
This is a very important book for students of spirituality, Islam, and Islamic spirituality, as it focuses on one of the representatives of a much understudied area of Islamic spirituality, i.e. the sober, “active” and highly practical type of Sufism. Much of the studies on Sufism has been devoted either to attractive and colourful lives and teachings of “intoxicated” Šûfîs, or to the sophisticated and intellectually stimulating works of speculative Sufism. The present work is a timely effort to bring the “sober” school of the Šûfi tradition to the attention of the English-speaking audience.

This book has been published by the Paulist Press in their ongoing series entitled “the Classics of Western Spirituality”. The series, to date, includes collections such as: *The Bezel of Wisdom* by Ibn ‘Arabî; *The Book of Wisdom* by Ibn ‘Aṭā’Allāh; *Intimate Conversations* by Khwajah ‘Abdullâh Anşârî; *The Hundred Letters* by Sharafuddîn Manerî; *Divine Flashes* by Fakhruddîn ‘Irâqi; and *Morals for the Heart* by Nîzâm ad-dîn Awwâlî.

Ibn ‘Abbâd, Abî ‘Abd Allâh Muḥammad b. Iṣḥâq (733/1333–792/1390), is well-known to the French-speaking audience thanks to the works of the late Father Paul Nwiya who had conducted a major study on Ibn ‘Abbâd, plus a comparative study of Ibn ‘Abbâd and the famous Christian mystic John of the Cross, as well as the publication of two editions of the very letters translated by Jack Renard. Yet this is the first time that Ibn ‘Abbâd’s teachings have become available in English. The volume under review consists of a Foreword, a Preface, an Introduction, and an annotated translation of the text of sixteen of Ibn ‘Abbâd’s letters from Arabic (what is referred to as the “small collection”), a Bibliography and two Indices.

An excellent Preface by Annemarie Schimmel briefly explains the factors responsible for the lack of awareness about “sober” Sufism among both admirers and critics of Sufism. This is mainly due, she reminds us, to an exaggerated focus on the ecstatic utterances of Šûfi poets, mostly Persian, and a tendency to take their words at face value (pp. ix–x). The other major factor is the identification of Sufism with dervishes who perform “weird feats such as piercing their limbs with knives...or taking out their eyes — performances that have nothing to do with the essence of Sufism but represent an interesting case for the psychologist” (p. x).

Schimmel appropriately situates Ibn ‘Abbâd in the context of the larger picture of Islamic spirituality and shows how he is related to Šûfîs of other schools. Ibn ‘Abbâd’s spirituality, as Schimmel introduces, is the kind that relies on total dependence on God and His mercy (p. xiii), and in which spiritual
advancement is judged by one’s growth in gratitude and in certitude (p. xiii). She concludes her contribution by bringing to light Ibn ‘Abbād’s relevance for the particular circumstances of our times, pointing out that at the present juncture of human history when fear and horror are growing, when hopelessness seems to prevail in large segments of the population... “Ibn ‘Abbād can teach his readers that there is always a reason and a way to thank God for something—and the more this constant grows the more it becomes a habitus of the soul, and man does no longer worry unnecessarily: He feels safe “like a child in God’s lap...” (p. xiv).

Renard’s ‘Foreword’ brings out the significance of Ibn ‘Abbād for comparative spirituality, particularly “Western”, that is Judaic, Christian and Islamic spirituality. Renard’s extensive introduction further situates Ibn ‘Abbād in the context of Islamic spirituality, particularly Maghribī Sufism. It introduces Ibn ‘Abbād as an “unambitious man” whose spirituality is deliberately detached from the exaggerations of both Persian Ṣūfīs and the Ṣūfīs of the Maghrib since he believed that “exaggerated attempts are good for nothing” (p. xii). Thus he presented a form of Sufism that is based on the central theme of “purification of man’s soul in order to fulfil the obligations of absolute monotheism” (p. xii).

It should be added that although Ibn ‘Abbād's Sufism, as reflected in these letters, could be aptly described as sober, it is different than the more conventional “sober” school of Sufism, since it has no room even for the esoteric knowledge presented in the teachings of the three towering personalities of “sober” Sufism: Junayd al-Baghdādi (d. 298/911), Imām al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), and Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1034/1624), as well as most masters of the Naqshbandī order (recognised as the most exoteric and sober order). The comprehensive ‘Introduction’ discusses, first, the central themes and concepts of Ibn ‘Abbād’s spirituality; second, the sources, formative influences, and historical context of his spirituality; and finally, Ibn ‘Abbād’s life and writings (p. 2). Its expressed aim is to enable the reader and the text to “meet each other halfway” (p. 2) for a precise understanding of Ibn ‘Abbād’s spirituality. It establishes its goal by enabling the reader to appreciate the Letters as an integrated and coherent body of instructions that discuss various aspects of a unified vision of a particular spirituality.

A few problems, however, should be pointed out here, a consideration of which would have led to a richer and fuller appreciation of Ibn ‘Abbād’s spirituality. The first is a lack of clarity on Ibn ‘Abbād’s actual spiritual status. Throughout the fairly extensive introduction there is not much discussion of Ibn ‘Abbād’s particular spiritual station, and no reference to his spiritual rank, his spiritual achievements, his character and personality, the type of spiritual exercises he performed, or the process of his spiritual growth and maturity. The second is an incomplete discussion and presentation of the nafs (lower soul).
Renard’s discussion of the *nafs* focuses primarily on the evil-inspiring soul and does not include the three modes or stages of the purification of the *nafs* from *al-nafs al-ammārah bi ‘l-sū* (the evil-inspiring soul), to *al-nafs al-lawwāmah* (the blaming soul), to *al-nafs al-mutma’inah* (the soul at peace), so vital in understanding Ṣūfī psychology. This becomes particularly significant in the case of Ibn ‘Abbād whose “whole thought is centred on the purification of man’s soul in order to fulfil the obligations of absolute monotheism” (p. xii). The third is an oversimplified presentation of the controversial concept of the Seal or *qutb* (pole) in Sufism. Renard introduces this complicated issue in a mere two and a half line sentence, and concludes that in Sufism the pole enjoys “a status roughly parallel to that of the Prophet himself” (p. 38). This conclusion is potentially very misleading, especially in a work intended for a non-specialist audience, most of whom have only a general familiarity with Islam and Sufism.

There are also some less important problems with Renard’s ‘introduction’. For example, the name of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī is curiously absent from Renard’s list of famous Ṣūfī masters who used writing letters as a way of instructing disciples. This is particularly significant as Sirhindī’s *Epistles* (*Maktūbat*) are much more known and read than those of Junayd al-Bughdādī, Imām al-Ghazālī and Sharaf al-Dīn Manārī (d. 806/1403) whose names are given by Renard as primary examples of this tradition. In addition, while discussing the Ṣūfī tripartite division of the Path and Reality, namely *shari’ah*, *tariqah*, and *baqiqah*, Renard translates *baqiqah* as the “Mystic Truth” and defends his choice by arguing that it “has the benefit of preserving both the connotations of ‘truth’ in the word’s root [baqq], and the idea that it is the goal of the kind of experience that can fairly be called ‘mystical’ (so long as one keeps in mind Ibn ‘Abbād’s decidedly non-elitist usage of classical terminology)” (pp. 28–9). This explanation, however, is not convincing enough since any adjective attached to the word “Truth” would imply the existence of different kinds or different modes of Truth, whereas there is only one Truth as long as God or the ultimate object of the mystical quest is concerned. Finally, one cannot help but think that it would have been nice to include the Arabic text of al-Shādhilī’s celebrated “Litany of the Sea” (pp. 38–40) as an appendix for those who are familiar with the language and the genre of supplicatory prayers, to give these readers a taste of the devotional sentiments experienced in the Shādhilī order to which Ibn ‘Abbād belonged.

Despite these minor shortcomings, the book is very useful for everyone interested in Islamic studies, the Ṣūfī tradition, or comparative mysticism, in that it presents an under-represented aspect of Islamic piety, complementary to almost any account of Islam and Sufism. Renard has rendered a valuable service to the English-speaking audience by introducing Ibn ‘Abbād and translating his letters which were hitherto unknown and unavailable to the general public.
This service assumes even more significance when we bear in mind Ibn ‘Abb ād’s special relevance for the contemporary man’s search for meaning and direction as “a ṣūfī teacher whose attitude can be shared by modern man and [who] is relevant in our day” (p. xiv).

Abdollah Vakily

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Delving into the heart of Lebanon’s confessional predicament in a study published a few years ago (*Inside the Lebanese Confessional Mind*, University Press of America, 1992), Khashan moves to a higher level of analysis and looks at the broad spectrum of the conundrum characterizing present Arab political endeavours.

To achieve his analytical aims, the author attempts to sustain the argument he presents in his preface. In his opinion, the current ‘morbid’ situation and poor state of development prevailing in the Arab world is due to the failure of Arabs in coming to terms with the question of political identity and thus redefine (define?) the nature of the relationship between state and society or the governor and the governed.

The opening statement of the book in fact is that Arabs are presently at a loss suffering from a severe identity crisis. The entire study is overshadowed with heavy-laden pessimism suggesting that this alleged identity crisis began in the 19th century when no alternative was offered to affiliation with the Islamic Ottoman Empire with which the Arab world remained identified for almost four centuries. This was a time when Islamic universalism had the upper hand over group particularism. When nationalism was suggested as a potential identity alternative to the Islamic character of the Ottomans State, one defeat after the other added to its ailments till the Arab defeat in the 1967 war signalled its death. 1967 is, therefore, a key date in Khashan’s analysis and ushers in the revival of political Islam when it stepped forward to fill in the vacuum and offered messianic redemption to a perplexed people.

In handling his argument, several core concepts such as political identity, nationalism, political Islam and class/elite notions are used by the author as analytical tools and constitute the means by which he approaches his selected themes. The range of topics examined in the study begin with the first chapter