

Book Reviews

THE BOOK OF THE BOOK.

By *Idries Shah*.

(Octagon Press, 15s.).

Review by R.N.J.A.

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The Book of the Book, which purports to be an object lesson in the problem of the container and the content, consists of some fifteen pages of print bound together with over 250 blank pages. The first pages of the book consist of nine episodes of the story of a book left to his disciples by "a wise man". After his death the disciples opened the book and found that it contained only one sentence: "When you realize the difference between the container and the content, you will have knowledge". Down the centuries many attempts were made to fathom the meaning of these words as also the mystery of the book itself. Most who tried failed, but some succeeded. These efforts produced a multitude of commentaries on the subject which were eventually bound into a volume of 200 pages. This story was, apparently, transmitted to us by a certain Ahmad Yasavi.

There is obviously little to say concerning this publication in itself, since, despite its claim to contain a superior but elusive wisdom, it is little more than a publisher's gimmick. The book and its claim however do, in a very interesting way, epitomize the author's writings on Sufism in general, and encourage us, by its very emptiness, to say one or two things about Idries Shah's contributions to the study of Sufism and the Sufis.

His many works have received wide acclaim in the mass media and he himself has been called a great authority on Sufism and even a "Grand Shaikh of Islam", which title is frequently hereditary. A large measure of the popularity and success of his books must be attributed to their "attractive writing", "wide range", "bold insights" and "fascinating revelations" which, while undoubtedly characteristics beloved in an age of un-wisdom, are hardly the most appropriate for writings which claim to deal seriously with the doctrines and practices of Sufism.

In making the observations which follow we take our cue almost entirely from a sentence in the notice on the author on the first page of the book here under review. It reads, "In a dozen widely acclaimed books, he has reclaimed Sufi thought from irrelevant esotericist and orientalist accretions, revealing it as a fascinating instrument for the analysis and development of human thought".

To the Muslim who is privileged enough to be part of Sufism as also to the non-Muslim who has sufficiently and seriously studied the subject, the pointlessness of the claim and the meaninglessness of its implications will be clear enough. In the first place

Sufism is not a system of "thought", the product of individual or collective mental discursions ready to be pruned, adapted or purified, but, in the very strictest sense, a spiritual way rooted firmly in the soil of a divine revelation, supported and inspired by the supra-rational, spiritual experience of men schooled in that revelation and protected by the initiatic nature of its transmission. As such there can be no question of "reclaiming" it from its own heritage, but only of preserving it from the attentions of those who seek to drag it from its providential context into the chaos of relativity which is "modern thought". It is precisely this attempt to reduce Sufism from a spiritual doctrine and practice, focused entirely on God, to a system of "fascinating" mental and psychic acrobatics, which characterizes so much of Idries Shah's writing on the subject. When one reads what he has to say on Sufism, one might be excused for thinking that it was only tenuously connected to faith in God and for supposing rather that it was a vaguely mystical and somewhat magical system of oriental pelmanism. Indeed that accent on human self-sufficiency and self-development so much a mark of magic, as also of mystical and yogic cults divorced from their proper spiritual contexts, is prominent in all his writings.

It is difficult to know what to make of the phrase "from irrelevant esotericist and orientalist accretions". If it means that he has stripped Sufism of its superficial popular hocus pocus and external oriental trappings, this is precisely what he has not done, since much of the success of his many writings derives in large part from their deliberately mysterious and "oriental" coloring. If however it means that he has sought to divorce it from the truly esoteric and to play down its specifically Islamic nature, then he may be said to have succeeded only too well. If Sufism is not that inner and esoteric aspect of Islam which has at all times been the spring from which Islam as a whole has drawn the draught of continuing life, it is nothing at all. It is surely a truism to say that all the deepest experiences and insights of a spiritual and religious nature transcend, in a certain sense, the formal limits of exoteric religion. One can understand, however, that in order to present Sufism in a readily assimilable form to an age so deeply alienated from things spiritual, it is necessary to avoid matters now barely comprehensible, even if it means ignoring its most essential ingredient.

Also, if Sufism is not rooted in and permeated by the Qur'an and the Tradition of the Prophet Muhammad it is nothing at all. Yet this is another *sine qua non* of Sufism which Idries Shah tends to relegate to a very secondary place. In its place he makes much of his theory that the Sufism peculiar to Islam is but a particular manifestation of a great and until recently secret doctrinal system which runs like an invisible thread through all the great religions and cults familiar to Western man. While it is indisputable that man's highest spiritual experience is universal, it is also incontestable that all the greatest saints and mystics have identified themselves firmly with their own particular religious traditions. It is therefore not surprising to discover that no person would be admitted to a Sufi order unless he were a believing and practicing Muslim and that, for the Sufi, from whatever land or origin, Islam by itself provides in its doctrinal and religious supports all that is necessary to follow the Way of the Sufi.

Idries Shah has, by his writings, at once helped and hindered Sufism. He has helped it in so far as many will be prompted by him to discover what Sufism really is, but hindered it in so far as he has sown in less enquiring minds a flippant half truth concerning that to

which the Sufi aspires.