Book review:

First Published in:
Sufi Wisdom
Marietta T. Stepaniants


Review by
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This work is a revised English translation of Stepaniants' Filosofskie aspekty sufizma published in Moscow in 1987 and the first attempt to convey a Russian view of Islamic mysticism in English. In addition, in the author's words, it has the distinction of being "the first inquiry into the philosophy of Sufism made in the [former] Soviet Union" (p. 10). With the 1980s came a radical change in political climate which brought with it new opportunities "to study, deliberate about, and express ideas on mysticism as a whole, and on Islamic mysticism in particular, without concern for censorship or hireling critics" (p. 6). Stepaniants' Sufi Wisdom, therefore, marks a new trend in Russian scholarship on this subject.

The book does not claim to treat Sufism exhaustively, but rather intends to offer the reader a "glance from Russia" (p. 10) by concentrating "on only a few aspects of Sufi philosophy" (p. 9). Thus, Stepaniants discusses only the most basic tenets of Sufi thought such as the Unity of Being (or Absolute Being), the role of humans in the cosmos, the acquisition of knowledge, and the placement of morality within the context of mystical thought. The work also includes an examination of the impact of modernity on Sufism as well as two appendices outlining the work of two of Stepaniants' post graduate students: "one by A. V. Smirnov on Ibn 'Arabi and the other by K. A. Hromova on S. H. Nasr" (p. 11). Nasr, by the way, is the editor of the SUNY Series in Islam, to which this book belongs.

At the heart of Stepaniants' research is her conviction that in order to comprehend the theoretical bases of Muslim mysticism "it is necessary to determine their place in the system of Islam, to define the interconnection of Sufism and the main principles of Muslim doctrine, and to compare Sufism with mystical trends in other world religions to find their common and unique traits" (p. 7). Thus, Stepaniants frequently cites parallels culled from Christian, Buddhist, Neo-Platonic, and Zoroastrian literature.

Stepaniants is adept in her sensitivity to the individualistic nature of the mystical experience and to the influence of Sufi ideas on other systems of thought outside of Islam. Yet, she also sees internal processes at work in the development of Sufism, as she notes: "While Sufism was subject to external influences as much as the whole of Islam, and was doubtless influenced by various non-Islamic schools, it would be more reasonable to consider Sufism as a product of Muslims' spiritual evolution" (p. 14).

Throughout, Stepaniants spices her examination of Sufi philosophy by appealing to the rich Sufi literary tradition. Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) and Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī (1165-1240), are discussed most prominently, (but to some extent also Abū Hāmid al-Ghāzāli [d. 1111]), and mostly in conjunction with excerpts of their writings rendered into English. Her emphasis on literature provides a contextual balance and helps to elucidate the often complicated and sometimes paradoxical philosophical views of these mystics.

Unfortunately, the criticisms of this book outweigh its positive contributions. Periodically, one finds outmoded analyses and a general lack of knowledge concerning the religious traditions in place in the Near East before the advent of Islam. An example of the former appears in Stepaniants' statements that "Primitive Man did not distinguish himself from his natural environment" (p. 23) and "In the Middle Ages Man no longer blended with nature" (Ibid.), both of which I find difficult to understand.

As for the latter, I turn to Stepaniants' assertion that Luther's notion that "the Creator prizes most in Man, a diligent, steady, and enterprising worker" (p. 92) was somehow "novel." In fact, Luther found his support for his work ethic in the Bible, e.g., "See a man who is diligent at his work, he shall attend upon kings" (Prov 22:29).

When discussing previously existing doctrines of the Unity of Being,
e.g., Xenophanes of Colophon, Parmenides, and Heraclitus, no mention is given of the same doctrine as found in Deut 6:4 "Hear O Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is One" or in Isa 45:7 "I form light and create darkness, I make good and create evil." Instead, Stepantsians consistently looks Eastward for her parallels, e.g., in the Bhagavadgītā (p. 15). Similarly, while Stepantsians removes the so-called "discovery" of the concept of love from Christianity and places it within Hinduism, the reader might not realize that this concept can be found earlier still in the ancient cuneiform hymns of Mesopotamia (cf. Foster, From Distant Days, 331-354). See also her discussion of the "sacral character of the number seven" (p. 76) which she finds in Brahmanism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Christian mysticism. Here, too, we might add the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 1-2), the Babylonian Hymn to Ishtar (c. 1800 BCE.) (Foster, From Distant Days, 78-84), and numerous classical Egyptian texts, each of which show a sacral interest in sevens. The point here is that though Far Eastern connections cannot be ruled out entirely, the more ancient Near Eastern traditions argue in favor of local origins for these doctrines.

Another major drawback of this book is its compositional stance somewhere between a work for advanced readers and an introductory textbook. For example, the author often assumes a thorough knowledge of the mystics and philosophers discussed. Names are dropped almost always without references or dates. Terms, too, are given without definition. Not every reader of this book will understand the meanings of kalān (p. 26), ghazal (p. 34), sunna (p. 36), quatrain (p. 41), ṣaḥīfa (p. 64), or the significant differences between the various Islamic orders, e.g., the Chishti and Mawlawiyya (p. 61). In this regard, the uninitiated reader would appreciate a short glossary of names, works, and terms discussed. Furthermore, though an index of names and terms is provided, one also would like to find an index of Qur'anic citations.

On the other hand, the initiated reader would like to hear more about other prominent Sufi philosophers, such as al-Husayn ibn al-Manṣūr al-Ḥallū (d. 922), Abū Yazīd Bīstāmī (d. 874), and Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭār (d. 1229). While they and their works are given periodic reference, the treatment remains parenthetical and pale in comparison with the space devoted to Rūmī and Ibn al-'Arabī.

Perhaps the largest problem with this work, however, is that it is seriously plagued by inconsistencies in style and transliteration, and by numerous typographical errors. For instance, though the author appears to make every effort to transliterate Arabic words accurately, the Holy Book of Islam is written throughout as "Koran," though the writing Qur'ān clearly is preferable. Similarly, while the Arabic letter 'ayn is rendered throughout with ('), the letter 'aleph (') appears inconsistently. Moreover, at least in three places, a knowledge of German (p. 29) and French (pp. 29, 78) is assumed, though elsewhere English translations accompany foreign statements. Other editorial infelicities include:

p. 1 Mystics for Mystics.
pp. 2, 12 tasawwuf for tasawwuf.
  p. 11 shoulders for shoulders.
  p. 13 al-Sheikh al-Akbar should be italicized.
  p. 15 All-Fuṭūḥāt for Al-Fuṭūḥāt.
  p. 18 waṣīfah muqawwad, but waṣīfah mutlab.
  p. 19 "denial of world's resemblance to God" should read "denial of the world's resemblance to God."
  p. 20 muṣfīdīyya is only partially italicized.
  p. 20 Sheikh for Sheyhk.
  p. 24 Ibn Arabī's and his adherents' Sufi views should read "Ibn 'Arabī and his adherents' Sufi views."
  p. 25 researchers for researchers.
  p. 26 sphere for sphere.
  p. 26 mutakallīmūn's should be italicized.
  p. 26 The second appearance of mutakallīmūn should read mutakallīmūn.
  p. 27 The citation of S. S. Averintsev's Filosofskaya entsiklopedia lacks a volume number (cf. p. 114, n. 12 where it is given).
  p. 27 mutakallīmūn lacks italics in three places.
  p. 27 simultaneously for simultaneously.
  p. 28 ex nihilo should be italicized.
  p. 28 al-wusīfī for al-wusīfī as elsewhere.
  p. 28 prominent for prominent.
  p. 29 dominate for dominant.
  p. 29 The French pluperfect acceptée should read accepted.
  p. 31 The Greek to prosōn kinōn is only partially italicized.
  p. 32 difference for difference.
  p. 35 perceive for perceive.
  p. 37 "However, great the variety..." should have no comma.
  p. 37 immediacy for immediacy.
  p. 44 "likeness. Ibn 'Arabī..." lacks a space after the end of the first sentence.
  p. 48 def for deaf.
  p. 51 receive for receive.
  p. 54 The French meme for même.
  p. 58 haqīqa for haqīqa.
  p. 60 al-'ayn is only partially italicized.
  p. 61 "...Sufi rites. In..." should read "...Sufi rites. In...."
The New World Order: The Reconstruction of the Middle East

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The New World Order: The Reconstruction of the Middle East consists of an introductory chapter and eight essays whose aim is to analyze the relationship between political, economic, and security factors of the Middle East in the world today. The work provides an insight into the overall situation in the Middle East. In the introduction, Tim Niblock says that the need for such analysis arises from two developments—the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Gulf crisis of 1990.

In chapters 2 and 3, Deegan and Geoffe discuss the issue of democratization. They start from the fact that Arab governments are ruled by autocratic oligarchies which dominate political life. As the wave of democratization overtook the world, the Arab countries began to assume that their political legitimacy might be questioned because populist forces urged a redistribution of power throughout the world. Both authors sound cautious about the question of democratization in the Arab world. Deegan emphasizes his doubts by asking “So what may we conclude about moves towards democratization in the Middle East?” and “Is talk of democratization...