

*Faith and Practice of Islam: Three Thirteenth Century Sufi Texts*

By WILLIAM C. CHITTICK. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992. Pp. 306. Price HB \$59.50, PB \$19.95. 0-7914-1367-5.

It is not easy to communicate a sense of immediacy and to treat a subject in a scholarly and yet lively way, but Chittick has succeeded admirably. In this work, he introduces three medieval Sufi texts, apparently by al-Qunawī, one of the foremost disciples of Ibn 'Arabī. Chittick manages to meet the demands of textual scholarship whilst giving a sense of the enduring value of his material, giving the uninitiated reader every opportunity to enter into the spirit of the author's age.

In his introduction, Chittick argues for an understanding of Islam in terms of its own 'internal coherence', shifting the emphasis away from the more common concerns of politics and economics towards a view of an integrated theology, cosmology, and anthropology (iii). This approach offers two advantages: first, it is more in keeping with the traditional Islamic view of the all-inclusive nature of truth, and is therefore a useful attitude for a sensitive reader to adopt. (It also reflects the diverse intellectual gifts of most medieval Muslim scholars.) Secondly, it keeps one from reducing the contents of the texts to the supposedly unrelated analytical categories such as law, Sufism, and philosophy.

It is notoriously difficult to speak about Sufism without merely adding to the growing pile of 'definitions'. A science which describes and develops the relationship between the Absolute and the contingent is unlikely to be amenable to glib descriptive formulas and Chittick is quite right to speak of the 'meanings' of Sufism as being pointers along the way (xiii) or allusions (*ishārāt*) to ineffable truths (168).

Sufism is also difficult to understand for more prosaic reasons. Chittick points out that it has been common to equate Sufism with mysticism, by false analogy with Christian tradition, for which mysticism is peripheral, given Christianity's essential esoterism. Seen in this light, Sufism becomes an exotic, peripheral phenomenon of dubious orthodoxy, a view which is belied by its central position in the traditional Muslim world.

Chittick's chosen texts do much to rectify this view. The first two works, *The Rising Places of Faith* and *Clarifications for Beginners and Reminders for the Advanced*, are intended 'to provide a map of faith's territory' (26). This is accomplished by quotations from the Qur'an, *Ḥadīth*, the consensus views of the 'ulamā', and by *kashf*, the Sufis' revelatory confirmation of truth. Persian and Arabic poetry is also quoted to appeal directly to the reader's aesthetic sense in a way which the dialectical methods of the *mutakallim* cannot.

The third work, *The Easy Roads of Sayf al-Dīn*, is a brief manual of essential faith and practice written for Sayf al-Dīn Tughril, a government official who was apparently a recent convert to Islam. It describes the essential things Sayf al-Dīn should know about God and the world, as well as his religious duties. These discussions range from the metaphysical to the mundane, from the divine qualities to the question of ritual cleanliness. Even the most explicit details of personal hygiene are included, as the author clearly intended his work to be a comprehensive and practical guide. Like the other two works, *The Easy Roads*

*of Sayf al-Dīn* also has an explicitly Sufi content in that it stresses the growth of spiritual awareness as the necessary accompaniment of ritual acts, and contains traditional prayers and invocations (emphasizing the importance of their initiatory transmission). Chittick ventures that, as such, the text might be called "the lowest common denominator" of Sufi practice in the thirteenth century and at other times as well' (xii).

Consistently with the 'integrated' approach, Chittick also gives essential background concerning the spiritual orientations of Islam as a whole. The Sufi theme running through these metaphysical and ethical considerations is clear enough, of course, but is not isolated from them. This counters common criticism of Sufism as being of an élitist nature, and confirms Chittick's assertion that Sufism is available to all in principle, the only exclusions being a lack of intelligence or a suspicious attitude. In this sense, of course, Sufism is no different from the other sciences, which also insist on a measure of intelligence and use their own technical terms (8-9).

Having used the texts to illustrate his earlier remarks about the integrated nature of the Islamic sciences, Chittick returns to examine the question of the 'definitions' of Sufism and its place in the Islamic tradition as a whole. He emphasizes the importance of discipline (*riyāda*), pointing out that the object of Sufism is to reach God, not necessarily to commune with Him or to know Him intimately. Similarly, although the 'unveiling of mysteries' might accompany such labours as a grace, it is not to be sought in itself. That would be to reduce Sufism to a kind of spiritual hedonism, to seek the house (*dār*) before the Neighbour (*Jār*), with its concomitant danger of *shirk* (172). In this way, Sufism is reconfirmed as the selfless pursuit of the Divine, as the ideal content of exoteric worship, and thus takes its place at the centre of the Muslim's endeavours.

It remains only to mention the translations themselves. These are rendered in vivid, active English without the anachronistic intrusion of modern slang, and convey a sense of immediacy which reinforces their clarity. They also carry an abundant critical apparatus, with glosses, annotations, two appendices (one of which lists corrections to the previously published editions of the Persian texts) and indices of quotations from the Qur'an and *Hadith*, as well as a general index. Overall, then, this work should be of lasting value as an introduction and a contribution to this important field of Islamic studies.

Julian Johansen  
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*The History of al-Ṭabarī (Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk)*, Volume XXI:  
*The Victory of the Marwānids*

Translated and annotated by MICHAEL FISHBEIN. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990. Pp. XVIII + 260. Price: HB \$54.50. 0-7914-0221-5.

In his preface to the above volume, the General Editor of the al-Ṭabarī translation series, Ehsan Yar-Shater, comments "The History of Prophets and