Sufis in Medieval Baghdad
Agency and the Public Sphere in the Late Abbasid Caliphate
Atta Muhammad
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TRANSLITERATION AND DATES

I have used the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* system for the transliteration of Arabic and Persian terms in this book, with some exceptions for the sake of convenience. The exceptions are q instead of ḍ, and j instead of ḍj. Well-known words, such as the names of dynasties, are rendered in their anglicized versions. I have also frequently indicated the plural Arabic nouns simply by adding ‘s’ rather than giving the correct Arabic form (e.g. *ribâṭ* rather than *rûbûṭ*). This book provides dates in the Common Era alongside Hijrî dates. The Hijrî year is followed by the Christian year.
This book draws attention to the significant topic of the medieval Islamic public sphere, and the role of Sufis during the later Abbasid Caliphate (r. 391–656/1000–1258) in Baghdad within that sphere. My central aim is to show how certain Sufis of Baghdad in that era played a significant role in the public sphere. The establishment of Sufi lodges in Baghdad created a much broader public space where the community of believers would be involved in public sphere activities related to the dissemination of religious traditions, intellectual teachings, moral guidance and financial support. The Sufis shared their emotional and spiritual experiences, criticizing rulers for the lack of improvement in the lives of the commoners and helping underprivileged segments of society through their charitable activities. The plethora of evidence that I have gathered and analysed in this study reveals that Sufis as social actors used their individual and collective agency to influence state policies for the betterment of common people. Through their autonomous and semi-autonomous activities, the Sufis regularly and successfully intervened in the public domains for the welfare of the community, sometimes to quite a radical effect by instructing the rulers or collaborating with the ruling authorities. Several Sufis also tried to build bridges between ruling elites and commoners, to develop and sustain an environment where social actors and community members from various walks of life could contribute to and shape the common values of society.

My study clears a space for a better understanding of the social, economic and political agency of ordinary people. I argue that medieval Islamic societies did not merely have a single authoritarian sphere of social activity in which only the elite had agency; rather, there were multiple public spheres where people recruited from a range of private spheres expressed differing modes of social agency. The public spaces including charity sectors, civic associations such as merchants’ organizations, futuwwa groups, and others with the aim of ‘commanding good and forbidding evil’ were available instruments utilized by the elite as well as the non-elite for the public good. My investigation has revealed that later Abbasid Baghdadi society functioned well not because the government performed an adequate job of discharging its responsibilities towards the populace, but because ordinary people took on significant aspects of these responsibilities, with members of the various social strata contributing to the constitution and maintenance of the public sphere.

The term ‘public sphere’ was devised by Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher, in the 1960s. He argues that this sphere lies between state and civil society, where common people critically and rationally debate matters of common
The public sphere resists and monitors the authoritarian tendencies of the state by organizing and mobilizing people against it. It promotes popular causes by both cooperating with and opposing the state. It is a sphere that creates relationships between society and the state through the exchange of public opinion. It is a public domain that is open to all sections of society and is independent of any state authority or institution.

Scholars such as Armando Salvatore have paid close attention to the idea of the public sphere and have noted that it is not simply about rational critical debate and the formation of public opinion; the public sphere emerged and developed through various historical, cultural and religious processes. Salvatore argues that the public sphere is a complex phenomenon, having various legal, civic and religious roots. It is a process in which the actors come together, argue, act and deliberate in a way that is legitimate in the pursuance of the collective well-being of the community. The actors in the process also show a fair degree of transparency in communication. The public sphere, by its nature, means the general well-being of the people. It is a sphere where people can air all kinds of grievances and address all kinds of problems through mutual consultation.

The nature of the public sphere is well illustrated by the example of rational critical debate and the formation of public opinion. Significantly, public opinion is not the opinion of an individual but draws its strength from groups that participate in a critical and rational debate for the common good. Habermas, who based his conception of the public sphere on ‘critical-rational public opinion,’ took the idea of critical rationality from Kant, who thought that it was a ‘rational-critical debate’ by the public, ‘human beings,’ over their collective concerns, which made them ‘citizens.’ In this way, ‘Kant’s ideas of public, publicity, and critical reason have become part of a Habermasian story of the progressively liberating aspects of secular, bourgeois society.’ For Habermas, this critical rational approach by the citizens in the public sphere helped the bourgeoisie to create a liberal constitutional state. According to Dewey, ‘public’ means ‘an institution with recognized common goals and at least an informal leadership.’ Thus, Dewey ‘reaffirms the necessary role of intermediary institutions and authorities, as against the emphasis that Kant and Habermas place on the public sphere occupying a social space free from the influence of such authorities.’

There is a need to critically examine the concept of rationality in public discourse, as it limits the role of some of the religious forms in the public sphere. As to religion, David Harrington Watt contends, ‘under certain circumstances at least religious institutions are important elements in the public sphere.’ These religious forms or institutions have no space within the single predominant public sphere as argued by Habermas. Nancy Fraser challenges the idea of exclusive focus on the single dominant public sphere in favour of the multiplicity of the public. She wants to focus attention on what she calls ‘subaltern counter publics.’ These publics exist at the margins and in the spaces of the single overarching public sphere, and they repeatedly assert their validity and legitimacy. Though Fraser does not explicitly list the subaltern practices that go against the greater interest of the public, presumptions can be made about them as several ‘voluntary
associations formed by persons with an attachment to religious ideas and practices that are marginalized by the dominant public sphere. Therefore, it can be argued that there are various and sometimes contending concepts of the public sphere. Moreover, it can be assumed that some religious institutions and traditions contribute to the formation of these multiple public spheres.

In contrast to the secular, rational public criticism experienced by the liberal democracies, public criticism exists in Muslim countries, but there it is based on principles and institutions guided by traditional reasoning, as Talal Asad argues, giving the example of the Islamic state of Saudi Arabia, where ‘ulamā’ (religious scholars, including theologians and jurists) criticize those functions of the state which they consider irreligious and against the shari’a (the revealed law; rules and regulations for governing the life of Muslims) norms in their discourses and sermons. This criticism is based on nasīḥa (signifying honest and faithful advice for someone’s good), a moral exhortation to the ruler for the betterment of the umma (community of believers). In Asad’s words, nasīḥa ‘is much more than an expression of good intention on the part of the advice giver (nāsiḥ): since in this context it carries the sense of offering moral advice to an erring fellow Muslim (mansūh), it is at once an obligation to be fulfilled and a virtue to be cultivated by all Muslims.' The earlier discussion highlights the role of moral political criticism and its relevance to the construction of the public sphere in Islamic societies.

Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, while exploring the concept of the public sphere in medieval Islamic societies, defines the concept of the public sphere as an area of activity existing between official and private spheres which facilitates the pursuit of the common good. Significantly, the public sphere develops when emphasis shifts from political authorities to society as far as the maintenance of the social order is concerned. In societies where the public sphere plays an important role, social order is maintained as much by independent social organizations and networks as by the rulers or ruling authorities, or even largely by the former. Moreover, these are symbiotic relationships between society and rulers that help in the development of the public sphere. Regarding pre-modern Islamic societies, there was no separation or estrangement between society and rulers since there were informal relations and ongoing discourse between the ruling authorities and the society, thus the public sphere expanded and progressed.

The functions of the public sphere occur simultaneously as a diagnostic centre for resolving social problems among the masses and a platform for devising solutions to complex issues, thus acting as a bridge between public and private segments of society. The term ‘public sphere’, therefore, indicates the existence of spaces that are autonomous and are not necessarily influenced by ruling authorities or the political order. These spaces are available to different sections of society. Keeping in mind this definition of the public sphere, I shall examine the establishment and impact of public spaces in the Islamic earlier middle period (from the tenth to the middle of the thirteenth centuries, as referred to by Marshall Hodgson) and analyse the role of the Sufis of later Abbasid rule in Baghdad within the public sphere. I have treated the public sphere in this book as a broader sphere of social activity; wide, inclusive and to be found at all levels of society; where rulers and
commoners, Sufis and non-Sufis, lettered and non-lettered participated in the construction and shaping of the medieval Islamic public sphere.

Sufism (tasawwuf in Arabic) is a religious and spiritual tradition within Islam. It emerged as an ascetic and mystical stream in the very early stages of the development and expansion of Islam and ‘subsequently took a wide variety of devotional, doctrinal, artistic, and institutional forms’. Many early Sufis were involved in activities such as personal austerity, fear of God, consistent recitation of the Qur‘ān, offering of ritual prayers and personal ethical and moral development. However, at the turn of the eleventh century, Sufism had moved from ‘individual piety’ into a ‘social organization’, complex religious tradition and a ‘vehicle for public outreach’. At the end of the twelfth century, Sufi orders impacted the public sphere when they integrated people from different social domains within kāhānqāh/ribāt, whereby providing a platform for identifying and formulating ideas relating to social life and facilitating freedom of debate in matters critical to the ruler and the public at large. In the case of medieval Baghdad, by the middle of the twelfth century, the Sufi lodge had been transformed into a public space – a centre of devotional, spiritual, religious and intellectual life shared by all sections of society. This book, while focusing on the Sufis of Baghdad, discusses and examines those facets of Sufism that were helpful to society in various ways.

The late Abbasid Baghdad period is considered the starting point of this examination of Sufism and its role in the public sphere. After the disintegration of the Abbasid Caliphate, Islamic societies tended towards social self-sustenance, where certain religious and social groups and actors all too often took responsibility for all sections of the community. This in turn created a space where a community could work for the betterment of its believers. During the period under consideration, Baghdad underwent a significant political, administrative and economic shift from Buyid (r. 334–447/945–1055) to Seljuk (r. 429–590/1038–1194) rule and then to the re-emergence of the late Abbasid caliphs as real masters and sovereigns of Baghdad and the whole of Iraq. The end of the Buyid rule in Baghdad and the arrival of the Seljuks as new rulers of Baghdad in 447/1055 changed the intellectual, religious and physical landscape of Baghdad to a great extent. Seljuk sultans and viziers endowed many religious and social institutions such as madrasas and ribāts. While these institutions engaged many scholars and students in the madrasas, they also involved Sufis as administrators of madrasas and ribāts. The Sufis of Seljuk Baghdad transformed these ribāts into ‘centers of public preaching and spaces for distribution of charity, and places of pilgrimage for the people to seek divine blessing’. During the later Abbasid period, many Sufis migrated from other areas to Baghdad and began playing an important role in the religious, spiritual and social life of the city. The most prominent example is the family of Abū Sa‘d b. Aḥmad al-Nīsābūrī, later known as the family of Shaykh al-shuyūkh (chief Sufi) of Baghdad, who came from Nishapur. Baghdadī Sufis and their names are ubiquitous in the biographical dictionaries and historical sources that were written after the tenth century. This allows an investigation into how these Sufis’ activities and practices become widespread in late Abbasid Baghdad – and furthermore, how their religious, social and cultural practices such as samā’
(the devotional practice of listening to Sufi music), writing, teaching, preaching, charity and *futuwwa* activities were beneficial to Baghdadi society; how the Sufis of Baghdad assimilated into a scholarly, social, political and religious order and used their agency to shape Islamic society and space.

In this book, while several Sufis of Abbasid Baghdad will be dealt with, the research will remain focused on how these Sufis’ activities shaped the relationships between society and the ruling authorities, and how their activities helped the society in self-functioning and self-regulating. Besides prominent Sufis such as Abu ‘l-Najib ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Suhrawardi (d. 564/1168), ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 562/1166) and Abū Ḥafṣ ‘Umar al-Suhrawardi (d. 632/1234), who were all involved in nurturing the public good, this book uncovers those non-elite Sufis such as Kamāl al-Dīn Ḥamza ibn ‘Ali ibn Ṭalḥa (d. 556/1161) and Abu ‘l-Ḥasan Sa’d Allāh b. Naṣr ibn al-Dajājī (d. 564/1169), prominent actors in the Baghdadi religious, spiritual and social spheres. According to Ibn al-Jawzī, Abu ‘l-Ḥasan al-Dajājī was a mystic, an *ʿālim* (religious scholar) and Ḥanbalī *faqīh* (pl. *fuqahāʾ*). He was involved in *waʿẓ* (to give sermons carrying admonishments) and the transmission of religious knowledge. Ibn al-Dajājī attached himself to the Sufis; so his attachment remained with the Sufis when he passed away and was buried in the Ribāṭ al-Zawzanī.25 At the same time, this study branches out to the significant theme of public spaces in medieval Islamic societies. It discusses how public spaces – charities, community organizations, *futuwwa* (chivalry) groups, those with the aim of commanding virtue and forbidding evil – in the medieval Islamic world enabled commoners to work in the social, religious and political environment and witness changes. It also explores how these spaces enabled Sufis to bring Sufism out of its spiritual sphere and into the public sphere. The development of these public spaces in the Islamic earlier middle period is underexamined by scholars. The analysis undertaken here extends our knowledge of the medieval Islamic public sphere and society, and the relationship between society and ruling authorities. Its significance lies in demonstrating how ordinary people were involved in the public sphere and how medieval Islamic society created a set of norms that permitted this to occur. There are a few modern scholarly works that identify ‘public sphere activity’ in medieval Islamic societies; significant aspects of this sphere, such as commoners’ agency, the role of religious schools, *waqf* (the act of founding a charitable trust), and the relevant rules have been highlighted by Amina Elbendary, Konrad Hirschler, Megan H. Reid, Adam Sabra and others.26 We have scholarly works on Sufism, its agency and its role in the public sphere in medieval Islamic societies – for instance, the works of Daphna Ephrat and Nathan Hofer. In her book *Spiritual Wayfarers, Leaders in Piety*, Daphna Ephrat discusses the Sufis’ activities in the public sphere. They played a significant role in the social and cultural life of the cities in medieval Palestine through Sufi lodges and tombs endowed by the wealthy ruling elite. Sufis transformed *ribāṭs/zāwiya* and tombs of *shaykhs* into public spaces open to all segments of Muslim society for receiving Sufi guidance and blessings.27 Ephrat clearly defines the Sufis of medieval Palestine and their contributory works in the public sphere between the official and the private sphere; their activities were not under the control of the ruling authorities.
Ephrat’s study is of great significance as it highlights medieval Sufism as a spiritual and social movement and it examines how Sufis’ religious and spiritual activities were enormously beneficial to society. The *Popularisation of Sufism in Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt, 1173–1325* by Nathan Hofer is a detailed discussion of the Sufis of Egypt and their roles in political, social and religious domains during the said period. Hofer examines different types of relationships between Sufis and the ruling elite; some were state-sponsored Sufis, as they lived in the Sufi lodges endowed by the ruling authorities, while some kept themselves aloof from the ruler’s domains, and others were critics of the ruling authorities. All three groups were involved in social and political activities in Egypt at various levels. Hofer’s study examines the agency of the Sufis as social actors who spread Sufi ideas, practices and beliefs in Egyptian society. Scholarship on the spiritual aspects of Baghdadi Sufism and the official sphere is vast, but the historians of that era have generally disregarded the role of Sufis of later Abbasid Baghdad in the religious, social and political spheres.

Agency is commonly referred to as the thoughts and actions taken by people to show their power. The term ‘agency’ originates in a Latin word, *agere*, which means ‘to act’ – it gives us the words ‘agent’ and ‘agenda.’ Agency is a human capability, rooted in the individual’s intellectual and physical capacity that comes into play to affect the social life pattern. It is not only ‘extraordinary human exertion’ that manifests agency; the term is more related to the human conduct and behaviour that is shaped by both the reflection and efforts of an individual. To study agency is to follow an individual in respect of their interaction with others, their engagement with ideas, customs, beliefs and the changing social life pattern. In simple words, it is the study of the individual and how they relate to society and culture. Agency can be used individually and collectively to shape social life and thought. Collective or individual use of agency may serve the community in one of two ways: it can confirm the existing social order, norms and social relationships, or its use goes against the existing social order and status quo and creates new norms and social relationships.

As far as the field of sociology is concerned, the critical challenge is understanding the relationship between an individual’s agency and the structure of a complicated and intersecting set of institutions, relationships, social forces, and other social elements that work together to shape and channel social behaviour and the overall life pattern of the people. Agency and structure are essential facets of any historical reality; the former is visible but rooted in the latter, which remains latent. Sociologists have given three types of opinions regarding the relationship between the two. Some argue that structure is fundamental for social change as it comes before social activities; while on the other hand, some argue that agency is the power through which people think and act to shape their life and experiences – in other words, social action is based on the self-reflective choices and rational approaches of individuals and groups. The third group focuses on the dialectical relationship between agency and structure, in which both are equally and mutually involved in social change. So in a dialectical process, social structure shapes individuals and groups, while the individuals and groups also shape the structures.
Where society and culture shape human agency, the creativity of the individual is significant in transforming existing norms and practices. It is the reflexive capacity of human beings that helps them to create culture and history, rather than simply receiving and reproducing the existing social structures. Consequently, in the study of agency some new questions arise about individuals’ perception of where power lies in society, the values and beliefs that guide their conduct, and ‘the self-reflection preceding strategic action.’ Another significant question is whether one’s actions are only for others or the world at large, or sometimes for one’s self. When anyone acts in the hope of changing their own conduct and character, this is also a clear example of individual agency. Another significant aspect of agency is the non-human kind of agency medieval societies. In medieval societies, irrespective of human agency, non-human agency was also seen to play a significant role in social order and change; prayers, ‘spells, and potions’ were a part of the cultural reality and many believed in their effectiveness. Like many other medieval societies, Islamic society also emphasized the importance of these prayers in religious and social life, especially the prayers of a saint. It is a complicated matter to examine the agency of commoners in medieval Islamic societies, because this scrutiny was not discussed in medieval sources in a way that is easily relatable to modern terms. Moreover, it is also challenging to identify the agency of the commoners, as the medieval social structure was divided by class, groups and communities in quite different ways from those we are familiar with in modern societies. However, agency is a significant concept in understanding the medieval social order. It helps in comprehending to what extent collective and individual thought and actions affected and brought about changes in social life. Keeping in mind the earlier discussion on agency, this book argues that ordinary individuals, people who belonged to the non-elite sections of society, used their agency to act effectively in the world of medieval Islam. It examines, among other aspects, the processes through which the Sufis used their agency in the public sphere. What was the Sufis’ degree of agency in terms of the social context in which they acted while promoting their role in the public sphere? To what extent did Sufis as autonomous moral agents use their agency in cultural, social, political and religious spheres for the benefit of the common people? The social roles of Sufis included all those religious, spiritual, political and cultural activities that were firmly embedded in the society at large and that were beneficial to the interest of the whole society. The pieces of evidence accumulated in this book support my argument about the individual and collective agency of Sufis and non-Sufis of medieval Islamic societies, and their religious, spiritual and social experiences. I have gathered in this book information on activities and events such as preaching sessions of the Sufis addressed to the rulers and the ruled, and gatherings of Sufis and non-Sufis at ribāṭs with the aim of exchanging ideas and helping materially the marginalized sections of society. Moreover, this book also includes events such as celebrations at Sufi tombs and ribāṭs and charitable actions of the wealthy, merchants, artisans and Sufis. It also covers the criticism that came from certain Sufis against the rulers. This book focuses on these events and actions as well as subsequent reflections about ordinary human agency.
There is hardly any serious research that directly addresses the Sufis of Baghdad and their involvement in the social and political sphere of late Abbasid Baghdadi society. This book is not just an attempt to fill this gap in scholarly pursuits, but also an effort to highlight this period of formative Sufism in the social sphere in Baghdad. It demonstrates how the Sufis of Baghdad transformed Sufism from an ascetic and spiritual phenomenon into a social one. It also examines how certain Sufis reached out to the common people to ensure their religious, spiritual, economic and ethical well-being, and this deserves qualified immersion in the subject which has hitherto been lacking. There were a variety of different strategies that these Sufis employed within the Baghdadi public sphere. These strategies came in the form of oppositional/collaborative relationships with the ruling authorities, supervision and managing of ribāṭs, and engaging in teaching, preaching and charitable activities. My central purpose is to show how elite as well as non-elite representatives of ascetic and mystical currents of Islam played their role in the public sphere in medieval Baghdad. The breadth of this role has not been previously described or analysed by scholars. Relying on Sufi and non-Sufi biographical and hagiographical literature, this book includes among its Sufis those who were ascetics, mystics, spiritually revered individuals and holy figures living in late Abbasid Baghdad from 391/1000 to 656/1258.

In investigating the role of Sufis in creating a public space, this analysis broadens the scope of discussion to include aspects that have hitherto been largely neglected in modern scholarship on the medieval Islamic public sphere – in particular, the areas indicated by the research questions that follow. What role did individual Sufis play in pursuance of the public good during the later Abbasid Caliphate? What factors allowed Sufis to create a public space for themselves and society as a whole? To what extent did the Sufis enjoy autonomy in their orders vis-à-vis the ruling authorities, and did they play a role in social domains where the state failed? How did the state and/or ruling elites react to Sufi activism in the public domain? To what extent did the ribāṭ under Sufi administration emerge as a public space for the religious, spiritual and economic well-being of the common people? What role did the endowing rulers, non-ruling elite and commoners play in this process? How and why did the Sufis of Baghdad, in addition to their primary role in the spiritual sphere within their communities, occupy the central stage in the provision of material, religious, social and political benefits to society? This study, through investigation of these issues, seeks to contribute to existing knowledge of medieval Sufism, where research has often focused on the lives of great Sufis, their legacies and the spiritual dimensions of Sufism while overlooking the public role of Sufism during this formative period. Thus, I hope to advance an understanding of medieval Baghdadi Sufism and its role in the public sphere. I intend to build up a picture of that social sphere, how it worked and who worked for it.

The concept of the public sphere helps in looking at relations between rulers and society from a broader perspective. Therefore, the present study covers not only the role of the Sufis in the public sphere but also the ruler’s involvement in this sphere and the nature of ruler–subject relations. When thinking about the public good and the public sphere, this book is attempting to close a gap in the literature
that focuses on the elite and the agency of the rulers. My argument is that there was a space in which ‘lesser’ people also had agency, through which they helped each other and those who were less privileged. Sometimes rulers were involved in charitable activities, but generally, we are trying to discuss history ‘from below’ in as much as the sources allow, bypassing the current obsession with caliphs and sultans (holders of power and authority; provincial rulers; rulers who had de facto power alongside the caliph), and the great Sufi thinkers’ obsession with great men. This study refutes the idea that medieval Islamic society was simply established around hegemony. Thus my focus is less on what the elite did for the elite; instead it is on what the elite and non-elite did for the non-elite.

The period of study encompasses the later Abbasid period, stretching from 391/1000 to 656/1258. In terms of geographical spread, I have mainly limited myself to Baghdad and the later Abbasid Caliphate in studying the Sufis’ role in the public sphere. Late Abbasid Baghdad provides an obvious focal point for this study. To examine the multiple public spheres in medieval Islamic societies, however, the geographical range of my study is wider, collecting evidence and examples from Baghdad, Cairo and Damascus. Examples from other areas such as medieval Cairo and Damascus have helped to establish my argument that medieval Islamic society boasted a vibrant public sphere in which the whole social strata participated.

The picture that emerges from this study is one of Sufism’s significant additions to the Baghdadi public sphere. Sufism emerged as a major network of religious piety on the social horizon. Sufis joined hands to create institutions such as ribāṭ and a range of mechanisms by which the population could integrate and interact, and become an honest critique of ruling authorities, posing challenges and even bypassing their authority on occasions, and at other times reinforcing their authority; so a variety of different roles were played out in this public sphere. This book argues that the consciousness of the public sphere prevailed in medieval Islamic societies and was also practised by the population. The understanding of the public good was pursued and demonstrated in many walks of life, suggesting that there was a concrete and locatable space for it in medieval Islamic societies.

In its examination of the medieval Islamic public sphere, the present study has taken a cue from a wide range of historical sources including biographical dictionaries, chronicles, dynastic histories, works dedicated to kings and amīrs (members of the ruling elite; military commanders), travelogues and the hagiographical accounts of Sufis; the use of these diverse sources in different forms can offer a nuanced context and meaning to the key research questions. As this study presents an overview of the role of the Sufis of Baghdad in the public sphere during the later Abbasid Caliphate, it enquires how, why and in which aspects of the public good the Sufis played their roles. How did Sufis approach political authority for the public good? Critical examination and analysis of these sources will help to locate the Sufis’ role in the public domain. Of the medieval sources, I have relied mainly on standard – that is to say, widely edited and easily accessible – works, namely al-Kāmil fī tā ṭrīḵ by ʿIzz al-Dīn Abu ‘l-Ḥasan ‘Ali ibn al-Aṯhir (d. 630/1233), al-Muntaẓam fī taʾrīkh al-mulūk wa ʿl-umam by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAli b. Muḥammad Abu ʿl-Farash ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), Wafayāt al-a ʾyan

Historical sources such as al-Muntaẓam fī taʾrikh al-mulūk waʾl-umām by Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Kāmil fī taʾrikh of Ibn al-Athīr and al-Bidāya waʾl-nihāya fi taʾrikh of Ibn Kathīr (d. 775/1373) provide a great deal of valuable information about the period in question. The book of Ibn al-Jawzī, a prominent Ḥanbālī preacher and writer from Baghdad, al-Muntaẓam fī taʾrikh, is both a chronography and a biographical dictionary. It provides vital information about important events in the city of Baghdad and its caliphs, viziers, qāḍīs, prominent officials, ʿulamāʾ, and pious and ascetic individuals. Ibn al-Athīr’s al-Kāmil fī taʾrikh offers multiple accounts of the history of later Abbasid Baghdad. It also gives brief accounts of the lives and the dates of death of prominent personalities such as officials, scholars and Sufis. From the historical evidence available in these works, along with others in the same genres, I have tried to isolate and hence trace the identities of Sufis of later Abbasid Baghdad concerning their role in the public sphere.

Biographical dictionaries written by individuals about their contemporaries, companions and intimates offer a deep understanding of the learned classes, scholars, Sufis and their activities. Biographies of Sufis, though ‘shaped by the understandings and beliefs of the times and by the traditions and intentions of the authors themselves’, are a valuable source. Biographical sources also allow us to establish that Sufis of various types could be found at every socio-economic level in Baghdad. Wafayāt al-aʿyān wa-anbāʾ abnāʾ al-zamān of Ibn Khallikān and Dhayl taʾrikh Baghdād of Ibn al-Dubaytī are key biographical works that throw light on individual agency in the creation of medieval Islamic public spheres. Biographical dictionaries and travel accounts such as The (Rihla) Travels of Ibn Jubayr have revealed details about the people for whom the public sphere was a necessary space for the articulation of their needs. Political treatises such as Siyāsat-nāma of Niẓām al-Mulk ʿṬūsī (d. 485/1092) and al-Ahkām al-sulṭāniyya of Abuʾl-Ḥasan ʿAlī al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) offer discussion of polity and the role of ʿshārīʿa and the caliphate in politics and society. Then there is the naṣīḥa literature such as Naṣīḥat al-mulūk by Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and Qābūs-nāma of Kai Kāʾūs b. Iskandar (d. 480/1087) which offers a soft criticism of rulers and an important aspect of the public sphere.

There is also a substantial corpus of Sufi literature, of the said period, written by Sufis themselves, for example, Adāb al-murīdīn of Abuʾl-Najīb ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Suhrawardī and Kitāb fil-ʾfutuwwa by Abū Ḥafṣ ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī, which deals with Sufis’ approaches towards the lofty but practical goals of the moral and ethical uplifting of humanity. This study also examines hagiographical texts, composed by the close disciples and devotees of Sufis, a valuable resource for studying Sufis of the medieval period. Sufi treatises are very much a projection of what Sufism is, should or could be. The theoretical literature on Sufism is wonderful but it is ‘top downwards’. On the other hand, the biographical literature is in one
sense more ‘bottom upwards’, because it describes the trajectories of individual Sufis and also their activities in helping the non-elite. They necessarily discuss the activities that Sufis carried out in the public sphere.

This wide range of primary sources helps us to perceive, imagine and represent the past, and trace the notion of the public sphere in later Abbasid society. I have gathered a range of ‘anecdotal’ textual evidence from which a picture of Sufis’ role in the public sphere can be built. However, the sources do have their limitations, as elite products are likely to have been written by the literate class for the educated. The available texts of this period do not allow sufficient room for women’s voices, particularly those of non-elite women who could not express themselves openly, which is why those voices could not be easily distinguished. Perhaps they did not focus on women in ways with any degree of seriousness because of cultural barriers that prevented the identification of women, particularly noblewomen. Nevertheless, these sources helped to create a canvas of social activity and, despite the limitations, there is a great deal of information and insight to be drawn.

To examine the problem of whether or not there was a public sphere in the later Abbasid period, and the role of Sufism in that sphere, my research undertakes a qualitative structural analysis of relevant primary and secondary sources and also employs a phenomenology of religion approach. This approach, less concerned with belief systems and the structure of religion than with how people spent their religious lives, offers a useful set of strategies for this study. In my case study, phenomenology of religion and critical structural analysis help in locating the conception of a public sphere in later Abbasid society in Sufi texts and in identifying the role of Sufis in that sphere. Source criticism allows us to be analytical and critical of the sources, their traditions, their transmissions, their authenticity and their value. The phenomenology of religion approach is another way of looking at these sources, which allows one to appreciate their contents in a different yet elucidatory way. Moreover, an in-depth structuralist reading of primary sources and Sufi studies permits a more profound insight into the relationship between culture and religion, which in turn helps to define and contextualize the question of the public good in later Abbasid society. It will help us to better understand the social structure of Baghdadi society in which Sufis as social actors played a range of significant social roles.

This study also uses hagiographical texts, composed by the close disciples and devotees of Sufis, as a valuable source to study Sufism of the medieval period. Hagiographical material helps us to reach certain conclusions regarding Sufis’ role in social and cultural domains, as the hagiographical literature is not completely isolated from its cultural context. Moreover, these texts are valuable when studying medieval Sufism and help us to reconstruct the atmosphere around a Sufi as a ‘friend of God’ with all the motives and behaviours that this entailed, including in the social world. However, as a phenomenologist of religion, one can also take these sources seriously in that they reveal how people see themselves as transformed by religious experience.

This book is divided into five chapters in addition to the introduction. Chapter 1 discusses the conception of the public sphere in medieval Islamic