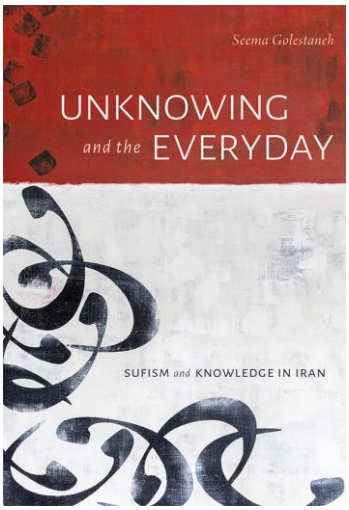
Book Reviews

Seema Golestaneh. *Unknowing and the Everyday: Sufism and Knowledge in Iran*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023. Pp. xviii+240. Paperback. ISBN: 9781478019534. Price: £9.89.

Book review doi: https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v64i1.7031



According to William C. Chittick, the word "science," in its etymological sense, can refer to any sort of knowledge. However, when it is contrasted with "religion," especially since the Enlightenment and Modernity began their process of festering the world, we understand that it means the modern endeavour of scientists in fields like physics, biology, and geology. In other words, science is understood as empirical knowledge obtained through the "scientific method." While acknowledging this meaning of the word "science," we also need to keep in mind the fact of "scientism," which is to take science as your theology and technology as your day-to-day religion. Scientism is a way of looking at the world that gives science the type of truth value that used to be given to revealed scripture. Although many modern-day philosophers, scientists, and writers have criticized scientism, it remains true that most people in the modern world, even educated people who should know better, take scientific knowledge as possessing unique reliability. Western popular culture—and today the same is largely true of Islamic popular culture—is based on a view of the universe, human life, and human destiny that accepts scientific theories as "fact." Science is understood as providing the only reliable answers to questions about the world. In this view of things, the role of religion can at best be to supply belief systems and ritual practices, which in turn give people solace and contribute to social stability.

One result of scientism has been that the Islamic intellectual tradition has been eclipsed by science and the disciplines of the modern academy, such as philosophy, political science, and sociology. This means that contemporary Muslim thinkers have been trained in modern disciplines and typically discuss science and religion in Western terms.

Religion is given a small place in life, but the tradition of intellectual learning—if there is any awareness of it—is looked upon as the long-dead ancestor of modern science, an ancestor whose often fanciful teachings have now been displaced by "facts." Yet, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr has been asserting for more than three decades, today's world bears witness to a continuous proliferation of such treatments of the traditional and sacred sciences to fulfil a need which is deeply felt by many people, especially those who can no longer find an intellectual home for themselves in the mental landscape created by modern rationalism, empiricism, and scientism. Paradoxically enough, this desire to go beyond the confines of positivistic science is to be found among many practitioners of modern science itself, especially physicists, some of whom have indicated the necessity of turning to traditional cosmologies and philosophies of nature to create a wider framework into which the findings of contemporary physics could be integrated. There is a vast range of views on this matter, ranging from those of people who are at once respectable metaphysicians and scientists to serious physicists who are seeking to bring about a synthesis of the latest discoveries of physics and caricatures of traditional cosmological doctrines of a usually oriental origin. Rapidly, a new intermediate zone is being created between physics and a kind of "cosmic mysticism" of rather dubious authenticity, a zone which nevertheless caters once again to the need of certain types of human beings for an authentic sacred science. In this context, the so-called "new gnosis" or "new age," which has been spreading so much during the past decades, is most telling.

In the Islamic context, the basis for thinking that religion does not concern itself with scientific questions is the notion that "religion" deals exclusively with the transmission of beliefs and practices. However, the moment we look at the Islamic intellectual tradition, we see that Islam has always embraced every sort of knowledge. What we call "scientific" knowledge was one form of learning that was included among the intellectual disciplines. But to understand the significance of its inclusion, we must first understand what Muslim intellectuals were trying to do.

Divided into seven parts, including an introduction and a postscript, Seema Golestaneh's first book, *Unknowing and the Everyday: Sufism and Knowledge in Iran*, explores Persian-speaking Sufi movements in contemporary Iran through the lives of practitioners from Sufi masters to students. A central question being explored in the book is how concepts like knowledge and what we do not know translate into both Sufi practice and general life situations. More importantly, how does engaging with Sufi practice change or impact the way people deal with life's uncertainties? Central to this process is *ma'rifah*, a term that the

author chose to translate as "unknowing," a choice that sometimes causes confusion while one is reading the book. The idea is that, as it is ultimately impossible to fully understand the divine, humanity must operate from an engaged awareness that it knows nothing, including those associated with the limitations of knowledge. For example, one sheikh whom Golestaneh interviewed felt melancholic while another was delighted by the fact that they must rest in a sense of unknowing. On the other hand, many Sufis find "unknowing" helpful in dealing with everyday issues and shared with Golestaneh how they operated, thought about, and experienced these notions.

In the introduction, the author shares an insight from one of the Sufis she interviewed for her study, which summarizes "unknowing," the conceptual subject of Golestaneh's ethnography. One of the author's Sufi interlocutors tells her that "the reasoned thinking of the intellectual will always be less than that of the sun. . . . There is always that which is beyond what we are thinking" (p. 3). This observation elucidates the perspective that the end of human thought can be recognized as a beginning rather than a terminus. In Sufism, this epistemological viewpoint is commonly referred to as gnosis or experiential knowledge (*ma'rifah*), but Golestaneh submits "unknowing" as a more useful translation because of the concept's generative and infinite nature (pp. 4-5).

Through ethnographic case studies, Golestaneh approaches "unknowing" as both an object of study and as a critical lens, examining how the Sufi mystical experience shapes contemporary life in Iran by engaging with self-described members of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order, an order rooted in Iran and South Asia since the fifteenth century CE. Employing the mystical epistemology of her interview subjects as a guide to understanding the data they provide, she analyses the relationship between "unknowing" and religious, aesthetic, and social life. These investigations take place in physical contexts like collective Sufi spaces, as well as in conceptual spaces, such as within the interpretation of Persian poetry and formulations of selfhood and non-selfhood.

This book is part of a growing field of study of the anthropology of knowledge in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Typically, questions about knowledge have been dealt with philosophically and have tended to focus solely on rational arguments about what we know and do not know and the meaning of it all. The anthropology of knowledge goes beyond the rational debates and seeks to understand the lived realities of these debates through people and wider society. How do ordinary people make sense of these issues, and how do they impact their behaviour and inform their beliefs about the world?

The author shows that rather than considering *ma'rifah* an obstacle to intellectual engagement, Sufis embrace that there will always be that which they do not know. From this position, they affirm both the limits of human knowledge and the mysteries of the profane world. By outlining the relationship between *ma'rifah* and religious, aesthetic, and social life in Iran, Golestaneh demonstrates that for Sufis, the outer bounds of human thought are the beginning rather than the limit.

An associate professor in Cornell's Department of Near Eastern Studies, Golestaneh's research, situated at the nexus of anthropology and religious studies, is focused on expressions of contemporary Islamic thought in the Persian-speaking world, and she is particularly interested in how metaphysical experiences make themselves known in the socio-material realm via aesthetics and epistemology. In this book, the author examines the social and material life of gnosis (*ma'rifah*) for disparate Sufi communities in Iran. Essentially an anthropology of the imagination, her work also relies heavily on textual ethnography and analysis, emphasizing the importance of hermeneutics within the Iranian socio-theological sphere. Both in her writing and her teaching, she strives to highlight marginalized voices but also creative expressions of critical thought. She came to the study of Sufism not in a direct way, since initially she was interested in musicians and artists in modern Iran and the intersection between aesthetics and meaning-making in everyday life. When she got to know some of these musicians, she learned that they were Sufis and became fascinated by some of their ideas regarding religion.

In the book, Golestaneh uses interviews and case studies drawn from a decade of fieldwork to explore how the Sufi mystical experience—particularly the role of mystical knowledge or *ma'rifah*—influences shaping contemporary life in Iran, where many people report turning to mysticism as a way to help navigate their daily lives. The author explores this phenomenon, as well as the role of Sufism and modernity in Iran, especially the ways that the unknowing of knowledge can open new possibilities for thinking about modern life.

Each chapter of the book, except for the first, analyses an individual case study, beginning with an ethnographic anecdote that describes the event or practice in question. This is then followed by an analysis that traces how particular mystical concepts found within the case studies are applied to navigate the socio-material realm. In utilizing this rhetorical technique, the author adopts a more miniaturist stance, taking individual stories and unravelling them, ethnographically, rather than exploring broader themes present within her research.

Chapter one "Sufism in Iran, Iran in Sufism" (pp. 29-58) explores the complexities behind the category of "mysticism" within Iranian intellectual and political history, the legacies of this convoluted history, and the prevalence of mystical thought outside of Sufi circles. In sharp distinction to designations of Sufism as "heterodox" and their non-Sufi "mainstream" counterparts as "orthodox," Iranian intellectual histories demonstrate no such clear bifurcation. The author begins by analysing the ambiguity surrounding the terms Sufism (*ṣūfīgarī*), literary mysticism (*'irfān*), and scholarly mysticism (*taṣavvuf*), and the subsequent difficulty involved in categorizing a person or group as Sufi or not within the Iranian popular imagination. Then she provides an overview of the history of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order since the late nineteenth century, with a focus on the complicated history between certain branches of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order and the reigning political and theological authorities in Iran, highlighting how these relationships have varied drastically over time. From here, she highlights strains of Shii clerical commitment to mystical thought through the twentieth century, touching upon two of the most famous members of the mystically inclined clergy (*'ulamā'*): Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989) and Allameh Sayyed Mohammad Tabatabai (1904-1981). The author also draws on scholarship that explores the relationship between the seminaries and Sufi orders in the mid-twentieth century, mysticism in the popular imagination as seen through self-help movements and popular fiction, and recent publications by mystically inclined clerics in Mashhad.

While the book does highlight several instances where Iranian mystical thought diverges from "mainstream" Twelver thought, by establishing this broader theological and sociohistorical landscape of Iran, the author hoped to highlight how the mysticism of her interlocutors was simultaneously convergent with and divergent from other forms of "Islamic thought" (considered broadly) within contemporary Iran.

Chapter two "Unknowing of Text, Unknowing of Authority" (pp. 59-95), which was the one that I enjoyed the most, analyses the transformative power of textual interpretation (*tafsīr*) for two Sufi reading groups. In particular, the author traces the ways the Sufis' unique understanding of spiritual authority is directly tied to their methods of *tafsīr* or hermeneutics. The members of these Sufi poetry-reading groups believe that the *tafsīr* of a text leads not to the correct answer in regard to its meaning, but to yet more difficult questions contained therein. The text is, in a sense, endless; its words can convey countless ideas that lead to ever deeper philosophical musings, the further one goes in one's analysis. Thus, employing a hermeneutic method not dissimilar to many modern and postmodern literary

theorists of the twentieth century, the Sufis adhere to an interpretative framework for understanding Persian poetry that mimics their understanding of knowledge as an exercise without limit or finality. Furthermore, this understanding of *tafsīr* holds vast consequences not only for the possibilities contained within the text but also for the ways in which the Sufis view the one who leads the reading group and guides them in analysis: their sheikh. Indeed, in contrast to the mainstream Ja'farī Shii clerics, whose authority is directly derived from their training and the fact that they can interpret sacred texts more accurately than lay people, thereby providing the best answers to their students, the Sufi sheikhs engage with a different form of authority. It is their ability to guide their students (*ṭālibān*) to find the appropriate questions, rather than provide them with the most accurate answers for a text that distinguishes them. Among other things, this chapter points out how both sheikhs, despite their different localities and not knowing one another, engage with the "unknowing" in the same way.

Chapter three "Unknowing of Self, Unknowing of Body" (pp. 96-134) investigates the relationship between the Sufi remembrance ritual (*dhikr*), sensorial engagement, and socio-political identity, specifically analysing how the Sufi idea of the annihilation of the self (*fanā'*), achieved through the bodily *dhikr* ritual, has been reinterpreted by the author's interlocutors in one of two ways: The first group articulates their understandings of *fanā'* in largely theological terms, discussing concepts like the quieting of the lower soul (*nafs ammārah*) and the turn to nonexistence. The second group, in contrast, describes their experience of *fanā'* as the loss of a much more socialized self, interpreting the loss of self as the loss of what might be called identity politics or the self in society. In the final part of this section, the author compares these Sufis' desire to destabilize subjectivity with calls by prerevolutionary Iranian intellectuals Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969) and Ali Shariati (1933-1977) to "return to the self." The author concludes the chapter by turning her attention to those Sufi aesthetic theories that expound upon the relationship between intentional listening and the transformation of the self, specifically, understanding the ways in which bodily and sensorial engagement might invoke a momentary alternative to the socio-political subject.

The fourth chapter "Unknowing of Memory" (pp. 135-164) traces an instance of the destruction of a Sufi meeting place (*khāniqāh*) by the local authorities in the city of Isfahan in February 2009. According to the author, the Sufis' response was not to mourn the site but to actively and deliberately forget it, which was to disavow the material in favour of the spiritual. A shrine that was used as a site for Thursday and Friday prayer

meetings was housed in the Takhteh-Foulad Cemetery, which had recently been dubbed an Islamic Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Following this designation, the local authorities began to transform the cemetery into a tourist site and destroyed the shrine on the grounds of the "beautification" of the neighbourhood.

When Golestaneh asked local Sufis about the incident, she found that respondents consistently bypassed making reference to the levelled tomb, preferring to emphasize the remaining grave. The author refers to this phenomenon as "active forgetting," a "decisive refutation of memory, a forgetting so purposeful that the material may be rendered immaterial" (p. 142). In this case, Golestaneh summons the idea of amnesia wherein the amnesiacs recognize their loss, but the subject of the memory has vanished. Golestaneh argues that this instance is a manifestation of the Sufi's understanding of and relationship to the spiritual and profane planes of existence. She also suggests that it is tied to broader Sufi theories of forgetting and remembrance (pp. 143-144). Through this active forgetting, the community has undermined the ontological status of the tomb and demonstrated a practical expression of "unknowing" (p. 144).

This chapter, besides being convoluted, sometimes feels like an exercise in armchair psychoanalysis—pun not intended. The author's focus is twofold: first, an analysis of the Sufis' reaction to the actions of the authorities, both before and after the demolition; and second, how such commemoration differs from that of memorialization processes of the Iranian state. Regarding the former, she analyses the order's decision to "remember to forget" the site. More specifically, the sheikhs advised their followers not to mourn the loss of the site but to actively try to forget it, arguing that the material structure was not important. From here, the author jumps to conclude how this command to "remember to forget" is tied to both Sufi ideals of the relationship between remembrance and forgetting and Ja'farī Shii ideals of remembrance, using this discussion as a jumping-off point to explore how this technique of commemoration exhibits both similarities and differences to the Islamic Republic's exercises in the construction of public memory, an assertion which, to say the least, is abstruse (one of the author's favourite words throughout the text). Many Japanese-Americans and Japanese-Canadians, who were the target of roundups and put in concentration camps during the Second World War in the United States and Canada, chose to forget that experience, as did many Jews in the aftermath of the European atrocities against them in the first half of the twentieth century, or as many South-Asians, who were expelled from or

forced to leave East Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, did. To deliberately forget something painful, at least in official discourses and narratives, is what human beings do when they have suffered trauma or when there is a sense of a hovering threat over them, which could be materialized if they keep talking about the event.

The fifth and final chapter "Unknowing of Place" (pp. 165-188) focuses on the relationship between concepts of wandering, intentional listening, and techniques of spatial formation as seen through the establishment and rotation of meeting places. As authorities continue to frown upon public gatherings, Sufis have sought alternative methods of convening that allow them to create and maintain an autonomous space while still complying with government regulations. One informal Sufi youth group—meaning one operating without the involvement of a sheikh or other spiritual leader—does so by meeting in private homes and rotating locations each week to avoid attention from the authorities. More notably, rather than let the participants know the exact address of the meeting place, each week they announce a nearby intersection at which to meet and then proceed to broadcast music to allow the members to locate the site by listening and hence "following" the sounds. While texting and telephone calls are ultimately used to find the exact address, in this chapter, the author examines, first, the ways that ideas of existential wandering are implemented to help resolve a matter of state interference, second, the formation of a Sufi soundscape, and third, the broader impact for the creation of such a collective space within post-revolutionary Iran.

The book concludes with a postscript (pp. 189-192), where the author thinks about the utilization of unknowing through the lens of improvisation. In musical improvisation, one draws upon one's prior training to instantaneously react to the immediate present. Similarly, the Sufis turn to their own mystical philosophies and ideas of gnosis to navigate the sociopolitical realm, responding to external actors by drawing upon their own training in real time. By drawing parallels between aesthetic and social improvisation, the postscript reaffirms the ways in which the contemporary Iranian mystical experience is in conversation with the sociopolitical realm, as well as the intricate relationship between religious, aesthetic, and sociopolitical narratives in Iran.

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