Unveiling Sufism is a general introduction to Sufism, past and present, a novel contribution to a field in which combining in one volume our understanding of past and present, is uncommon. The book seeks to provide an initial taste of some of what Dickson and Sharify-Funk consider it to be the most significant and representative aspects of Sufism from its formative period until today. The text is very wide in scope and contains a rich collection of well-summarised case studies; its goal is to introduce the reader into the multidimensional phenomena of Sufism, going beyond the mere doctrinal and religious aspects, and to place the attention in a diverse array of ways in which Sufism has found social expression, in political life, in the arts, literature, architecture among many others.

The broad-ranging thematic span of the text aims to make accessible to the reader with no prior knowledge on the subject the highly complex and diverse phenomenon commonly associated with Sufism. Due to this reason, some of the most popular historical characters (e.g. Rumi, p.29-40; al-Jilani, p.p.171-173; or al-Ghazali, p.141-147) and Sufi icons (e.g. the wandering mendicant dervishes, p.112-121) are included. Yet, although most of the text is devoted to assay cases that are well known and studied, there are few others, which are less studied, and whose information is useful also to scholars in the field. Special mention in this regard should be made to the introduction of contemporary female leaders, such as the North-American Mevlevi Camille Adams Helminski (b.1951) (p.27) or the Turkish-American Rifa’i-Jerrahi Cemalnur Sargut (b.1952) (p.28), personalities who despite their relevant role within their respective religious communities and of being prolific Sufi authors, are insufficiently known and have been scarcely studied.

The book is presented in a reversed historical order, an anomaly recognised by Dickson and Sharify-Funk (p.4) that seeks to develop a “genealogical framework [in order to] enable the reader to understand the patterns of connection between contemporary manifestations of Sufism and past realities” (p.4). For each period, specific geographical areas have been chosen as illustrative and in detriment of others, a summative endeavour that the authors recognise has its limitations. Chapter one, presents an overview of Sufism in North-America, placing special attention in trends such as ‘Universal’ Sufism, and discussing the porous nature of religious affiliation in some of these tendencies, whilst discussing in less detail more ‘traditional’ versions of Islamic mysticism. The influence of Sufism beyond Sufi circles is also addressed in an analysis of the impact of Sufism in popular culture, poetry, music, and so forth.

Chapter two explores Sufism in colonial times and concentrates in North Africa, mostly in Algeria, to sketch what the authors see as a prototypal anti-colonial Islamic resistance movement. The chapter addresses Sufism in great part in relation to their detractors and sympathisers, ‘anti-Sufi’ Muslim reformists, on the one hand, and European intellectuals attracted to Islam, on the other. The role of Sufism in the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal worlds between the 15th and 18th centuries is covered in chapter three. Dickson and Sharify-Funk want to emphasise the centrality that Sufism had in defining normative Islam and its close associations to political leaders: “the official Islam of the imperial courts, and the Islam invoked by imperial rulers to legitimise their rule, was
generally Sufi in orientation. Some of Islamic civilization’s most powerful dynasties could only function as legitimately Islamic by paying homage to Sufi saints, whether living or dead, either through supporting Sufi Orders or visiting and endowing Sufi shrines” (p.97). Chapter four is an assessment of Sufism between the 11th and 13th centuries. It begins with a synthesis of the contributions and lasting legacy of ibn-Arabi (d.1240) and al-Ghazzali (d.1111) to Sufi doctrine to then, describe the birth and consolidation of the most prominent early Sufi Orders, Shadhiliyya, Qadiriyya, Naqshbandiyya and Chishtiyya.

Chapters five and six are an introduction to some of the characters, themes and tendencies that have been a posteriori identified with Sufism, as they found expression in the early centuries of Islam, between the 8th and 10th centuries (chapter five) and the 7th and 8th centuries (chapter six). Chapter five introduces some of the most prominent figures of the time (e.g. al-Basri, d.728; Rabia al-ʿAdawiyya, d.801; or al-Hallaj, d.922) whilst chapter six addresses doctrinal issues associated with Islamic esotericism. It describes Sufi themes and hermeneutics in the reading of the Quran, ‘Sufi’ understandings of prophethood, as well as doctrinal parallelisms with Judaism and Christianity.

Scholarship on Sufism nowadays agrees on that the boundaries of definition of Sufism are porous. Some of the issues we nowadays consider ‘Sufi’ have for very long simply been considered generally Islamic, others are considered non-Islamic by many, some of the trends we consider today as the antithesis of Sufism (for example rhetoric critical of Sufism we simply label as ‘Salafi’) are ideas that often were born from within Sufi circles and have centrally shaped, and been incorporated into, Sufi thought thereafter. I think that recognizing these subtleties is scholarly pertinent and would contribute to, among other things, add nuance to the cliché that depicts Sufism as the ‘good’ Islam against that of others. An oversimplification of some of these issues is recurrent in the text.

My second major objection has to do with the relationship between the title of the book and the selection of topics and geographical areas covered. Dickson and Sharify-Funk declare theirs is a book that wants to be an introductory text about Sufism, and they recognise the difficulty involved in trying to provide a general overview that is fair with the whole, “of course, there are significant limitations inherent in any summative work, and it is impossible to provide a comprehensive history of such a rich and varied subject, we have highlighted particular examples to suggest broader patterns” (p.4). In my view, the point of departure of this book is an assessment of few current trends of modern Sufism, popular in ‘the West’. The authors develop a very rich and interesting ‘why’ and ‘how’ to understand these trends by mixing a general overview of Sufism with issues that are a good contextualisation to understand these movements today, but not necessarily Sufism as a whole. The authors place these groups within a broader scope of other (mainly North-American and Western European) modern Sufi movements, and understand the intellectual and religious sources in which these trends have found inspiration (e.g. the analysis of the Alawiyya, or the relationship of European intellectuals to Sufism), yet, provide a less detailed analysis of a more general past and of the important development of Sufism in places such as Southeast Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa.
As I read, I thought the book sometimes felt as a study on the genealogical detour of a certain type of Sufism rooted in ‘the West’. Although I consider this is a very legitimate and probably necessary endeavour, and something it is eloquently done, it is not what the book claims to be about. If the reader is looking for a general introduction to Sufism, there is many other cases that seem to be (numerically speaking) far more representative of what ‘Sufism’ in general is, than those sometimes chosen by Dickson and Sharify-Funk. As they claim that “a multitude of examples [...] could have been chosen, though we have selected ones that should offer doorways for the reader to develop a deeper understanding of the subject as a whole” (p.4), I think the general view they end up providing could have been broader and more diverse. In this wider picture, often called ‘traditional’ forms of Sufism, that have historically been and still constitute the vast majority of religiosities within the world of Sufism, would have deserved more attention. In line with this thought, a general introduction to Sufism, I believe, shall first and foremost speak about the Muslim world that still is where the vast majority of Sufi religiosities, are born, reside and continue to flourish.

Leaving aside the issue of representativeness, I think Unveiling Sufism is a good book, with very interesting aspects. The language in which the authors introduce the sometimes very complex themes is accessible and clear. The text is dynamic and reads well. It is a good bibliographical resource for those looking for an initial insight into the topics covered. The text contains few boxes in which special attention is devoted to particular case studies and concepts. I think these boxes are good at presenting content in a well presented and easy to understand manner and produces a style that works well with the introductory character of the book.

We should particularly welcome the position of the authors in recognising that Sufism is something that goes far beyond the religious sphere. The book honours this polyhedral legacy, by paying attention to cultural, social and political aspects that are often not addressed in introductory texts. It is also a very good resource to being introduced to particular figures, particularly women, who are too often erased from both past and present by the existing academia in Sufi studies, with very few exceptions. It is also a good assessment of some of Sufi trends more popular in the West.

Unveiling Sufism is an interesting read that due to its unique arrangement of topics and selection of content has something to offer to every reader, regardless of their background or prior knowledge on the subject. In that sense, I think we should thank Dickson and Sharify-Funk for their unique and at a times very attractive contribution.