Review of Sufi hermeneutics: the Qur'an commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, by Annabel Keeler

Author: James Winston Morris

Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2510

This work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries.

Published in Journal of the American Oriental Society, vol. 130, no. 4, pp. 644-646, 2010

These materials are made available for use in research, teaching and private study, pursuant to U.S. Copyright Law. The user must assume full responsibility for any use of the materials, including but not limited to, infringement of copyright and publication rights of reproduced materials. Any materials used for academic research or otherwise should be fully credited with the source. The publisher or original authors may retain copyright to the materials.

The starting point of this dense and richly rewarding study is the immense early Persian Qurʾan commentary begun by al-Maybudī in 520/1126, whose still widely popular ten-volume published version is commonly attributed in Iran to the famous earlier Khurāsānī Sufi, ʿAbd Allāh al-Anṣārī (d. 1088)—the inspirational saintly figure whose distinctive spiritual teachings are frequently quoted throughout Maybudī’s work. Maybudī’s only fully surviving book is, like most Qurʾan commentaries, a masterful, yet highly personalized compendium of earlier Qurʾanic commentaries and translations. More importantly, as the main title of this study suggests, Maybudī’s voluminous work also constitutes a richly complex and lastingly influential creative literary reworking of a diverse range of antecedent “Sufi” literary traditions—especially the abundant hagiographies and classical manuals on spiritual practice, teaching, apologetics, and homiletics—in both Arabic and early New Persian from the two preceding centuries.

In many respects, Maybudī’s compendium represents the culminating Persian synthesis and most visible literary landmark of what would eventually turn out to be key developments in the much wider shaping of later Islamic (not just Persian-language or “Sufi”) religious tradition. Reflecting that complex historical situation, the focus of Keeler’s analysis throughout this magisterial study is always twofold. On the one hand, she provides an abundantly illustrated account of characteristic aspects of Maybudī’s distinctive rhetoric and literary style, hermeneutics, and his central spiritual themes and teachings. Simultaneously, each step of that dense “doctrinal” and rhetorical exposition of Maybudī’s own writing is carefully interwoven with a constantly ongoing diachronic analysis of his literary and saintly predecessors and inspirations (and also, but in less detail, his more famous contemporaries and successors) from the converging domains of Qurʾan commentary, hagiography, sectarian polemics, uṣūl, spiritual practice, Persian literature, and the gradual institutionalization of nascent “Sufism.” In that respect, Keeler’s study offers such a detailed window into several decades of related scholarly research in Iran and the West (with a special emphasis on the contributions of G. Böwering, who provided the foreword to this volume, and N. Pourjavady) that it often reads as a kind of focused encyclopedia or scholarly Handbuch on each of those multiple traditions—a feature visibly reflected in its almost 150 accompanying pages of intricate footnotes, bibliography, and indices.

While the few specialists in each of those intertwined historical fields are already relatively familiar with Maybudī and Anṣārī, it is fortunate that a far wider international circle of readers interested in Islamic thought and spirituality are much more likely to have read translations and related studies of such contemporary or slightly later Persian authors as Āḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. ca. 1126), Aʿyn al-Qudāt al-Hamadhānī (d. 1131), Rūzbihān al-Baqlī (d. 1209), or the even more celebrated line of Persian spiritual poets linking Sanāʾī (d. 1131), ʿAtṭār (d. 1220), Rūmī (d. 1273), Saʿdī (d. 1292), ʿIrāqī (d. 1289), Hāfiz (d. 1389), and Jāmī (d. 1492). For the most fascinating feature of Maybudī’s “commentary,” as of Keeler’s thorough summary of its key features, is the fact that even the uninformed reader of any one of those more famous (and widely translated) later poets and prose writers who encounters this volume will immediately recognize virtually all the typical features of the vast domain of literary-interpretive techniques, symbolic fields, spiritual practices, and intellectual theories (cosmology, metaphysics, hagiology, and so on) that are largely taken for granted by those classical Persian authors and apparently assumed to be familiar to their original audiences. Indeed, the same constantly repeated experience of immediate recognition of familiar religious and spiritual themes is likely to be shared by readers from those much wider regions of the contemporary Muslim world where the historical transmission and assimilation of Islam in general were largely effected through creative adaptations of originally Persianate writers, artists, and social and cultural institutions.

Thus, the first unifying dimension of Maybudī’s commentary that Keeler analyzes in detail (chapters 2–3) is his characteristic focus on the communication of the key features of the “spiritual hermeneutics” of the Qurʾan in light of each reader’s necessarily personal, lifelong experience of inspiration, illumination, and interactive integration of those insights with the corresponding unique “Signs” of their own
life and spiritual challenges and discoveries—together with a host of propaedeutic and precautionary teachings likewise assembled from related spiritual disciplines and fields of Islamic learning. The following chapters (4–7), which are the scholarly heart of this entire work, highlight Maybudī’s distinctive integration and rhetorical expression of virtually all the characteristic spiritual themes (metaphysical, theological, practical, pedagogical, and prophetological/hagiographic) of earlier Sufi authors and teachers within the pervasive context of divine and human “Love” (‘ishq). This comprehensive literary, symbolic, and rhetorical complex centered on God as Love—so omnipresent in the work of most of the later Persian classical authors already mentioned—has traditionally been portrayed as the special focus and achievement of Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, especially in his Savānīh. But as Keeler points out, in reference to the historical research of a number of recent Iranian scholars, the pervasiveness and complex interweaving of that distinctive focus throughout Maybudī’s work—and quite possibly in the underlying Persian teachings of Anšārī himself—opens up profound and as yet unresolved questions about the wider, largely undocumented creative popular movements of Persianate preaching, teaching, practice (especially in greater Khurāsān) which may have long preceded their more enduringly visible expression and complex “doctrinal” synthesis in Maybudī’s commentary. Finally, both the earlier rhetorical and pedagogical dimensions of Keeler’s analysis are beautifully woven together in three concluding chapters (8–10) that outline in detail the intricate archetypal typologies of spiritual growth and development elaborated in Maybudī’s treatment of the widely scattered Qur’anic passages concerning Abraham, Moses, and Joseph. Because this last section is necessarily embedded in particular portions of Maybudī’s exposition, these final chapters bring most readers of this study as close as they are able to come, in this volume, to some more living sense of the evocative and poetic “musical” qualities of the original Persian text.

For students of Islamic religion and culture, at any level, Keeler’s study provides an indispensable, thoroughly documented background for four key interrelated historical developments that were to become inseparable from the subsequent creative unfolding of post-Mongol Islam as a truly world religion—although the primary focus of this volume on strictly literary and philological dimensions of that process means that readers must fill in the necessary hypotheses about the underlying wider popular dimensions of this process of religious acculturation and transformation, beyond the tiny writing circle of urban literati. These four ultimately world-historical developments include the complexly interactive and creative “Persianization” of earlier Arabic learned disciplines and practical spiritual disciplines, which eventually resulted, over only a few centuries, in the near-universal popular assimilation of a related complex of religious and spiritual ideas, stories, spiritual exemplars, and operative understandings of Islamic heritage taken for granted by later classical authors. Intricately involved in both those developments, throughout this period, was a mysterious process of creative experimentation and gradual establishment of new popular (as well as more specialized) socio-religious institutions and spiritual paths, eventually resulting—to take only one almost universally visible example—in the omnipresence of the complex of rituals, spiritual practices, hagiological assumptions, affiliations, experiences, and social institutions surrounding the practice of ziyāra (“visitation”). And lastly, as already mentioned, there is in Persian writing the remarkably sudden emergence and later predominance of the characteristic ornate rhetorical mix of prose and poetry, with its equally characteristic personalized focus on the religion and spirituality of Love and on ethico-spiritual exposition through richly evocative storytelling. All four of these wider processes were, of course, thoroughly and creatively repeated, in new local cultures, vernacular languages, and locally adapted institutions, throughout many regions of the rapidly expanding Islamic world throughout the post-Mongol era—just as we can see happening so visibly on a global scale today.

Finally, given the historical importance (and contemporary readability and popularity) of Maybudī’s original work, and the scholarly depth and comprehensiveness of Keeler’s far-reaching study, one cannot but note the poignant irony—still unfortunately all too common in Islamic scholarship—that the actual subject of this study is still inaccessible beyond its original Persian. This pioneering study appears as vol. 3 in the rapidly expanding, ambitious, and admirably ecumenical “Qur’ānic Studies Series” sponsored by the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. The provision of a full companion volume of carefully selected representative passages translated from Maybudī, whether at the hand
of Annabel Keeler or of other collaborators, would vastly extend the readership and relevance of this impressively authoritative scholarly reference work, both in classrooms and among that younger generation of Muslims everywhere whose new educational and cultural circumstances are increasingly remote from the once-prevalent spiritual approaches and interpretive assumptions so beautifully illustrated throughout Maybudū’s work, as well as the more celebrated masterpieces of his heirs in Persian and many other classical Islamicate literary traditions.

James W. Morris
Boston College


In Ottoman historiography the seventeenth century has often been represented merely as a transitional period between the “classical” sixteenth century and the period of so-called decline beginning conventionally in the eighteenth century. As such the century has lacked an independent narrative of its own. All the more remarkable, then, that we have Baer’s book put front and center the drama of Ottoman politics, organized around the career of Mehmed IV (r. 1648–87).

The central concept, as the title indicates, is the process of religious conversion, but with two important qualifications. First, religious conversion is considered from only one perspective, that of the mediator of conversion, not that of the converted person. As such, the study focuses on the mindset and strategy of the converters, in this case members of the Ottoman imperial family and their retinue, as agents of religious transformation. This inter-religious conversion is closely linked with, and in this story preceded by, the intra-religious conversion of Muslims themselves, namely, the intensification of their own piety. Second, Baer broadens the scope of religious conversion to include not only the process by which the imperial household facilitated the conversion of non-Muslim persons, who in the Arabic phrase were “honored by the glory of Islam,” but also the ways in which they transformed non-Muslim space (churches, residential quarters, etc.) into Muslim space.

The book is divided into eleven chapters, with a separate introduction, conclusion, and postscript. While the chapters follow a roughly chronological order, there is a fair amount of overlap in the treatment of events, personalities, arguments, and themes. Chapters one and two set the stage by establishing the conditions of crisis to which the intra-religious conversion, which Baer calls the “conversion of self,” was a natural response. The first chapter, entitled “Inauspicious Enthronement,” describes in vivid terms the tumultuous accession of Mehmed IV, and the second chapter, entitled “A Decade of Crisis,” narrates the first decade of Mehmed’s rule, during which the empire was confronted with a set of interrelated challenges: the recurring and violent power struggles between palace factions, growing financial deficits, a continuing pattern of rebellion in the provinces, and a prolonged and debilitating war with Venice. In these chapters as with others, Baer is concerned less with establishing an objective reality of crisis than with its perception, as he draws primarily on the narrative accounts of elite observers, who, as he writes, draw a direct link between the turbulence they witness and the erosion of their social and political status.

Though not organized as a formal division in the book, chapters three through six make up a natural grouping, as they trace the various processes of conversion as defined by the author, but at an early stage in the reign of Mehmed IV. Chapter three concisely traces the history of the Muslim reformist Kadızadeli movement until the 1650s, drawing attention to historiographical debates over the relative weight of social versus religious factors in the movement’s development. The Kadızadelis would produce Vani Mehmed Efendi, the religious scholar who played a central role in the turn of the imperial household to piety. Chapter four, entitled “Islamizing Istanbul,” shifts to the geographical dimension by charting the inter-religious conversion of non-Muslim to Muslim space after the Great Fire of 1660. The destruction by fire of many non-Muslim homes, businesses, and places of worship created an