required reading for anyone who wants an introduction to the issues raised by Muslim family law in the contemporary world.

Kecia Ali


The great Persian Sufi and poet, Mawlana Jalal al-Din Muhammad Balkhi (d. 672/1273) is usually acknowledged as one of the two greatest Sufis who have ever lived, along with the Shaykh al-Akbar, Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-ʿArabi (d. 638/1240), who flourished a generation before him. Quite appropriately, we know more about the Mawlana (usually known as Rumi) than almost any other pre-modern Sufi figure. This is, in large parts, due to the vast body of hagiographic material that was developed in the Sufi community that followed him. The most significant of these hagiographic works by far is the *Manaqeb al-ʿArefin* by Muhammad Shams al-Din Aflaki. The present work represents a herculean effort by the noted independent scholar, John O’Kane, to make the entire work available in a highly readable and accurate English translation to those who cannot access the original Persian.

It is widely assumed in the West now (see Alexandra Marks, “Persian Poet Top Seller in America” in *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 25, 1997), that Rumi is the best selling poet in the English language today. Much of that effort is due to the evocative, though not literal, translations/versions by the American poet (and devotee of the Sri Lankan Sufi master, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen), Coleman Barks. That Americanized rendition of Rumi is one that is deliberately cast in the widest possible universalized image, one which is, to a large extent, detached from the Sufi and Islamic milieu in which Mawlana himself was so clearly situated in. The depiction of Mawlana that we get in the *Feats of the Knowers of God*, on the other hand, is unmistakably one of a great pre-modern Muslim Sufi master, surrounded adoringly by a loving community who is eager to learn didactic lessons at every turn. Scholarly value aside, one can imagine a tremendous interest in this book for the millions of Rumi devotees in the West.
Yet that very genre is one that is worthy of closer examination. This work falls clearly in the genre of hagiography. There is a tendency among some scholars of Sufism to dismiss any and all hagiographic material as fanciful rubbish, reflecting no more than the pious exaggerations of a devotional community. That tendency reflects a predisposition towards positivism and historicism, ideological presuppositions that would have been hardly shared by our medieval audience. One need not take all these stories at face value — perhaps even as the original audience did not — to appreciate the great pedagogic insights of a Sufi master at his best. The tellers and re-tellers of these tales surely know what contemporary scholars of religion like Wendy Doniger have demonstrated, that the greatest narratives are the ones that are told so many times that no one remembers hearing them for the first time. And this book is full of such unforgettable tales that bring the full human being Mawlānā — as envisioned by the Sufi community that organised around his teachings—to life. Furthermore, while these stories should not be taken as naïvely informing us about the historical Mawlānā, they do tell us a great deal about the way that the image of Mawlānā has been cultivated a few generations after him and throughout the centuries, and for that fact alone it is a document of great historical interest.

The author of this work, Aflākī, began this work in 1318 CE, less than two generations after Mawlānā’s death, and finished it around 1350 CE. He was associated with Mawlānā’s descendants, such as Chalabī Amir ‘ Ağref (d. 1319 CE), Chalabī ‘ Ağbed (d. 1338), and Chalabī Amir ‘ Ağdel (d. 1368). The title Chalabī is an indication of descent from Mawlānā. Like many works of hagiography, the work went through a number of editions and expansions before assuming its final form. The hagiographer Aflākī builds on the collection of Rūmī’s own works (Mathnawi, Divān, Fīhi mā fīhi, etc.), Shams al-Dīn Tabrizī’s Maqālāt, and an earlier hagiography, Resāla-ye Sepahsālār, written by another hagiographer, Farīdu’din Sepahsālār.

There are, however, some important distinctions between the impression of Mawlānā and his community that one gets from Aflākī than from Sepahsālār. We still need a thorough comparison of the two works, but overall it seems that Sepahsālār preferred to depict Mawlānā and his community as metaphysical masters, quite compatible with Ibn al-’Arabī. Specifically, he offers repeated praises of Şadr al-Dīn Qūnawī and Aḥmad al-Dīn Kirmānī. Aflākī, on the other hand, portrays Mawlānā’s community as being aware of the Shaykh al-Akbar’s writings (even reading the Futuhāt together), while simultaneously offering critical remarks about Shaykh A Ḥmad al-Dīn and even Şadr al-Dīn. Also, Aflākī depicts Mawlānā as praising the ecstatic qawwālī sessions of Sufi dance and music over the reading of the Futuhāt. (It is possible
to read such narratives as less an outright critique of the *Futūḥāt* itself and more as a preference of the experience of ecstasy over bookish learning about spiritual realities).

One last word deserves to be added about the translation, and this is both the highest possible compliment to the translator scholar, John O’Kane, and a condemnation of the present state of the field of Islamic studies. This is the second massive Persian hagiography that O’Kane has patiently translated, the other one being the equally voluminous *Asrār al-Tawḥīd*, about the great Persian Sufi master Abū Saʿīd ibn Abī ʾl-Khayr 440/1049. These types of translations are extremely time consuming, and require a great expertise not just in terms of Persian language, but also of the technical Sufi, philosophical, theological, and legal lexicon that these texts feature. Sadly, most academic programmes do not fully value translations, to the point that very few research universities reward scholars who spend their research time translating masterpieces such as the *Manāqeb* with tenure. The loss is that of the field of Islamic studies, where the overwhelming majority of our classical works remain un-translated. Surely it is time for the field of Islamic studies — and the universities that employ people in this field — to recognise that an erudite translation of a classic and difficult work is worthy of recognition. It is that recognition and applause that this reviewer wishes to bestow on the indefatigable John O’Kane.

Omid Safi

★★★★


Family law is one of the most important branches of law in all legal systems of the world. Family law regulates the rights and obligations of citizens regarding marriage, divorce, maintenance, custody of children, and inheritance, thus providing the foundation on which the most important unit of the society rests. The present book deals with this important area of Islamic law.