Review of Islamic mysticism contested: Thirteen centuries of controversies and polemics, ed. F. de Jong and B. Radtke

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The remarkable depth and breadth of this volume are such that it is likely to become a classical reference in Islamic Studies for decades to come. The thirty-five essays it contains are the proceedings of a 1995 conference at Utrecht on ‘Sufism and its Opponents’—a considerably more accurate description than the present title, since (as J. Van Ess ironically points out in his opening address), neither mysticism nor spirituality is the subject of any of these studies! Instead, the vast majority of these highly specialized contributions, each focused on a specific cultural region and/or historical period, examined the shifting forms of political and rhetorical opposition to specific institutionalized Sufi ‘orders’ or associated local forms of popular Islamic religious and devotional life over the past eight centuries, with primary emphasis (twenty contributors alone) on polemics reflecting local responses to the familiar challenges of imperialism, Marxist rule and various types of ‘reform’ within the past three centuries. Only four fascinating studies (each by leading authorities) touch on earlier Hanbalî, Muctazili, Zaydi and Imamî attitudes toward the charismatic or ascetic individuals of the formative, ‘classical’ period in Iraq and Iran, prior to the thirteenth century and the subsequently recurrent figures of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Arabî and ‘Abd al-Wahhab.

The contributions assembled here are of a uniformly high level of scholarship, in many cases representing the fruits of a life's work of specialized historical study. Accordingly, fellow specialists will delight in the abundance of new references to related sources and studies on often unfamiliar regions of the Islamic world. However, uninitiated readers without a high level of related academic background and interest will probably find this heavy going, since the usual focus of each essay on localized polemics and struggles for power and public 'authority' means that the actual wider forms of religious and devotional life and practice in question—as well as many of the deeper currents of political, social and cultural change underlying those fragmentary polemics—are normally silently assumed by both the original Muslim authors and their specialized students here, with their readers being left to supply those indispensable (and often more interesting) wider contexts. Thus the practical outcome and profound challenges involved in situating each case-study may be compared, for example, to our attempting to reconstruct something of the actual social and cultural realities of recent American religious life—from the perspective of another culture substantially distant in time and space—solely through the analysis of a handful of the surviving polemics and controversies (both learned and popular) between the hundreds of shifting Protestant...
denominations (to mention only a single analogous element) partly underlying those larger realities.

By far the most important contribution of this volume for Islamic Studies (within the wider field of religious studies) is the broader and more reliable comparative perspective provided by the organizers' careful inclusion of in-depth studies, at very different periods, of what were too long considered ‘peripheral’ and certainly unfairly neglected regions of the wider Islamic world. Indeed, the vast majority of these studies deal precisely with such previously neglected areas: five on China and neighbouring Central Asia; four on Indonesia and Malaysia; five on sub-Saharan Africa and the Sudan; and four from pre-partition India. The comparison and contrast of so many detailed case-studies within the same cultural region are a remarkable help in more accurately contextualizing and often questioning familiar stereotypes about broader developments in the 'Islamic World', such as the spread of ‘Wahhābī’ ideas and norms, or the development of diverse forms of ‘Neo-Sūfism’ (B. Radtke's neologism here) in response to such criticisms of ‘innovation’. Equally important for the student of Islam are the longer-term, diachronic studies of the constantly shifting sociology of religious authority within a given region (here including al-Andalus, Zaydi Yemen, Ottoman Algeria, Eastern Turkistan and the earlier Ottoman empire), or of the ongoing literary life of recurrent polemic themes (in M. Chodkiewicz's magisterial discussion of 'le procès posthume d’Ibn ‘Arabi').

In short, despite the fragmenting effects of recent area studies and nationalistic emphases, disciplinary specializations and the public clamour of contemporary religious polemics, the editors and learned contributors to this volume have brought together a remarkably rich, useful and thought-provoking comparative 'sourcebook' which will be indispensable for interested students of Islamic Studies in all its equally indispensable historical and contemporary dimensions.

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