

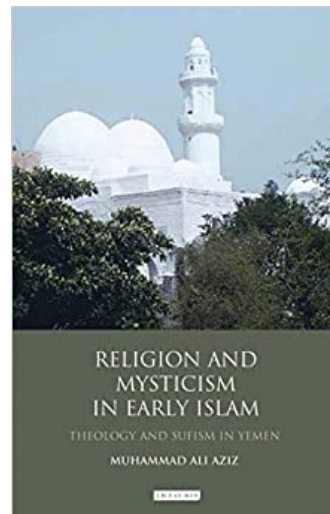
## Book Reviews

Muhammad Ali Aziz. *Religion and Mysticism in Early Islam: Theology and Sufism in Yemen*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2011. Pp. viii+282. Hardbound. ISBN: 978-1-84885-450-5. Price: \$130.

While researching the historical development of Sufism, one's attention is immediately drawn to the influence of prominent early figures who shaped the growth of mystical communities and paved the way for the future development of Sufi orders (*tariqahs*) in the post-classical period. One of the most important of these individuals in Yemen was Aḥmad b. 'Alwān (d. 665/1266). Although he was not the first Sufi scholar to come out of Yemen and no order was ever formed in his name, his intellectual and spiritual contributions came at a time when the region was at its political and cultural peak during the rule of the Rasulids (626–858/1228–1454).

Ibn 'Alwān also lived when the mystical works of other scholars such as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) were being synthesized, debated, and transferred to the general population. Ibn 'Alwān, therefore, is one of the most critical formative Sufi figures from the southern Arabian Peninsula whose thought continues to resonate in Yemen to this day.

In this work by Muhammad Ali Aziz, readers are introduced to the world of Ibn 'Alwān and the importance of re-evaluating our view of Yemen as a centre for Muslim intellectual and mystical discourse. Western scholarship, according to Aziz, “emphasizes [Yemen's] lack of central authority, rugged terrain, inhospitable climate, and political instability” (p. 219). The truth, however, was that during the Ayyubid and subsequent Rasulid dynasties, Sunni educational institutions



received generous state backing. As a result, Yemen's three major theological groups (Sunnī, Ismā'īlī Shī'ah, and Zaydī) engaged in heated debates in an environment of relatively political and economic stability. Yemen, therefore, was not an intellectual backwater but rather a site of the coalescence and localization of Sufi thought.

Chapters one and two set the stage for this journey by introducing readers to Yemen's historical context during the early periods of Islam and the region's three main Muslim groups, and providing an intellectual history of Sufism in Yemen to the time of Ibn 'Alwān. As reaching its interior was geographically challenging to the 'Abbasids, Yemen remained insularly focused until the coming of the Ayyubids and locked in a continual political rivalry between the Zaydīs and the Ismā'īlīs. Although the Sunnī Ayyubids and their successors, the Rasulids, were never able to fully control the other two groups, both sets of rulers heavily backed Sunni, particularly Sufi, institutions and scholars. For example, Sufis and their institutions were exempted from land taxes, and their scholars were called upon to assist in quelling local conflicts (p. 32). It was this rich political and intellectual environment in which Ibn 'Alwān would appear.

Chapter three then focuses on the contributions of Ibn 'Alwān himself, beginning with a discussion of his life and a detailed analysis of four of his major works: *al-Tawhīd al-A'zam* (The Supreme Union), *al-Futūḥ* (The Revelations), *al-Mahrajān wa 'l-Baḥr al-Mushakkal al-Gharīb* (The Festival and the Unfamiliar Diverse Sea), and *al-Ajwibah al-Lā'iqah 'alā 'l-As'ilah al-Fā'iqah* (The Appropriate Answers to the Outstanding Questions). Chapters four through six then delve into these works to ascertain Ibn 'Alwān's intellectual contributions and how his ideas compare to other significant Sufi figures, including Aḥmad al-Badawī (d. 674/1276), al-Ghazālī, and Ibn 'Arabī.

A common theme within each of these chapters is acknowledging Ibn 'Alwān as a participant in a larger Sufi intellectual tradition but at the same time independent in his line of thought. At many points, Aziz pushes back against other scholars who suggest that other scholars directly influenced Ibn 'Alwān. "Ibn 'Alwān may have availed himself of the works of al-Ghazālī," Aziz writes, "but nevertheless I cannot dismiss the distinctive styles and originality in each scholar" (p. 108).

Another theme in these chapters is to see Ibn 'Alwān as uniquely Yemeni, or a product of the local political and ideological circumstances. In chapter four, for example, Aziz mentions that although Ibn 'Alwān was violently opposed to Shī'ah extremists (*rawāfiḍ*), at many times in his

works, he sought to bring together Sunnism and Shiism. For Ibn ‘Alwān, the physical world’s pole was Abū Bakr (d. 13/634), while the pole of the unseen world was ‘Alī (d. 40/661) (p. 88). Balancing between Shiism and Sunnism, in Aziz’s analysis, was the direct result of Ibn ‘Alwān’s intellectual environment and a desire to accept everything within Islam that did not “conflict with the Qur’ān or the Prophet’s reports” (p. 89).

In the last three chapters of the book, Aziz discusses the world of Yemeni Sufism following the death of Ibn ‘Alwān, tracing the shifting Sufi support of the Ottoman Empire and the influence of Wahhabism as well as the internal debates between Sufis and jurists (*fuqahā*). Here, Aziz shows how Ibn ‘Alwān’s influence shaped the development of a unique approach to Sufism in Yemen, even though there are no orders (*ṭarīqahs*) based entirely on his thought. For example, the existence of Ibn ‘Alwān’s tomb and the question of whether he should be venerated as a saint (*walī*) became the focal point for the debate on grave visitation well into the twentieth century, when his tomb was destroyed in 1942 and then rebuilt in 1963 (p. 164). Additionally, Ibn ‘Alwān’s writings that encouraged seekers to not adhere to a master and his careful interactions with Rasulid political authority have led modern Yemeni Sufism to be uniquely decentralized and believe that “great masters can survive the corrupting influences of politics and keep their orders away from involvement in politics” (p. 217).

Ultimately, *Religion and Mysticism in Early Islam* is far more than a discussion of the life and works of Ibn ‘Alwān. It is a comprehensive survey of the development of Sufism in Yemen. Its scope stretches from the beginning of Islam to the twentieth century and touches on social, political, religious, and intellectual history. At times, the sheer number of names, works, and ideas discussed act as the book’s most striking fault. Even for specialists in Sufi thought, the book is challenging to follow and digest. Aziz attempts to remedy this by providing general introductory sections throughout the text to describe, for example, Zaydism or the Sufi concept of annihilation (*fanā*) (p. 129). However, these sections only partially lessen the blow as the remainder of the chapters usually bombard readers with stacks of more detailed information.

For those prepared to take on the task of diving into the details, however, Aziz’s book provides a rewarding and enlightening experience of the often-overlooked world of Yemeni Sufism. The book is an important contribution to Islamic studies, helping researchers develop respect for Yemen as a centre of Muslim thought and realize the

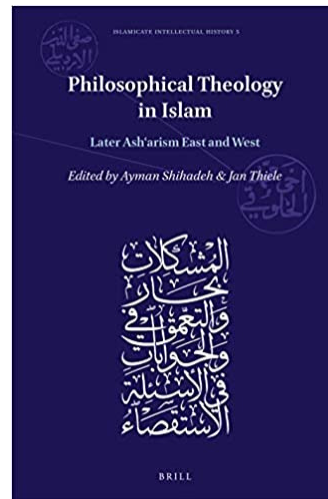
importance of the political and social environment for the development of intellectual and mystical trends.

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Ayman Shihadeh and Jan Thiele, eds. *Philosophical Theology in Islam: Later Ash'arism East and West*. Leiden: Brill, 2020. Pp. x+440. E-book. ISBN: 9789004426610. Price: \$119.

Fifth in the series of Islamic Intellectual History, *Philosophical Theology in Islam* is an attempt to understand philosophy, theology, sources, and scholarly networks of Ash'arism, a dominant *kalāmī* school of Sunni Islam. This work is an outcome of a conference arranged in September 2014 by the Department of the Languages and Cultures of the Near and Middle East, SOAS University of London. Containing 440 pages, this volume begins with an introduction by the editors and is further divided into thirteen chapters written by fifteen eminent scholars in the field. In several ways, these chapters are more like separate articles on similar topics. The editors Ayman Shihadeh and Jan Thiele did remarkably well to keep them in line, but the nature of the work makes the reviewer's task challenging. The third chapter (pp. 71–94) written in French by Meryem Sebti, whose works on Avicennian philosophy are well known and who has many English works to her credit, could be considered an exception to the rule and a disappointment to the English reader. The editors did not state any reason as to why they had included an article in French in an English volume.



Rather than giving an overview of philosophical theology in Islam, the book focuses on the later Ash'arī theology. Abū 'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Ismā'īl

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