BOOK REVIEWS


It is with great interest that one turns to a book on Sufism which is said to have been written by a master of one of the Sufi orders because it is ultimately only from within that Sufism can be described. But, alas, one is soon disappointed in discovering that despite the presence of much information about Sufism and an obvious "acquaintance" with Sufi lore, literature and practice there is a singular absence of that grace or barakah which characterizes all true expressions of Sufism. Instead of seeing an expression of Islamic spirituality one is faced with an exposition of Sufism from which Islam seems to have been subtly eliminated and Sufism presented as an occultism and an "eroticism floating in the air".

The author who is already known by several other works in English including one on Oriental magic, here seeks to present the whole of Sufism to the Western audience although he admits at the outset that it is not an easy task to put the message of Sufism on paper. He seems in fact to have been induced to attempt this task by Robert Graves whose introduction to a book on Sufism is one of the real surprises in this book. After this introduction which already puts the reader in the state of continuous expectancy, Idries Shah himself briefly introduces his book as a work which itself has a Sufi form and is meant to attract only those for whom it is meant which one guesses includes most of all those who have a fascination for the occult and not necessarily the spiritual. Then he sets out in chapters whose titles have no apparent relation, but which are related in content, to expound various aspects of Sufism.

He begins with a series of chapters on tales and fables including those of Aesop and Khwâjah Nasr al-Dîn which he considers as Sufi tales veiling a hidden meaning. Some of his interpretations are plausible and acceptable and others extremely far-fetched. Then he turns to a discussion of several of the leading figures of Sufism, namely, Sa'dî, Rûmî, Ibn 'Arabî, Ghazâlî and Khayyâm whose significance to Sufism he tries to reveal. Here again amidst certain definitely useful information about these giants of Islamic gnosis there are all kinds of numerical and alphabetical speculations which to say the least detract from the content of the chapters especially to a Western audience not acquainted with the Arabic alphabet. Perhaps the most positive point mentioned in this group of chapters is that Khayyâm is not an agnostic but rather a gnostic who represents a particular aspect of Sufism although the statement that Khayyâm is a "generic term applied to a way of teaching which the Sufis have" (p. 168) remains completely unsubstantiated and unexplained.

These chapters are followed by a series on the influence of Sufism on such groups and figures as the Carbonari, Free Masonary, alchemy, magic, the Order of Garter, St. Francis and his order, and learning and philosophy in general in the Latin West. These are in turn followed by a discussion of Richard Burton and Colonel Clarks, the translator of Suhrawardi's 'Awârif al-Ma'drif into
English. Both of these figures Idries Shah considers as Sufis in the West, a remark which needs much qualification and explanation before it can have any real meaning or be accepted.

This excursion into the field of the influence of Sufism on medieval and modern West is followed by a return to the subject of Sufism itself and a series of chapters on the Sufi orders, the relation between the master and disciple, etc. The best lesson to be learned from this section is that one cannot practice Sufism without the direct guidance of a real master (p. 346). If this lesson is really understood it will in itself neutralize many of the dangers inherent in many other sections of the book.

Finally, in the last chapter the author turns to what he considers as the influence of Sufism in the East on both medieval Hindu mysticism and Zen Buddhism, asserting many quite debatable and dubious conclusions without giving substantial proof aside from morphological resemblances between Sufism and Hindu and Buddhist esotericism which do not all point to historical influences. The author could here be accused of the same misjudgment as that of those who claim Sufism to have been borrowed from the outside and do not realize its Qur'ânic origins. This final chapter is followed by a list of annotations and two short appendices on various terms and phrases in Sufism and the book concludes abruptly without an index.

The most serious criticism that can be made of this book is that it seems to disregard completely the mentality of the audience it is addressing. Now, there have been works written by Sufi masters or contacts made with the Western world which have been unfruitful because these men, although complete masters in the traditional world of Islam, did not know the modern world they were addressing so that their message was not to the point. But for a man who is well enough acquainted with Western civilization to say that the Bolero of Ravel is based on the music of the Sufis (p. 155) or that the Franciscan order is based on the Kubrawiyah (pp. 230-31), there is no excuse for giving an exposition of Sufism which can mislead the Western audience spiritually and help to create one more "pseudo-spiritualism" to the already over-supplied market of occultism and "universal religions" already existing in the West. One wonders whether this is not just what is sought when the author says, "There have been many Sufis living and working in the West, but it is only recently that the correct conditions have existed for the naturalization and re-introduction of a genuine transmission in the Western world" (p. 285).

The serious error committed which distorts the very meaning of Sufism and causes the danger of making Sufism one more pseudo-religion added to the already existing list is that the author seems to express a definite disdain for the Shari'ah and the whole exoteric dimension of Islam. When he writes "One of the reasons why the mystic does not preach publicly is that the conditioned religious man, or the materialist, will not understand him" (p. 120) or in referring to Rûmî says "For him the earliest teachers of religions were right. Their successors, apart from a few, organized matters in such a way as virtually to exclude enlightenment" (p. 118) he only caters to the anti-religious and anti-traditional spirit so prevalent today which often seeks to destroy the absolutely necessary exoteric aspect of religion by a supposed esotericism which cannot be in any way realized
without the exoteric form. The reader is not lead to realize that Sufism is basically metaphysics added to the Shari'ah and that both of these elements are essential to it. This disregard and even belittling of the Shari'ah is combined with a turning of Sufism into a kind of occultism and almost magical play with words and numbers. Little is mentioned of Sufi metaphysical doctrine whose understanding especially for a Western audience is essential before the applications to such contingent domains as the symbolism of letters and numbers, which are quite legitimate on their own level, can be understood.

Another point which is seen throughout the book is the lack of distinction between Sufism as Islamic esotericism and esotericism as such which has always been and is sometimes called by Sufis themselves the Sufism of this or that tradition. On the cover of the book we are told that Sufism is four thousand years old. Now, either by Sufism we mean Islamic esotericism in which case it is nearly 1,400 years old and begins with Islam itself or else we mean the universal esoteric tradition in which case things began with Adam and there is no definite date to be set. It is this lack of distinction which makes the author confuse direct influences of Sufism upon other spiritual forms especially in the West with the esoteric teachings of other traditions which bear a resemblance to Sufism. Curiously enough the author also rejects Yoga and Buddhist mysticism (p. 338), surely a most strange position for one who claims to put himself on such a "lofty universal perspective" as to belittle even the revealed forms of religion.

In spite of much historical and literary knowledge displayed in the book, there are also many points in this secondary domain which could be criticised as for example the incorrect transliteration of certain Persian poems such as on p. 41. The translation of tajalli as meaning mutual concentration exercises (p. 128), the assertion that Rumi and Ibn 'Arabi met in Baghdad (p. 133) which is highly doubtful, the strange criticism of Dante's use of Ibn 'Arabi as "having robbed it of its Sufi validity (I)" (p. 140), the statement that Paracelsus received his Sufic training in Turkey (p. 204) which needs substantiation if it is to be anything but sensationalism.

But we need carry the discussion no further, for, as the author himself states, "In order to make his assessment of a person or his teachings, the Sufi needs only a sample" (p. 135). The samples discussed already are enough to indicate the dangers inherent in many of the pages of this book which having been written in a popular and sensational style has already drawn much attention in the West and is the means by which many people are coming to know of Sufism for the first time. This book, although it could teach certain interesting facts to someone who is already well-grounded in Sufism, will most likely be an instrument in most instances in creating a pseudo-Sufism meant for those who seek "a spiritual way" without wanting to surrender themselves to one of revealed traditions which alone guarantee the efficacy of a spiritual way. As a result a pseudo-Sufism could be created in the West as there is already a pseudo-Vedantism and pseudo-Zen. It is only the realization of the organic bond between Sufism and the Shari'ah that can reveal the true nature of Sufism and save it from this danger. In this basic question, the least one can say is that the present book has failed and has not at all taken the precautions which are absolutely necessary for a serious presentation of Sufism to the modern world.

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