

BOOK REVIEWS

Tales of God's Friends: Islamic Hagiography in Translation by John Renard, ed., California: University of California Press, 2009.

Sufism (Islamic Mysticism) is rightly called "the inner dimension of Islam" by Algar¹, and said to be "a reality without name." Though the word 'Sufi' does not appear in the Qur'ān, nor did it exist in the life span of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his Companions (Ṣahāba'), yet it is confidently rooted in the Qur'ānic revelation. Since its origin in the 7th century, the first century of Islam, it has made an important contribution in the propagation of Islam throughout the globe, from the Atlantic coast of West Africa to the entire region of South Asia and far eastern terrain of Indonesia and Malaya. The emergence and early amplification of Sufism went alongside with the establishment of Islamic jurisprudence and various schools of law in the second and third centuries of Hijrah. Thus, Sufism's exposition as a distinct institution and the formalization of its practices and technical vocabulary took shape simultaneously with the development of traditional schools of Islamic interpretation.

Tales of God's Friends: Islamic Hagiography in Translation is an anthology that honors the Sufis from every corner of the Muslim world, and provides an easily accessible overview of the history of Sufism and particularities of individual Sufi experiences that contributed in spreading Islam throughout the world.

This anthology is a valuable contribution to the contemporary literature of Sufi studies and offers an excellent overview of the Sufi path and philosophy in a single volume. Texts are each classics of Islamic mysticism. A wide-ranging and eclectic collection of sources is a particular strength of this book which complements the text well. Manuscripts have been edited with references to several authors, who knew the life history of these Sufis i.e. 1-Abū Bakr; 2-Abū Ya'zā Yallanūr; 3-'Abd Allāh ibn As'ad al-Yāfī'ī's; 4-Wafā'īya; 5-Junayd; 6-

¹ See, Hamid Algar. Trans. Intro and Anno. *The Path of Gods Bondsmen from Origin to Return*, "Mersād al-'ebād men al-mabda'," a sūfī compendium in Persia by Najm al-Dīn Rāzī. North Heldon (NJ: Islamic Publications International, 1980).

Sa'dī; 7-Ostad Elahi & Hajjī Ni'mat; 8-Mulla of Hadda; 9-Hakīm Ata'; 10-Sari Saltik; 11-Sari Ismail; 12-Yūnus Emre; 13-Shaykh al-Hajj Abbass Sall; 14-Nana Asma'u & Usman dan Fodiyo; 15-Job's Wife; 16-Shaykh Uways of Somalia; 17-Tazkira; 18-Ahmad Sirhindī; 19-Khwāja Ghulām Farīd; 20-Ismā'īlī Pīr Sadr ad-Dīn; 21-Indo-Persian Sufis; 22-Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī; 23-Bonbībī; 24-Mānik Pīr; 25-Muhammad al-Hanafīya; 26-Wali Songo; 27-Lan Zixi's.

All anecdotes recorded in the book show that God's Friends have served the humanity, their teachings were simple and precise, and they used local languages to guide the people towards the right path, according to their perception.

This *Islamic hagiography* gives an understanding Islam as a religion of peace. The texts are also important for students, historians and practitioners of Sufism, and for philosophers who are interested in Sufi philosophy of mind and psychology as it is developed in the Sufi tradition. Since, we are witnessing a development of interest in Sufism, this book is a welcome addition to the worldwide growing literature on Sufism.

The book contains illustrations, a preface, six-parts, 27 chapters, along with an appendix, glossary, note about the contributors, index of names, index of concepts, themes, places, book titles and a Qur'ānic Index. The editor claims this book to be the first truly global anthology of Islamic Hagiography in English language, both historically and geographically, which is translated from seventeen languages of origin, with the help of two dozen Islamic scholars specializing in broad spectrum of languages (p. xi-xiv).

The introduction "Islamic Hagiography: Sources and Contexts" gives a complete picture of the theme and methodology adopted in producing this sensitive and delicate treatise. Method of selecting the data and technicalities are clearly specified. Four filters i.e. geography, culture, chronology, language and literature are used to understand this anthology. Twenty-texts offered in the book, along with twenty visual images, represent a variety of literary forms, functions, and hermeneutical presuppositions (pp. 1-12).

Part-I "The Arab Middle East and North Africa" contains hagiographical anthology of four major figures from the Arab Middle East and North Africa in the form of four chapters. These hagiographical anthologies have been produced with Sufi perspective from four sources—three Arabic and one Persian.

1- Abū Bakr in Tradition and Early Hagiography by John Renard (pp. 15-29). Abū Bakr (RA) was the most reliable companion of Muhammad (PBUH). Renard has highlighted his high moral status with the help of Ahādīth. This article portrays a unique picture of Abū Bakr.

2- Tamīmī's Eyewitness Account of Abū Ya'zā Yallanūr by Kenneth Honerkamp (pp. 30-46). It is a writing about Abu Ya'zā Yallanūr ibn Maymūm (527/1177) of Moroccan God's Friend. He received the initiatic cloak from Abū Shu'ayb. He also served forty friends of God. Abū Ya'za was over 130 years, when he died. Tamīmī, was the disciple of Abū Ya'za. He narrates the spiritual teachings of his mentor in al-Mustafād.

3- 'Abd Allāh ibn As'ad al-Yāfi'ī's Defense of Saintly Marvels by Erik S. Ohlander (pp. 47-62). This article is written in defense of Saints. 'Abd Allāh ibn Asad al-Yāfi originally belonged to Yemen but had lived most of his life in Makkah. He was a great scholar of Hadīth and theology too. He wrote many treatises to defend his teachings and traditions from opponents. "Diffusion of Perfumed Merits" is included in this manuscript with its translation.

4- The Wafā'īya of Cairo by: Richard McGregor (pp. 63-76). The Wafā'īya of Cairo was a Sufi order that had left great effect on the social and spiritual life of Cairo. A piece of writing "The Divine Gift" is incorporated in this book.

Part-II "Iran and Afghanistan" contains four chapters which give a view of medieval and contemporary Sufi orders from 5th /11th century; 7th /13th century; 9th /15th century; 13th /19th century, i.e.

5- Junayd in the 'Hilyat al-awliyā' and the 'Nafhāt al-Uns' by: Jawid Mojaddedi (pp.79-91). Abū al-Qāsim Junayd (297/910) is the famous and highly respected Sufi of his time. Junayd's biography is taken from two books: (i) *Hilyat al-awliya* compiled by Abū Na'im al-

Isfahānī who was a Muhaddith and biographer of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and (ii) *Nafhāt al-Uns* (The Breaths of Intimacy) written by 'Abd al-Rahmān Jamī (898/1492), who presented 600 biographies in chronological order. Teachings of Junayd are quoted from *Nafhāt al-Uns*.

6- Sa'dī's Earthly Vision of Sainthood in the *Bustān* and the *Gulistān* by: Fatemeh Keshavarz (pp. 92-99). This article presents the vision of sainthood along with two poetic master pieces of the Iranian saint Muslih al-Din Sa'dī. A great poet of his time and today who wrote exemplary and archetype poetry that urge a common man to do the right and correct his path towards God.

7- Ostad Elahi and Hajjī Ni'mat: Master and Disciple, Father and Son, by: James W. Morris (pp. 100-113). Teachings of Ostad Elahi are presented from his book *Athar al-Haqq*.

8- A Miracle of an Afghan Friend of God, the Mulla of Hadda, by: David Edwards (pp. 114-117). Mulla was a great Afghani Sufi who spent his life in Taswwuf. He is well-known by his countless miracle stories about him and disciple, some of which are presented in this treatise.

Part-III "Turkey and Central Asia" contains four hagiographical types of medieval Turkish Anatolia, Ottoman Balkans, and Mevlevi mystics, i.e. 9- Three Tales from the Central Asian *Book of Hakīm Ata*, by: Devin DeWeese (pp. 121-135). 10- Sari Saltik Becomes a Friend of God, by Ahmet T. Karamustafa (pp. 136-144). 11- Sari Ismail: The Beloved Disciple of Hacı Bektaş Veli, by Vernon James Schubel & Nurten Kilic-Schubel (pp. 145-149). 12- Yūnus Emre Seeks His Share: Traditional & Modern Accounts by Mark Soileau (pp. 150-166).

Part-IV "Africa: West and East" contains four chapters of hagiographical panegyric poems on Sufis, created from Nigerian, Senegalese, Somalis and Swahili sources of early modern East & West Africa, i.e. 13- Shaykh al-Hajj Abbass Sall: In Praise of the Tījānīya Order by Souleymane Bachir Diagne (pp. 169-1178). 14- Imitating the Life of the Prophet: Nana Asma'u and Usman dan Fodiyo by Beverly B. Mack (pp. 179-196). 15- Job's Wife in the Swahili 'Epic of Job' by J. W. T. Allen (pp. 197-207). 16- The Death of Shaykh Uways of Somalia by Scott Reese (pp. 208-216).

Part III and IV of this book illustrate the stories of Turkey and central Asia and Africa: West and East friends of God. These are comprised of the life history, Sufi teachings and incidents of spiritual aspirations of the Sufis of that period.

Part-V "South Asia" contains eight chapters which are comprised of the hagiographical literature from all three of the modern nation-states that once constituted greater India: Pakistan, India, Srilanka and Bangladesh. Eight texts are presented here in a geographical order from west to east. These selections represent Persian, Urdu, Arabic, Gujrati, Siraiki and Bengali genre of anecdotes of the subcontinent from a spiritual Sufi perspective, such as:

17- A Tazkira for the Times: Saving Islam in Post-Partition Punjab by: Anna Bigelow (pp. 219-233). This anecdote has been taken from the book "Bagh Anbiyā Punjab" written by Sufi Muhammad Ismail. Sufi penned several tales of God's Friend of the Punjab region. He mentioned the spiritual powers of saints, their pious behavior, poetic compositions and Satan's encounters with renowned figures of that period. Ismail has described biographical and historical details about 32 saints from different Sufi orders. Shaykh Sadr Al-Din Sadri Jahan's life was selected from his piece of writings. His life and legend, harmony with other religion particularly Sikhs were sketched in this article. After the separation of India and Pakistan, no violence and dispute erupted in his area, is considered as his leading miracle.

18- Tales of Renewal: Ahmad Sirhindī, Reformer of the Second Millennium by Arthur Buehler (pp.234-248). This story illustrates the deeds of Ahmad Sirhindi. It poses him as a millennial reformer of religion, which has been derived from the letters of Sirhinidī written to different people of his time.

19- Sufi Poetry of the Indus Valley: Khwāja Ghulām Farīd by Jamal J. Elias (pp. 249-260). Khwāja Ghulām Farīd is the most celebrated Sufi poet of the Indus valley. His ten legendary pieces of poetic compositions are included in this article. His style is different from other poets of the region because he represents himself in a womanly manner. He uses many symbolic phrases in his verses. The author has illustrated all the characteristic of his poetry.

20- The *Ismā'īlī Pīr Sadr ad-Dīn* by Ali S. Asani (pp. 261-268). The writer takes account of *Ismā'īlī Pīr* as God's Friend. He also explains the Shi'a Muslim beliefs, that an *Imām* has a reverence and distinguished place in them. *Ismā'īlī Pīr*'s early life and traveling towards the his *Pīr*, difficulties of preaching in India occupied by the majority of Hindus at time was summarized in a good manner. A book *Nurumm Mubin* completely mentioned the life story and work of this *Ismā'īlī Pīr*.

21- An Indo-Persian Guide to Sufi Shrine Visitation by Car W. Ernst (pp. 269-285). It is a visualized work on the attendance to the memorial of God's Friends in the Tombs of *Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā* and *Pīr Mehr Alī*. In this article, the essayist mentions the death anniversaries, food delivery to visitors, rituals, offering prayers, sacred consciousness of the pilgrimage and Friday attendance at the shrine; all are well described.

22- Sufi Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: The Worldly and Spīritual Journeys of *Khwāja Hasan Nizāmī* by Marcia Hermansen (pp. 286-300). It is a commentary of *Khwāja* on his own observation and experiments in the spiritual world. He wrote *Āp Bītī* in Urdu language. It is also a pioneering genre in emerging Urdu language.

23- *Bonbībī*, Protectress of the Forest by Sufia Mendez Uddin (pp. 301-311). It is a story of a God's Friend who lived in the Sundarban— a forest in Bengal. He provides protection to the people from the difficulties of the forest. This forest has mangroves trees that make slow the flow of water with sediment collected from the river. A rich fertile forest with lush greenery, plenty of natural resources like wood, honey and wax etc. People traveling in this forest have to come across many dangers like floods, storms and Bengal Tigers. But, they had a faith of protection, in *Bonbībī*, from all these hazards that could jeopardize their lives.

24- The Tales of *Mānik Pīr*: Protector of Cows in Bengal by Tony K. Stewart (pp.312-332) is an article written about the spiritual and miracles performed by this saint.

Part-VI "South-East and East-Asia" contains three chapters which present hagiographical selections of pre-modern and modern languages of the Muslims communities of Brunei, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia

and China, i.e. 25- The Malay Story of Muhammad al-Hanafīya by Lode F. Brakel, (pp. 335-340). 26- Sunan Ampel of the Javanese Wali Songo by Anna M. Gade, (pp. 341-358). 27- Lan Zixi's "Epitaphs of the Real Humans" by Sachiko Murata, (pp. 359-370). These anecdotes display that God's Friends have served the humanity by their simple and specific teachings to show the right path to the community in the local languages.

One problem with this kind of hagiographies is that there is a fair amount of repetition, especially about the core concepts of Sufism. Thus several essays recount the principles of Sufism and the peculiar history of this institution in practice. A relatively minor criticism is that there is probably an insufficient amount of attention paid to the transliteration of names and places given in this anthology. An additional observation is that the prominent Sufi poets of Indus Valley: Abul Hasan 'Alī Hajverī— whose *Kashf al-Mahjub* is a primary hagiographical text and the first in Persian by any author was not included. Similarly, Miān Muhammad and Bāba Bulleh Shāh should also have been included in this treatise.

Not every reader of the Muslim world will be happy with this treatise because of the reservations among some Muslims Sects about Sufi viewpoint. These small sects are the Salafīs, Harikīs-Jamāt-e-Islamīans, Tablīgīs, Tazīm-e-Islamians; Nizārī Ismā'īlis-Aga Khānis; Bohras-Mustālī Dawūdīs and Sulaymānis; Ghāmdī group, Pervaizī group, Lāhorī group, Chakrālvī group and Zikrīs-of Makran, Baluchistan; the rest of the Muslim world is very much Sufi. Despite the fact that the general picture, the arguments advanced by those who adopt it, and the interpretations of Sufism that underlie those arguments and that interpretation of Sufism are in fact contested, they are all presented without critical perspective as unproblematic truth. So those hoping for a critical treatment in a volume such as this will be disappointed.

Overall, the book is both well translated and well structured by the editor. The translation of the root texts presented in this book is very good. Of course there are places where other choices could have been made, and translators can always find a great deal to argue about, but I will avoid that temptation. For the most part, the translation is faithful to the sense of the text and to its grammar, and can be used by the reader without worry. The editor has introduced helpful section titles in the text.

One could have reservations about his methodology in as far as individuals and their very different biographies have no real place in the tightly organized chapters. But such a criticism would create misunderstanding about the author's actual intention. What John Renard achieves in this treatise is to provide an insight into Islamic mysticism. Not only does he identify a range of Sufi concepts, he also shows that new Sufi concepts could co-exist alongside older ones. Those seeking an overview in Sufi terminology, themes and concepts, as they emerged in this anthology, will find much of value here, especially historians and practitioners. I recommend this volume to anyone interested in Sufi thought and philosophy. It is a valuable reference volume and an excellent text to use in advanced classes of Sufi philosophy.

The presentation of this anthology is scholarly, extraordinarily well illustrated with a wide range of appropriate scriptural references. An outstanding feature of this book is that it brings the reader to the feeling of being present at the time of these Sufis. The appearance of such a translation of Sufi literature in English must be recognized as a special event. I would like to recommend the translations of this anthology in international and regional languages, which will be very useful in understanding the spiritual foundations and message of Islam.

This book is a majestic piece of Islamic hagiography. It will soon gain attention and popularity in the Non-Muslim and Muslim world due to its easy language, simple presentation of contents, and its range in covering the famous Sufis from global Muslim communities.

Muhammad Junaid Nadvi,
Ph.D. / Assistant Professor,
Faculty of Islamic Studies,
International Islamic University, Islamabad.

