La vie merveilleuse de Dhû-l-Nûn l'Egyptien

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Book Review


The images that come to mind when one speaks of “hagiography” or “lives of the saints” say a great deal about the particular religious history that has helped shape our own language and culture. So it should not be surprising if the English language, even in scholarly discourse, still lacks so many of the basic distinctions that would be needed to do justice to a religion whose learned disciplines are almost entirely grounded in the “hagiographic” records of hadîth and Sîra, and whose extraordinarily diverse popular manifestations have always been rooted in the living examples (and subsequent veneration) of thousands of awliyâʾ, or “Friends of God”. Recent scholarship has only begun to reveal the fundamental role of the multi-faceted conceptions of sainthood (walâya) in Ibn ʿArabî’s own understanding of Islam – and the profound relevance of those perspectives for illuminating the ongoing relations between the learned and “popular” forms of Islam. Now Prof. Deladrière’s discovery and translation of Ibn ʿArabî’s lengthy treatment of this famous early Muslim saint (ca. 155/771–246/861) provides a remarkable concrete illustration of spiritual phenomena and teachings that are discussed – often in more abstract theological terms – throughout his immense “Meccan Revelations” (al-Futûhât al-Makkiya). (This particular book was written after the Futûhât, relatively late in Ibn ʿArabî’s life, which may account for the rarity of manuscripts and its absence from the author’s own Fihrist and subsequent bio-bibliographical studies.)

Ibn ʿArabî’s explanation of his own aims in composing this work (in the Prologue, pp. 47–53) is highly reminiscent of the autobiographical hagiographic materials familiar to many readers from the Sufis of Andalusia (transl. R. Austin). Like the anecdotes of Ibn ʿArabî’s own masters and companions in the Rûh al-Quds and al-Durrat al-Fâkhira, these stories, poems, prayers and concise sayings
of Dhû-l-Nûn are brought together here in order to awaken and intensify his readers’ own spiritual desire (himma) to emulate these examples of the spiritual life, and to avoid the recurrent dangers that they also so clearly highlight. But although these sayings are all handed down from earlier disciples and hagiographic collections – usually, Ibn ‘Arabi, insists, by direct oral transmission (as with hadîth of the Prophet) – the cumulative effect of this personal collection is radically different from a literary “anthology” or more historical account. In fact, careful readers should have a vivid sense of actually participating in a majîls, of watching Ibn ‘Arabi’s own method of oral spiritual teaching as he repeatedly interjects his own explanations and personal anecdotes, explaining or corroborating the actual relevance of Dhû-l-Nûn’s words in regard to both doctrine and practice.

The book itself – following Prof. Deladrière’s thorough and indispensable Introduction (pp. 11-45) – is divided into four main sections. Part I outlines the few known historical “facts” about Dhû-l-Nûn’s life (including his early training in hadîth and later persecution in Egypt and brief imprisonment by the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil at the end of his life), and gives a representative sampling of his teachings, his prayers and special spiritual accomplishments (karamât). Part II is an extremely dense compilation of the wali’s sayings and aphorisms regarding some sixty different spiritual virtues and related problems of discipline and practice, constituting an elaborate “spiritual psychology”. (Prof. Deladrière’s corresponding “Index de la spiritualité”, pp. 386-91, includes hundreds of Arabic technical terms drawn from the Qur’an, hadîth and early Sufi tradition.) Part III is divided between Dhû-l-Nûn’s poetic allusions to members or ranks of the ever-present “spiritual hierarchy” of the awliyâ – a central concern of Ibn ‘Arabi throughout the Futûhât – and some forty edifying tales of Dhû-l-Nûn’s own dramatic encounters with a fascinating array of ascetics, solitary worshippers, pilgrims and “fools of God” who variously teach, inspire or caution him during the years of his own spiritual wanderings (siyâha) in a quest that extended from the Maghreb to Syria, Yemen and perhaps even Khorasan. Finally, Part IV includes many further illustrations of each of these genres of Sufi writing, drawn from an earlier hagiographic compilation by Ibn Bâkûya. These dramatic descriptions of Dhû-l-Nûn’s spiritual encounters are no doubt the most interesting and approachable genre for non-specialist readers, and it is especially striking that in many of these stories (at least 18) the famous protagonist is depicted as being instructed by women saints and
ascetics from virtually all parts of that early Islamic world, including the woman saint (waliya) who is specifically cited as his “master”, the famous Fâtima of Nishapur (also known for her connections with the early Persian mystic, Abû Yazîd al-Bastâmî).

Apart from these very accessible stories, some of them familiar from the anecdotes of Dhû-l-Ñûn continually retold by later Sufi writers, the particular rhetorical form of Arabic “rhymed prose” (saj') in which the rest of his prayers and teachings are usually cast presents almost insuperable obstacles for any translator into an Indo-European language. (One is reminded of the remarkable absence of any readable Western translation of the Najh al-Balâgha, the even more famous and influential collected sayings of 'Ali ibn Abî Tâlib, a compilation which resembles the form and content of these teachings of Dhû-l-Ñûn in so many fundamental respects.) Prof. Deladrière is to be commended for his truly remarkable efforts to transmute these masterpieces of that peculiar Arabic form into comprehensible French: Dhû-l-Ñûn’s meanings here are almost always clear, even if the aesthetic appeal of the underlying Arabic (its rhyme, concision, allusiveness, mnemonic power, and the like) is inevitably lost in translation. At the very least every reader, even those encountering Dhû-l-Ñûn for the first time, will come away with a strong sense of this saint’s distinctive “spiritual personality”, with its especially marked ascetic, other-worldly tendencies.

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Apart from successfully meeting the challenge of translation, Prof. Deladrière has also undertaken a painstaking effort to uncover the relevant historical background and to compare the original and intermediary sources for these teachings of Dhû-l-Ñûn with parallel or later Islamic uses of the same materials (e.g., by Attâr, Suyûtî, etc.) – including Ibn ʿArabi’s use of them in other works, especially the Futûhât (where the “wise counsels” in his concluding chapter 560 include dozens of Dhû-l-Ñûn’s sayings also recorded here) and his as yet untranslated Muhâdarât al-Abrâr. These demanding scholarly explorations – which are equally evident in Prof. Deladrière’s Introduction, lengthy notes and appendices (pp. 349–91), and his alternative versions of many stories and sayings – should be a great help both to specialized students of Ibn ʿArabi and to cultural and social historians of the Islamic world during the centuries between Dhû-l-Ñûn and the Shaykh al-Akbar. Simply comparing these 300 pages of translations (by no means exhaustive of the earlier surviv-
ing sources) with the few paragraphs on Dhû-l-Nûn in any of the major Islamic encyclopedias and reference works on Sufism should suggest the magnitude of investigations as yet hardly begun. Similarly extensive bodies of hagiographic material exist for other key formative figures in what later came to be "Sufi" tradition (as we know from the pioneering studies of Hallâj, Muhâsibî, and Sahl al-Tustarî), but the detailed comparative study of the origins and literary transformations of that vast material has scarcely begun.

The period of Dhû-l-Nûn's own long life was one in which virtually all the "religious sciences" and institutional forms of teaching and guidance that came to typify later Islamic religious culture suddenly seem to spring up — judging by the surviving literary and historical evidence — in remarkably differentiated and sophisticated form. In this case, the contrast between Dhû-l-Nûn's early studies of hadîth (with Mâlik and others) and his subsequent critical attitude toward the worldly corruption of hadîth scholars and legalists (and his resulting imprisonment) is symptomatic of wider, historically decisive transformations. And the complex development of his technical terminology for "spiritual phenomenology", excluding the transmutation of secular Arabic love poetry, proverbs and storytelling for spiritual purposes, is an even more important illustration of these formative developments of Islamic tradition. Prof. Deladrière's exploration of the many earlier sources for these sayings and stories should help Islamic historians to begin to work out to what degree those critical developments were actually due to a "historical" Dhû-l-Nûn (and hence no doubt to earlier, anonymous figures) and how much they represent the gradual, cumulative creation of later mystical and literary traditions. But for Ibn 'Arabi and later Muslim readers, of course, the only Dhû-l-Nûn who mattered is the "friend of God" (wâli Allâh) whose life and teachings are so vividly and copiously revealed in this book.

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