

2016

Book Review: The Comfort of the Mystics: A Manual and Anthology of Early Sufism by Gerhard Böwering & Bilal Orfali

Martin Nguyen

Fairfield University, mnguyen@fairfield.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs>

Copyright 2016 Marting Nguyen, published by the American Oriental Society

The final publisher PDF has been archived here with permission from the copyright holder.

Repository Citation

Nguyen, Martin, "Book Review: The Comfort of the Mystics: A Manual and Anthology of Early Sufism by Gerhard Böwering & Bilal Orfali" (2016). *Religious Studies Faculty Publications*. 129.

<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs/129>

Published Citation

Nguyen, Martin. Book Review: The Comfort of the Mystics: A Manual and Anthology of Early Sufism by Gerhard Böwering & Bilal Orfali. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136.3 (2016): 658-659. doi: 10.7817/jameroriesoci.136.3.0648.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

The Comfort of the Mystics: A Manual and Anthology of Early Sufism. Edited by GERHARD BÖWERING and BILAL ORFALI. Islamic History and Civilization, vol. 98. Leiden: BRILL, 2013. Pp. ix + 34 + 686 (Arabic). \$282.

This carefully edited critical edition of *Salwat al-ʿarifīn wa-uns al-mushtāqīn* (The Comfort of Those Knowing God and the Intimacy of Those Longing for God) by Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī (d. ca. 470/1077) is a welcome addition to the growing body of early Sufi literature presently available. Abū Khalaf is primarily remembered as a Shāfiʿī legal scholar, but as the present work indicates, he was familiar enough with the Sufi tradition to compose a substantial handbook. His presence in the region of Khurāsān and the city of Nishāpūr is not insignificant. The former places his *Salwat al-ʿarifīn* in line with a number of earlier Sufi works also connected to the region, such as *Kitāb al-Taʿarruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf* by Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhi (d. ca. 380/990) of Bukhārā and *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ fi al-taṣawwuf* by Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) of Ṭūs. The latter location places him alongside prominent Sufi writers of Nishāpūr, such as, specifically, Abū al-Saʿd al-Khargūshī (d. 406 or 407/1015-16), who penned a Sufi handbook entitled *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, the prolific Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), and Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), who authored the famed Sufi handbook *al-Risāla*.

This 700-page edition of *Salwat al-ʿarifīn*, however, is only the most recent publication to bring scholarly attention to overlooked or understudied mystical texts. In 2009 and 2010, the same editors, Böwering and Orfali, published with Dar el-Machreq two collections of short works by al-Sulamī, *Rasāʾil ṣūfiyya* and *Masāʾil wa-taʾwīlāt ṣūfiyya* respectively. In 2011, Hassan Ansari and Sabine Schmidtke provided a preliminary study of a previously unexamined Vatican manuscript containing al-Khargūshī’s *Kitāb al-Lawāmiʿ*. Then, in 2012, Orfali published with Nada Saab an Arabic edition of a Sufi treatise entitled *Sufism, Black and White: A Critical Edition of Kitāb al-Bayāḍ wa-l-Sawād by Abū l-Ḥasan al-Sirjānī* (d. ca. 470/1077) (Brill). Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī’s handbook joins a widening array of sources available for a deeper understanding, and possibly a critical reevaluation, of the formative period of Sufism in the region.

Abū Khalaf was born into the Iranian Salmī family of Ṭabaristān; as a result of his legal affiliation, his life is preserved in the major Shāfiʿī biographical dictionaries of later centuries, such as compiled by Ibn al-Ṣalāh al-Shahrazūrī (d. 643/1245), al-Subkī (d. 771/1369), and al-Asnawī (d. 772/1370), a point duly noted by the editors. That Abū Khalaf was a Shāfiʿī is all the more noteworthy because his handbook on Sufism provides another important example of the Shāfiʿī alignment with the developing Sufi tradition in the city. The previously mentioned Nishāpūri Sufi authors, al-Khargūshī, al-Sulamī, and al-Qushayrī, were Shāfiʿī as well. Although his Sufi colleagues figure prominently in the extant biographical dictionaries of his time, Abū Khalaf does not, despite his legal affiliation—he has no entry in the surviving portion of *al-Mukhtaṣar min Kitāb al-Siyāq li-tārīkh Naysābūr* by al-Fārisī (d. 529/1134) or in its summary *al-Muntakhab min al-Siyāq* by al-Ṣārīfīnī (d. 641/1243). The exclusion of a scholar who ought to have been of great interest to al-Fārisī and al-Ṣārīfīnī, meaning a scholar of Shāfiʿī and Sufi inclinations, is peculiar. The apparent silence over Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī is all the more extraordinary since Abū ʿAlī al-Manīʿī (d. 463/1071), the patron for whom *Salwat al-ʿarifīn* was composed, is mentioned in both books (p. 10). Compounding the puzzle further, the editors note the author’s complete absence from the Sufi literature as well.

There are a number of possible reasons for Abū Khalaf's obscure status in the literature. The work itself may have been eclipsed by al-Qushayrī's more popular *al-Risāla* (pp. 7–8), which was completed in 438/1046, while *Salwat al-ʿarīfīn* was completed more than two decades later in 459/1067. Alternatively, the relative silence may have some connection with the divergent legal positions taken up by Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī (pp. 5–7) or perhaps with his theological positions. Some indication of this last possibility might be interpreted from the editors' note that "Abū Surayj Ismāʿīl b. Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan al-Shāshī al-Naqqād (d. before 470/1077), a student of Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī's, completed a gloss (*taʿlīq*) to his teacher's work on the principles of Islamic law (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) at Ghazna in 434/1042-3, but based his gloss on the principles of Islamic theology (*uṣūl al-dīn*) on the work of another author" (pp. 4–5). It is unclear why Abū Khalaf's student in law would turn to another scholar for theology—perhaps Abū Khalaf held divergent or unpopular views or was not vocal enough in his theological positions during a period of heated theological contestation. The question, however, draws attention to his theological identity, a point of special concern since Nīshāpūr was not only a significant site for the partnership of Shāfiʿism with Sufism, but with Ashʿarism as well. Mention of Abū Khalaf's theological affiliation is made late in the introduction (p. 24), but it is an aspect worth further exploration. As the editors note, the sole Ashʿarī theologian quoted in *Salwat al-ʿarīfīn* is Abū Iṣḥāq al-Isfarāyīnī (d. 418/1027). Nevertheless, a deeper theological analysis of contentious topics covered in the handbook, such as miracles (*muʿjizāt* and *karamāt*), might shed further light on Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī's place and identity in the socio-political matrix of Nīshāpūr.

The present edition is based on a single manuscript in Cairo, which was the only copy available to the editors. Regrettably, a second possible manuscript in Iraq was unavailable for examination (p. 23). Nevertheless, the editors were able to reference two manuscripts of an abridgement of *Salwāt al-ʿarīfīn* entitled *Khalwat al-ʿakīfīn* (The Solitude of Those Living in Seclusion) in preparing the present edition.

As the editors note, the text relies heavily on al-Qushayrī's *Risāla*, al-Khargūshī's *Tahadhīb al-asrār*, al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*, al-Kalābādhi's *Kitāb al-Taʿarruf*, and a number of works by al-Sulamī. As a consequence it is strikingly similar to these texts with respect to arrangement, terminology, and content, especially *al-Risāla*. Like other Sufi handbooks, *Salwat al-ʿarīfīn* begins with expositions on the meaning and characteristics of *taṣawwuf* and then furnishes Sufi perspectives on theology (*tawḥīd*) before attending to key terms, principles, and issues relevant to the Sufi system of thought and practice. The first seventy-one chapters of the book, which comprise the majority of the text, treat specific concepts, terms, or sets of related terms. Near the end of this terminological treatment, the author turns to Sufi theological issues such as *walāya*, *karāmā*, *sharīʿa*, and *ḥaqīqa*. The substantially longer seventy-second chapter that concludes the text spans nearly a hundred edited pages and presents a biographical dictionary of Sufi personalities much like those produced by al-Qushayrī, al-Sulamī, and Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038). While much of the material is unoriginal in that it is taken from earlier Sufi works, the text should not be summarily dismissed. The selection and arrangement of that material, as well as its omissions, reflect Abū Khalaf's particular vision of Sufism, providing researchers with yet another distinctive perspective to investigate and compare. In sum, the present edition provides present-day scholars with another invaluable window into the historical formation of the Sufi tradition and will be a required point of reference for future studies in the field.