

Of Priests and Sufis

Revisiting Catholic Scholarship on Islamic Mysticism

CALL FOR ABSTRACTS



Submit an abstract of 300 words
by December 15, 2025



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Of Priests and Sufis:

Revisiting Catholic Scholarship on Islamic Mysticism

IDEO, Cairo – June 6 –7, 2026

Call for Papers

The HORIZON.1.2 - Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) project *SEMENSUF: Seminal Sufism in Motion* coordinated by the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan, Department of Linguistic Sciences and Foreign Literatures, in collaboration with the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies, invites scholars to an international conference on the subject of Catholic engagements with Sufism and their historical, theological, and hermeneutical consequences.

The modern history of Catholic engagement with Islam is often narrated through theology, polemics, interreligious diplomacy, or colonial politics. Alongside these visible avenues, however, runs a quieter but enduring strand: sustained scholarly engagement of Catholic religious with Sufism, Islam's principal mystical tradition—an engagement that influenced Catholic scholarship and provoked responses among Muslim scholars and Sufi communities.

This conference seeks to revisit that tradition in its complexity. Catholic religious produced studies, critical editions, translations, glossaries, and frameworks that profoundly shaped and inform the field of Sufi studies. Yet, their work raises questions: What theological and ecclesiological implications arise when Catholic religious study non-Christian forms of mysticism? What responses have Muslim scholars and Sufi practitioners articulated to these Catholic engagements? How did Catholic readings of Sufism contribute to the shaping of the modern Sufi canon? What political, colonial, or hermeneutical consequences did such scholarship entail for Muslim audiences and Sufi communities?

Historical Background

From Miguel Asín Palacios' (d. 1944) comparative studies of Islamic eschatology and Christian literature to Louis Massignon's (d. 1962) monumental study of al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) and his lasting influence on interreligious theology, Catholic scholars left a mark on both Islamic studies and Catholic thought. This trajectory was then carried forward by, among many others, Paul Nwyia (d. 1980), Serge de Beaucueil (d. 2005), Richard Gramlich (d. 2006), and Paul Jackson (d. 2020) through studies, editions, and translations spanning diverse centuries and regions—from the early mystics Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 194/809–810) and Anṣārī (d. 481/1089) to later figures such as Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh (d. 709/1309) and Sharfuddin Maneri (d. 786/1380).

Catholic institutions such as the Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth, the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, and the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies—which, after the Second Vatican Council, gained new momentum, giving Catholic scholarship on Sufism fresh direction—created crucial frameworks and scholarly spaces. Their teaching manuals and anthologies—for example, those of Louis Gardet (d. 1986), Georges Anawati (d. 1994), and Robert Caspar (d. 2007),—trained generations of Catholic and non-Catholic scholars of Islamic mysticism, often in direct dialogue with Muslim students.



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Yet these were not only academic endeavors. Many of these religious were born or lived for decades in Muslim contexts—from Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil’s (d. 1979) Morocco to Yuḥannā Ṣādir’s (d. 2014) Lebanon, from the Syrian desert community of Paolo Dall’Oglio (presumed d. 2013) to the Algerian hilltop monastery headed by Christian de Chergé (d. 1996)—where scholarship intersected with pastoral presence and interreligious friendship. Some attempts gained ecclesial approval, others faced suspicion or marginalization. Their stories include both celebrated bridges and silenced ruptures, and they unfolded in constant dialogue with Muslim interlocutors—as teachers and students, friends and critics, seekers on the path. These encounters shaped the modern field of Sufi studies, where Catholic religious and Muslim interlocutors engaged in the study of the mystical quest for God.

Research Axes and Guiding Questions

I – Catholic Scholarship and Contexts

- Historical and intellectual profiles of Catholic religious figures (priests, monks, sisters, friars) who engaged with Sufism in the 20th and 21st centuries: academic and spiritual motivations, formative experiences, their enduring influence, and relations to ecclesial institutions.
- Catholic institutions and networks (USJ, PISAI, IDEO, others) and their role in shaping Sufi studies and training both Catholic and non-Catholic scholars, often in dialogue with Muslim students.
- The influence of place: Iraq, Algeria, Afghanistan, Lebanon, India, and other geographies where encounters and scholarly efforts were lived and embodied.
- Colonial and post-colonial entanglements: the impact of missionary, colonial, and political settings on Catholic approaches to Sufism, and their consequences for Muslim communities.
- Continuities and shifts in Catholic engagement with Sufism: from Orientalist frameworks to post-Vatican II interreligious scholarship, including dialogue with Catholic theologians such as Rahner, von Balthasar, and de Lubac.
- The tension between academic study and lived mystical engagement: how encounters with Sufism reshaped Catholic vocations and spiritual identity, and how such “double fidelity” illuminates interreligious influence.
- Gendered dynamics: the marginal role and emerging potential of women religious in Catholic–Sufi dialogue.

II – Texts and Interpretations

- Catholic editions, translations, and commentaries of Sufi texts: methods, audiences, theological framings, and their influence on the field of Sufi studies. Catholic formation as both a source of sensitivity and a risk of projecting Christian categories onto Muslim texts and practices.
- Catholic fascination with Sufism as the “good other”: selective affinities, disproportionate focus, and the positioning of Sufism as a privileged space for Christian–Muslim encounter.
- Catholic shaping of the Sufi canon: how editions, anthologies, and manuals influenced the reception and prioritization of certain Sufi figures and themes.
- Textual networks: correspondence, anthologies, unpublished writings, and interreligious exchanges (e.g. Thomas Merton’s dialogue with the Pakistani Sufi ‘Abd al-‘Azīz).



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III – Receptions and Reciprocal Influence

- Catholic shaping of the Sufi canon: how editions, anthologies, and manuals influenced the reception and prioritization of certain Sufi figures and themes.
- Muslim responses to the selective elevation of certain Sufi figures: contesting, reframing, or countering Catholic framings.
- Muslim canon-building in response: asserting priorities in selecting, editing, and teaching mystical texts.
- Modes of selective reception: cases where Catholic editions were taken up in Muslim contexts, with philological work retained but interpretive frameworks set aside or reshaped.
- Reciprocal influence: Catholic editions introducing textual variants, terminologies, or interpretive lenses that circulated back into Muslim scholarship, and the ways contemporary Muslim scholars critiqued, corrected, or adopted them.
- Theological implications of Catholic engagement with Sufism: how immersion in Sufi sources shaped Catholic reflections on mystical theology, sanctity, grace, and divine action.
- Emerging collaborative models—co-authorship, joint translations, shared peer review—and whether they redress earlier asymmetries or risk producing new forms of co-optation.

Invitation and Practical Information

We invite proposals from scholars of Sufism, Catholic theology, Christian–Muslim relations, religious studies, and related fields. Submissions are welcome from established and early-career researchers alike, and we particularly encourage contributions from Muslim scholars and Sufi practitioners engaging with Catholic scholarship. Collaborative papers authored across confessional or disciplinary boundaries are especially welcome.

Abstracts (300–400 words) clearly outlining the proposed paper’s topic, sources, and methodology, with a short biographical note (100–150 words, including affiliation and publications) should be submitted by **15 December 2025** to riccardo.paredi@unicatt.it. Authors will be notified by **31 January 2026**.

The conference will take place at the **Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies (IDEO) in Cairo, 6–7 June 2026**. The working languages are English, Arabic, and French. Participants will be hosted free of charge. A limited number of travel bursaries will be available, with priority for early-career researchers and participants from the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. Selected contributions will be considered for publication in an edited volume or journal special issue.

For any further inquiries, do not hesitate to contact: Riccardo Paredi, MSCA Post-Doc Global Fellow (2024-2027), Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan. Email: riccardo.paredi@unicatt.it

