



BRILL

## Book Reviews



Aḥmad ibn Maṣṣūr Samʿānī, *The Repose of the Spirits: A Sufi Commentary on the Divine Names*, translation William C. Chittick. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019. 708 pages.

Aḥmad Samʿānī was a Persian scholar, Sufi, and preacher (*khaṭīb*). Unfortunately, he is still rather unknown in contemporary scholarship, partly because his work and the type of Khurāsānī Sufism he represented would soon be marginalized by Akbarian thought.<sup>1</sup> Almost twenty-five years after Samʿānī passed away in 534/1140, Ibn al-ʿArabī was born and would soon usher the Islamic world into a new direction. Samʿānī, however, represents a Qushayrī style Sufism, and, as Chittick states, one can regard Samʿānī's *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* as “the first major exposition of Qushayrī's teachings in the Persian language.”<sup>2</sup> Samʿānī belonged to a prominent Shāfiʿī family of Merv. Aḥmad's father, Abū al-Muẓaffar Maṣṣūr ibn Muḥammad (d. 489/1096) wrote several books on Quranic exegesis, jurisprudence, and theology. Aḥmad's older brother, Abū Bakr ibn Maṣṣūr (d. ca. 509/1116), was a scholar himself and the father of ʿAbd al-Karīm ibn Muḥammad Samʿānī (d. 562/1166), the author of *al-Ansāb*, a famous biographical dictionary. The Samʿānī family enjoyed much prestige and esteem in the intellectual circles of twelfth century Khurāsān. The autobiographical words of the Persian master of speech Saʿdī Shīrāzī (d. ca. 690/1291) could be uttered by Aḥmad Samʿānī and would be equally true: “My kin were all religious scholars” (*hama qabūla-yi man ʿālimān-i dīn būdand*).<sup>3</sup>

Aḥmad Samʿānī is remembered for his *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ fī sharḥ al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*, which is translated by William Chittick as *The Repose of the Spirits*:

- 1 William C. Chittick, “Introduction” in *The Repose of the Spirits: A Sufi Commentary on the Divine Names* (New York: Sunny Press, 2019), lxi.
- 2 Chittick, “Introduction,” xxxi.
- 3 Saʿdī, *Kulliyāt-i Saʿdī*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAlī Furūghī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Hirmis, 1385/2006), 542.

*A Sufi Commentary on Divine Names. Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* is a Sufi commentary on 101 names of God, which are classified under 74 names. *Al-Asmā' al-ḥusnā* or God's most beautiful Names is a Qur'anic category: "And the most beautiful Names belong to God" (Q. 7:180). While some of these names are supplied by the Qur'an, many others are recorded in *ḥadīth* sources. There is no consensus on how many divine Names qualify as *al-Asmā' al-ḥusnā*, but Muslim scholars such as Abū al-Qāsim Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), and Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240), to name just a few, have written various commentaries on these names. Sam'ānī's commentary belongs to the intellectual environment of twelfth century Khurāsān, which as Annabel Keeler explains, demonstrates "love mysticism."<sup>4</sup> Keeler writes, "during the second half of the fifth/eleventh and the first half of the sixth/twelfth centuries, probably the most significant development to take place in the Sufism of Khorasan was the evolution and coming to the fore of the mystical doctrines of love. This was accompanied by the emergence of Persian as a language for mystical discourse."<sup>5</sup> It was in this environment that Sam'ānī produced his Persian commentary.

*Rawḥ al-arwāḥ*'s manuscripts were first identified and introduced by the Persian bibliophile Muḥammad Taqī Dānishpazhūh (d. 1996). It was followed by the publication of the critical edition of the book at the hand of the able Persian editor Najīb Māyil Hirawī whose lengthy introduction to the book provides a comprehensive view of Sam'ānī's life and work.<sup>6</sup> Now thanks to the erudite effort of William Chittick, English readers have access to a complete, clear, and beautiful translation of *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ*, which is one of the oldest and finest examples of Persian prose. Chittick's translation, which comes with a detailed glossary of technical terms (47 pages), index of *ḥadīths* and Arabic sayings, index of Quranic verses, and over 1300 explanatory footnotes, is highly accessible and useful for specialists and non-specialists alike.

As Chittick states, his translation is "as literal as possible." He acknowledges that sometimes it led to awkward English but promises that "the meaning is typically clear from the context."<sup>7</sup> He tells us "I prefer to maintain the flavor of his sometimes ornate style, with its profusion of metaphors (sometimes

4 Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur'an Commentary of Rashīd Al-Dīn Maybudī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7.

5 Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics*, 107–8.

6 Aḥmad Sam'ānī, *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ fi sharḥ al-asmā'*, ed. Najīb Māyil Hirawī (Tehran: Shirkat Intishārāt 'ilmī wa Farhangī, 1368 sh./1989).

7 Chittick, "Introduction," lxxviii.

mixed), rather than try to decipher exactly what he has in mind.”<sup>8</sup> This is particularly so since Sam‘ānī’s Persian is flowery, rhythmic, and at times sophisticated and difficult. *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* appears to be written as a series of oral sermons, which must have been delivered in the Niẓāmiyya madrasa in Merv. But as Chittick rightly notes Sam‘ānī “often put a great deal of artistry into complex Persian sentences.... So it is hard to imagine that he presented the text as it stands to the general public.”<sup>9</sup> Even if the text was initially a series of sermons, it must have been significantly revised and changed, which makes the task of the translator painstakingly difficult. However, Chittick has masterfully overcome linguistic peculiarities and rendered a highly readable translation. Chittick’s translation does not offer excessive transliterations or brackets that would disrupt the reading. It reads pleasantly, technical terms are introduced when necessary, and notes help readers identify numerous Persian and Arabic poems, *ḥadīths*, and Quranic verses that Sam‘ānī cites.

In addition to the well-developed critical apparatus, Chittick provides a lengthy introduction to Sam‘ānī’s life, work, his prominent family, and his influence in Islamic mystical traditions. It is particularly helpful to situate Sam‘ānī’s intellectual project in relation to the works of his predecessors such as Abū al-Qāsim Qushayrī, Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (fl. 6th/12th), Abū al-Layth Samarqandī (d. 373/983), Abū Bakr Kalābādī (d. ca. 380/990), and ‘Alī Hujwīrī (d. between 465/1072 and 469/1077). These analyses help see a wider picture of twelfth-century Sufism. Chittick also identifies Sam‘ānī as a Sufi. He explains that Sufism, mysticism, spirituality and similar terms do not tell us much about the historical context they purport to elucidate. It is often accompanied by a problematic assumption of some Western scholars that Sufism was not a part of mainstream Islam.<sup>10</sup> Chittick states, “I use it to designate a broad trend among Muslims, clearly present in the Quran, the Prophet, and some of his Companions, to stress the inner meaning over the outward form, to insist that every act should be done while keeping God foremost in mind, and to hold that outward adherence to doctrine and ritual is not efficacious unless it is accompanied by the intention to purify oneself from everything of which God disapproves.”<sup>11</sup> This definition is certainly helpful and can be equally applied to Ismā‘īlī esoterism although they do not identify themselves as Sufis. In general, Chittick’s insightful and well-researched introduction masterfully

8 Chittick, “Introduction,” lxviii.

9 Chittick, “Introduction,” xliii.

10 Chittick, “Introduction,” xxix.

11 Chittick, “Introduction,” xxix.

contextualizes Sam'ānī's opus and provides a solid framework to understand his world. Also, Sam'ānī's poetic prose finds its home in Chittick's superb translation. This book is a welcome and much needed contribution to Islamic Studies, and it is particularly beneficial for both graduate and undergraduate courses on Sufism, Islamic spirituality, and Islamic civilizations.

AQ 1

*Mohammad Amin Mansouri*  
University of Toronto  
*amin.mansouri@mail.utoronto.ca*

**AQ 1: Please provide complete affiliation**