with the ruling elites, while others choose not to, either remaining consciously aloof from them or even actively opposing them (pp. 87–94). Those who did cooperate often used this relationship to attain benefits for their followers. Another suggestion the study makes is that Sufis in this period became closer to the ‘*ulamā*’, leading to an increasing overlap between the two groups (p. 99). After briefly discussing the Sufis’ activities in the public sphere as preachers, teachers, Sufi masters, and champions of charity, the study concludes by examining the Sufis’ relations with craftsmen and traders as well as the *futuwwa* associations, which is again meant to demonstrate their roles as middlemen between the political elites and less influential circles (pp. 111–15).

On the positive side, the book does raise a number of pertinent questions, not least, how did Sufism arrive at the center of the public sphere, and what roles did Sufis play in this? In what ways did Sufis contribute to public welfare? Or, what did the relations of Sufis with the political establishment as well as other segments of the society look like? In the background to those issues loom of course the still more monumental questions about the growing popularity and institutionalization of Sufism from the eleventh century onwards, leading eventually to the emergence of the Sufi orders. The study succeeds in explaining how Sufis participated in the public sphere and contributed to the “common good.” It also adds to our understanding of the position of Sufis as middlemen in medieval Baghdadi society.

It would have been apt for the book to explain how Sufis attained such prominent positions in the Baghdadi public sphere in the first place and to address, in detail, how this relates to the bigger question at hand, viz. the emergence of the Sufi orders. One of the main claims, that Sufism turned from its original ascetic and mystical mode into a “social phenomenon,” remains ill-defined and largely unsubstantiated by Sufi literature.² The study could likewise do with more contextualization. The background information and awareness of the Sufi tradition in Baghdad and more generally are insufficient. For example, the book lacks a proper overview of the original Sufi tradition in Baghdad in the ninth and the early tenth centuries and a nuanced discussion of such relevant concepts as “lenient” (*rukḥṣā*) and “strict” (*‘azīma*) codes of ethical regulation and “audition” (*samā‘*). It also suffers from certain misconceptions about the development of Sufi orders in Baghdad (it is very unlikely, for instance, that the Sufi orders in their definite forms existed in the city in the twelfth century).

2. See above for a list of potential sources.