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**Book review:**

**Stepaniants, Marietta T. *Sufi Wisdom*. SUNY Series in Islam. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994.**

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# Sufi Wisdom

Marietta T. Stepaniants

Albany, NY: State University of New York Press,  
1994. 132 pages. \$44.50 cloth (ISBN 0-7814-1795-6),  
\$14.95 paper (ISBN 0-7914-1796-4).

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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 'Arabī 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 Ḥāmid al-Ghāzālī [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, Stepanians consistently looks Eastward for her parallels, e.g., in the *Bhagavadgītā* (p. 15). Similarly, while Stepanians 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 *kalām* (p. 26), *ghazal* (p. 34), *sunna* (p. 36), quatrain (p. 41), *sharī'a* (p. 64), or the significant differences between the various Islamic orders, e.g., the Chishtī and Mawlawīyya (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-Ḥusayn ibn al-Mansūr al-Hallāj (d. 922), Abū Yazīd Bisṭāmī (d. 874), and Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār (d. 1229). While they and their works are given periodic reference, the treatment remains parenthetical and pales in comparison with the space devoted to Rūmī and Ibn al-'Arabī.

Perhaps the largest problem with this work, however, is that it seriously is 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 'ayin 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 *Mysitcs* for *Mystics*.
- pp. 2, 12 *tasawwuf* for *tasawwuf*.
- p. 11 shouldes for shoulders.
- p. 13 al-Sheik al-Akbar should be italicized.
- p. 15 All-Futūḥāt for Al-Futūḥāt.
- p. 18 *wujūd muqayyad*, but *wudjūd mutlab*.
- p. 19 "denial of world's resemblance to God" should read "denial of the world's resemblance to God."
- p. 20 *mudjūdiyya* is only partially italicized.
- p. 20 Sheykh for Sheykh.
- p. 24 "Ibn 'Arabī's and his adherents' Sufi views" should read "Ibn 'Arabī and his adherents' Sufi views."
- p. 25 researhers for researchers.
- p. 26 shpere for sphere.
- p. 26 mutakallimūn's should be italicized.
- p. 26 The second appearance of *mutakallimun* should read *mutakallimūn*.
- 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 mutakallimūn lacks italics in three places.
- p. 27 simultaineously for simultaneously.
- p. 28 ex nihilo should be italicized.
- p. 28 *al-wujūd* for *al-wudjūd* as elsewhere.
- p. 28 promnent for prominent.
- p. 29 dominate for dominant.
- p. 29 The French pluperfect acceptee should read acceptée.
- p. 31 The Greek *to protōn* kinoyin is only partially italicized.
- p. 32 differnce for difference.
- p. 35 percive for perceive.
- p. 37 "However, great the variety..." should have no comma.
- p. 37 immedicacy for immediacy.
- p. 44 "...likeness.Ibn 'Arabī..." lacks a space after the end of the first sentence.
- p. 48 def for deaf.
- p. 51 recieve for receive.
- p. 54 The French meme for mēme.
- p. 58 *haqīqa* for *ḥaqīqa*.
- p. 60 al-'ayn is only partially italicized.
- p. 61 "...Sufi rites. in..." should read "...Sufi rites. In..."



- p. 61 *samā'* khānas is only partially italicized.  
 p. 63 "The orthodox Islam..." should read "Orthodox Islam..."  
 p. 65 "...(consciousness)of..." lacks a space between words.  
 p. 65 reads p. 221-222 for pp. 221-222, as elsewhere.  
 p. 71 muwaḥḥid should be italicized.  
 p. 71 rebellion for rebllion.  
 pp. 73, 86 Muhammad Iqbal for Muḥammad Iqbal (cf. p. 87).  
 p. 80 "...from outside but integral parts" should read "...from outside but from integral parts."  
 p. 80 "...accepting surrounding reality" should read "...accepting the surrounding reality."  
 p. 83 sui generis should be italicized.  
 p. 89 estethical for aesthetical.  
 p. 102 *al-Ḥaqq* is only partially italicized.  
 p. 109 "Hromova believes that rejecting secularization of sciences formally, nevertheless Nasr advocates it unconsciously" makes little sense.  
 p. 114, n. 9 *waḥdat al-wujūd* for *waḥdat al-wudjūd*.  
 p. 114, n. 12 The *Qur'anic* citation is incorrect and should read 50.16, not 50.15.  
 p. 117, n. 6 Voskresenie should be italicized.  
 p. 118, n. 3 metamorphosed for metamorphasized.

In conclusion, the devastating impact of "decades-long restrictions on oriental studies in Russia" (p. 6) which the author admits, can be seen in this work. While *Sufi Wisdom* does offer the promised "glimpse" into Russian views of Sufism, it offers little more. Indeed, this reviewer found very few new insights that cannot be found in a standard English work on Islamic mysticism, save the brief introductory purview of the history of scholarship on Sufism in Russia (pp. 1-10) and the two synopses on Ibn 'Arabi and S. H. Nasr at the end of the book. We only can hope, with the author, "that the day is not far off when Russian works on this intellectually and spiritually inspiring subject will become part of world literature" (p. 6).

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## The New World Order: The Reconstruction of the Middle East

Haifaa A. Jawad, editor

London: St. Martin's Press, 1994. 154 pages. \$59.95  
 (LC 94-009889, ISBN 0-312-12201-2).

Review by  
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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