

Hacı Bayram Başer. *Sûfîler ve Sultanlar: Klasik Dönemde Tasavvuf-Siyaset İlişkileri* [Sufis and Sultans: The Relationship between Sufism and Politics in the Classical Period]. Istanbul: Klasik Publications, 2021. 167 pages. ISBN: 9789752484672.

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The problem of methodology is one of the most prominent questions in contemporary studies on Sufism. All social scientists accept the opinion that the historical texts should be read in their own contexts. While doing this, however, sometimes the text may get lost in the context. As an example of this, the generally accepted opinion in textbooks can be given about the relationship between the unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujūd*) and the unity of the seen (*wahdat al-shuhūd*). The idea of *wahdat al-shuhūd* was systematized by the great Sufi Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1034/1624), who lived in 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century India, with references to the Iranian Kubrawī sheikh Alāuddawla Simnānī (d. 736/1336), who lived three centuries before him, and is generally over-contextualized, so much so that Sirhindī is claimed to have said *wahdat al-wujūd* to be the same thing despite openly criticizing it. Due to the circumstances of his time and environment, especially concerning Akbar Shah's (d. 1014/1605) corruption of the creed of unity in Islam with his pantheistic views coming from Hinduism, Sirhindī was said to have not been able to openly talk about the unity of existence and to have expressed his own understanding of unity through a different conceptualization. In this case, Sirhindī's letters and treatises have been lost in the context. One of the places where such causalities are used the most in relation to Sufism is the field of its relationship to politics. While examining the relationship patterns Sufis had developed with politicians, politics has mostly been depicted as the

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determining factor with Sufism being depicted as being in the position affected by it. For example, Sufism's use of implicit language in the early period is often explained through political pressure, but is this really so?

Hacı Bayram Başıer satisfactorily revealed the formation of Sufism as a religious science in his work *Şeriat ve Hakikat: Tasavvufun Teşekkül Süreci* [Sharia and *Haqîqa*: The Formative Period of Sufism]<sup>1</sup> in the context of its relationship with other religious sciences and answered this question with his new work *Sûfîler ve Sultanlar: Klasik Dönemde Tasavvuf-Siyaset İlişkileri* [Sufis and Sultans: The Relationship between Sufism and Politics in the Classical Period], which this review discusses. In other words, he seeks an answer with this book to the question of how Sufism was related to politics in the classical period.

First, the author's intention for using "classical period" in the title should be stated as being not a very strict date range lasting approximately between 150-450/750-1050 (12-13).<sup>2</sup> This time interval basically coincides with the formative period of Sufism, which the author had discussed in his previous book. In this respect, those who read the author's previous book can feel comfortable from the very beginning, seeing that they will read the work of someone who is an expert of this period in the context of Sufism. As a matter of fact, when they reach the end of the work, they will see they had not been mistaken in this opinion.

The book has the distinction of being the first work in the volume of an independent work, not only for Turkish but also for the literature in other research languages. After presenting this study as a symposium paper, he situated it as a book chapter<sup>3</sup> and finally as a book. Of course, while publishing it as a book, Başıer added chapters to this work that had not been found in its previous format as an article.

- 1 For the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the work (the 1<sup>st</sup> edition was published in 2017), see Hacı Bayram Başıer, *Şeriat ve Hakikat: Tasavvufun Teşekkül Süreci* (Istanbul: Klasik Publications, 2021).
- 2 Although the author inadvertently says in the preface that the work involves the 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries CE (7), the following pages lead the reader to understand that he meant the eighth and eleventh centuries CE. In addition, although Chapter 1 refers to the process being until the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AH (13), one can predict from the general references of the book and the author's statement in the conclusion that the process starts from the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AH and goes until the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AH (147) to mean the exact date range is from around 150-450 AH.
- 3 Hacı Bayram Başıer, "Klasik Dönem İslam Toplumunda Sûfîler ve Siyaset: Karşılıklı Etkileşimlerin Tasavvufun Gelişimindeki Rolü Üzerine Bazı Değerlendirmeler", *Tarihten Günümüze Sûfi-Siyaset İlişkileri* (Istanbul: Ensar Publications, 2020), 49-116. The book was created by bringing together the considerably expanded versions of the papers presented at the scientific meeting titled "Tarihten Günümüze Sûfi-Siyaset İlişkileri." The book noteworthyly has also articles from Zafer Erginli and Salih Çift. Başıer references their results as required for better understanding the picture presented in the volume (11).

The author states that the aim of the work is to question the stereotyped preconceptions regarding the early history of Sufi-politics relations and to come up with the proper questions for correctly interpreting the available data (12). In doing so, he aims to arrive at a framework rather than a detailed analysis (14). In this respect, the author's aim in the book can be considered as a reasonable and well-defined one. When looking at the whole work, the aim of drawing a framework for Sufis' relations with politics until the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century AH can be said to have been accomplished.

The book appears to be a candidate for having an important place in the literature in terms of the questions asked and the results arrived at. Did the patterns of relations Sufis had developed with politics in Sufism's formative period as a science influence Sufism's language or method? The work focuses on this important question.

The conclusion reached at the end shows the need to change current perceptions and acceptances on this issue because, according to the author's findings, Sufis' relationship with politics during the formative period had not reached a degree that would have been able to change Sufism's course (149). On the other hand, the author shows a closer relationship than was thought to have existed between Sufis and politics using the testimony of primary sources throughout the work (especially 123-34). The work earns an important place in the literature with these and similar findings. Başer's work will contribute to both Sufism and historical studies, as very few researchers of Sufism who are interested in this subject enter this field; more historians do, and they mostly lack the ability to use the primary Sufi literature correctly or adequately.

The main claims of the book can be summarized as follows. In the first two centuries AH when the name of Sufism had not become widespread yet, *zuhd* (renunciation) movements can be considered as a form of political protest. In this period, the *zāhids* (renunciants) who went to *jihād* in the border regions (*sughūr*) can be cited as a manifestation of their interest in escaping the societal life and rulers which they thought were corrupted. In the first two centuries AH, renunciants generally adopted an attitude of advising and criticizing politics and rulers from a distance. By the third and fourth centuries AH, the renunciants who'd returned to the city and taken the name of Sufi had developed a flexible relationship with politics. As a matter of fact, the politics of that time with few exceptions can be said to have not had a policy of suppressing Sufism, and thus no political pressure was present that could change the course of Sufism in the early period. Events such

as the execution of Hallāj (d. 309/922) in Baghdad or the prosecution of Ghulām Khalīl (d. 275/888), which also took place in Baghdad in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AH, should be considered as isolated events because more than just scholars with renunciatory tendencies faced oppression from the Abbasid government as a state policy in the *miḥna* period; also, no systematic intervention was observed against the Sufis after those events. One should not ignore that only the situations threatening social integrity have been taken into account in the anti-Sufi political movements. In this context, for example, Hallāj would probably not have been executed if he had been accused only of divine love (111); however, his association with the Qarmatians and the Zanj rebellion was the most important element leading to his execution. Therefore, politics as an institution cannot be said to have had such a strong influence on Sufism that it had been able to affect its method or language, direct it, or explain the emergence of certain Sufi practices or concepts. In particular, as far as the concepts put forward for explaining Sufis' eccentric statements such as *shathīyya* (words of ecstasy) or the conciliatory and symbolic language developed by Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 297/909) are concerned, political influence cannot explain their emergence. This conscious choice from Sufis should be considered a part of the process of codification (*tadwīn*), in which they are involved as perpetrators rather than subjects. Sufism was codified as a legitimate science of religion through a language that was able to reconcile itself with all strata of society, especially with such disciplines as *fiqh* and *kalām*, and thus became widespread.

So, how does one make sense of the concepts Sufis used such as *mulk* (sovereignty), *malīk* (ruler), *walī* (saint), and *walāya* (sainthood) which actually evoke politics? Is saying the Sufis had been influenced by politics not possible when using these concepts? According to Başer, these are concepts Sufis use not in a political context but rather in their own spiritual context. The best example of this is the anonymous work entitled *Adab al-mulūk* (Etiquette of Rulers) (4<sup>th</sup> century AH). Although its name evokes a political treatise, it is a Sufi book (34) as, according to the work, the real sultans (i.e., the kings (*mulūk*)) are the Sufis who have left all the causality (*asbāb*) of the world (35). Mentioning Hasan al-Basrī's (d. 110/728) answer here to the question "Who is the real jurist (*faqīh*)?" as a pioneer of this understanding would be useful. According to al-Basrī, the real jurist is not a person who knows about legal matters, as people think, but one who avoids the world (23). From this point of view, Sufis can be said to have not developed an alternative political discourse as a result of being influenced by political thought. On the contrary, they tried to convey and spread their agenda more easily by using political terminology. In this sense, Sufis followed their own politics, were

determined to stay removed from politics in the sense of worldly sovereignty as a political attitude and had an intellectual activism (149).

As is the case with every work, Başer's is also missing certain points that only prospective studies can fill. The foremost of these is the absence of the Khurāsān context in this reading, as the author himself has stated (13, 95–96). However, considering how the Sufism of Baghdad had also been determinant on the Khurāsān in the early period, this deficiency can be partially ignored. When examining *zuhd* movements such as the Malāmātiyya and Karrāmiyya in Khurāsān or the Sālīmiyya in Basra, their results can be considered to not differ much from those in the context of Baghdad and the Abbāsids. Nevertheless, completing the picture would be beneficial by performing a similar study regarding Khurāsān.

Başer has admittedly been quite successful in using early Sufi sources. However, historical and literary sources of the period not having been used much can also be said, and their use would increase the strength of the work's discourse. The last section of the work should also be mentioned as being weaker and more disjointed than the first three parts. Although the issue of evaluating Sufis in the tradition of political treatises (*siyāsatnāma*) is important, including the Sufi writings addressed to the rulers in the book is not considered necessary as examples can be found in sources like *Hilyat al-awliyā*. These could be included as supplements to the book, or key passages could be included in the text for analysis. Here, the reader can be said to expect a more in-depth analysis of these texts rather than seeing them all.

As another important point for improving the book, the problem of *walāya* (sainthood) being disregarded in the discussion should be mentioned. This is an important point because social scientists and historians in particular claim the idea of *walāya* to have developed as a socio-political concept in Sufism. This is precisely the issue this book needs to address and discuss. Although the work briefly mentions the concepts of *walī* and *quṭb* (23–25), these are not discussed in detail under the concept of *malīk*. Particularly after Ahmet Yaşar Ocak's book entitled *Tasavvuf, Velâyet ve Kâinatın Görünmez Yöneticileri*, which came out shortly before Başer's book and developed a critical attitude toward the above-mentioned *walāya*, the need has become urgent to have researchers on Sufism address this issue.<sup>4</sup>

Başer's work attempts to overcome the methodological problems frequently encountered in studies on Sufism and successfully evaluates the relations between

4 Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Tasavvuf, Velâyet ve Kâinatın Görünmez Yöneticileri* (Istanbul: Alfa, 2021).

context and text. It seems to be a candidate as a reference book on Sufi relations with politics. Although the work examines the period of 150-450 AH and Sufism in Baghdad in particular, it also stands out as a study containing methodological examples for prospective studies on other geographies and historical periods. This book appeals to all who are curious not only about the history of Sufism but also about the relationship between Sufism and politics as a social phenomenon in the early history of Islam. Although the target audience is mainly specialized researchers, the work should also be added as having been written in a simple and successful style that university students can read and benefit from.