

REVIEWS



General



Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, *Journey to God: Sufis and Dervishes in Islam*. Translated from German by Jane Ripken

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. vii + 194 pages, b/w & color photos, bibliography, photo credits, index. Hardcover, US\$49.95; ISBN 978-0-19-547642-2.

TAŞAWWUF, one of the key terms in Islamic culture, notoriously resists a straightforward and unambiguous translation into English. While many modern scholars render it according to one of its most salient features as “Islamic mysticism,” others prefer to reflect the diversity of the phenomenon and refer to it as “Sufism.” Etymologically, *taşawwuf* is linked to its second important feature—the word is probably derived from the Arabic word for wool, *şūf*. This was the material used for the clothes of early Muslim ascetics. Another etymology that circulated in the Middle Ages draws a parallel with the etymology of *falsafa*, the Arabic term for philosophy in the Greek tradition, and sees the root of *taşawwuf* in the Greek word for wisdom, *sophia*. This may find support in the intellectual-theoretical branch of Sufism which can be traced back to the ninth century and the Iraqi Sufi Sahl al-Tustarī, but became even more prominent with the Andalusian Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240).

For both Muslims and non-Muslims, historical as well as modern authors, there have been major disagreements about what Sufism essentially entailed. For some, it was and still is above all connected with certain doctrines concerning the relationship between God and the created world, the nature of prophecy, the interpretation of scripture, and so on. For others, it is mainly associated with certain rituals such as intense prayer or fasting (which are practised in a more moderate form by Muslims who are not Sufis), or dancing and playing music (which are more specific to Sufis). For yet others, its implications were mostly social, in other words, the significance of being affiliated with one or several Sufi orders, or the role of a Sufi *shaykh*, or a saint in local communities. For some, Sufism denotes a certain spiritual state of mind which does not even require a person to be a Muslim in order to become a Sufi.

While some reduce Sufism to its more “extravagant” manifestations and describe it as heterodox, others see Sufism as identical with being a good Muslim.

Because of the great diversity of the phenomenon which has been and still is a vibrant tradition in different social spheres, over centuries and in different regions of the Islamic world, there are various approaches authors of introductions and overviews can choose from. Most such publications use a historical (KNYSH 2000; BALDICK 2000) or a thematic (ERNST 1997) approach, or they focus on specific figures and texts (SELLS 1996) or periods (KARAMUSTAFA 2007). Although the present publication does not claim to be an introduction, it does offer an overview which has a somewhat introductory character and may be read as such. The focus is on Sufism as a living tradition and on Central and South Asia. Much of the material is original and has been collected by the author during his extensive fieldwork in Pakistan. While these are clearly advantages considering the frequent focus of general works on the early tradition, on classical texts, and on the Middle Eastern heartlands of the Islamic world, there are also several significant weaknesses.

The first concerns the lack of focus and argument. Even though many of the numerous examples are described in rich detail, in most instances not much is made of them. Although the methodological premises are not spelled out, this is clearly not a historical study—the specific contexts in which Sufis were active are not discussed in a more comprehensive way, except when interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims are involved. Likewise, no analytical framework from another academic tradition seems to have been employed. Why particular forms of Sufism developed their specific features in their respective contexts, why one tradition of Sufism was more successful in one milieu rather than in another, what may or may not make Sufism a coherent phenomenon, and to what extent the examples in the book are representative—such issues remain to be investigated by others. The author appears as an observer rather than as an interpreter.

The second shortcoming is a lack of terminological and conceptual consistency. While almost everything in the book provides further evidence for the oft-observed diversity of Sufism, the introduction as well as the epilogue convey an essentializing and idealized impression. While the author concedes that “the starting point of Sufism was orthodox Quranic piety,” he continues: “This ‘soft core’ of Islam represents a particular creative and liberal facet characterized by tolerance, humanism and the accommodation of differences” (vii). Because of this, Sufis adopted “a liberal, tolerant attitude toward non-Muslims” (7). Yet, as the examples presented in the following chapters illustrate, this is only one aspect and not an accurate description of all of Sufism. This generalization does not tie in well with other statements in the book which locate “most mystics” within the mainstream of “orthodox” orders (44) or that *ribāṭs* (centers for a diversity of pious religious exercises) were also used for jihad against non-Muslims (54).

A third problem is the way Frembgen’s original German publication has been rendered in English. Readers interested in following up some of the details will be disappointed to read that “in order to avoid overloading this script with footnotes, their number has been considerably reduced” (195). The note refers to the “first German precursor” (FREMBGEN 1993). Given that the present publication will be

consulted mostly by readers who do not find the German original accessible, this choice is most regrettable and unhelpful. Even more puzzling is a remark in footnote six (189) which explains that “The original German text also does contain paragraphs dealing with the topic of sexuality in Sufism.” Again, the interested reader is referred to the German edition. Had this affected a more “innocuous” subject, the unpleasant suspicion of suppression would probably not come to mind.

Finally, the structure of the book is not ideal. While the first five chapters, which offer a general and more historical introduction (“The Holy Journey in Islam”; “The Sufi Tradition: The Foundations of Dervish Life”; “Sufis and Dervishes”; “Mystics and Saints in the Muslim World”; “Orthodox Sufi Orders”), are relatively short (the first three less than ten pages each, the remaining two between twenty and thirty pages), the following two chapters (“‘Free’ Sufi Orders and Ecstasies”; “The Way of the Mystics and Ascetics”), each more than sixty pages long, provide a lot of material, some of which may easily have appeared in other chapters.

These problems notwithstanding, because of the rich material the book offers it is a useful addition to the publications mentioned above for an introduction to Sufism. Even though it does not match the other books on an analytical level, it gives a colorful impression of Sufism as a living tradition.

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