

Book Reviews

LETTERS OF A SUFI MASTER,

The Shaikh al-'Arabi ad-Darqāwī

(Perennial Books. 45p).

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This precious translation of selections from the letters of Shaikh ad-Darqāwī, the founder of a major branch of the Shādhiliyyah Order in North Africa in the 13th/19th century, belongs to a class of Sufi literature that has not as yet received enough attention outside of the Islamic world. Most Sufi treatises deal with doctrine—metaphysical, cosmological as well as psychological—or with practical instructions concerning the cultivation of spiritual virtues, or with the lives of Sufi saints and the history of the Orders that have preceded the author in question. They also of course include poetry in which all these elements as well as others are to be found ornamented through the poetic genius with which so many Sufis have been gifted.

Samples of these four categories can be found in translations made into Western languages of such writings as the *Fusūs al-hikam* of Ibn 'Arabi, the *Kashf al-mahjūb* of Hujmīrī, the *Nafahāt al-uns* of Jāmī and the *Mathnavī* of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī.

The serious students of Sufism have been already put in debt by Titus Burckhardt for his lucid translation of the *Fusūs* and of selections from *al-Insān al-kāmil* of 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī which also belongs to the category of doctrinal works of Sufism. And now they must be even more grateful for his having turned to this much lesser known category of Sufi writings consisting of letters, addresses and table-talks of Sufi masters, an excellent example of which is found in these letters of Shaikh ad-Darqawī.

The personal and less formal comments of Sufi masters contained in such types of writings—and exemplified in the few works of this kind that are known to the West such as the *Discourses (Fīhi mā fīhi)* of Rūmī, *The Secrets of Unity (Asrār al-tawhīd)* of Abū Sa'īd Abī'l-Khayr, and the letters of Ibn 'Abbād of Rondā--represent an aspect of the teachings of Sufism that is complementary to what is contained in expositions of more formal Sufi treatises. These less formal writings deal with concrete problems and questions of the spiritual life and are often answers to specific questions posed by disciples. Hence they represent a precious treasury of instructions that are of value particularly to those who aspire to walk upon the path of realization and whose interest in Sufism and the spiritual life in general is more practical than theoretical.

The *Letters* of Shaikh ad-Darqāwi are a particularly forward and direct example of this operative aspect of Sufi instruction and reveal the sapiental and directly gnostic nature of their author's approach. Each letter is a precious gem of wisdom, an indispensable key to open certain doors which stand before every traveler upon the Path. Almost all the letters concern the method and the operative aspects of the Way based on the central techniques of invocation or *dikhr*. In this domain they must be considered among the most direct instructions given on Sufic method to be found in all Sufi literature where usually masters have preferred to refer to the actual spiritual techniques mostly through allusion. Occasionally, however, as in the letter on page 16, fundamental facets of Sufi doctrine are also discussed.

In making available these letters in English Titus Burckhardt has rendered a service to those seeking spiritual instruction. He has also enriched Sufi literature in Western languages and made available one more document of extraordinary power and beauty belonging to the recent past, a period which the work of Orientalists had ignored until very recently, relegating the living tradition of Sufism to the medieval period after which it was supposed to have decayed and disappeared. To discover that a century and a half ago, there lived a man of such quality as the author of these letters, a man who established a branch of the Shādhiliyyah Order which made possible the flowering of the great Algerian saint Shaikh al-'Alawī during this century, is to gain a completely different vision of the Tradition of Sufism than what has been taught in the West until now. The informative introduction of Martin Lings helps the reader to gain this more authentic vision of the Tradition of Sufism and to make better known the spread of the Shādhiliyyah Order during the past two centuries.

The quality of the translation is high and helpful footnotes, some of which contain important affirmations, add much to its value. The selection thus presented whets the appetite of the reader for more and one hopes that Titus Burckhardt will soon give us other selections of these beautiful letters and other gems of Sufi literature which remain to be unearthed. With his remarkable ability to reach the essential and with a mind that is transparent before the metaphysical truth, he is qualified more than any other translator to carry out this laudable and at the same time necessary task of revealing before the contemporary world the perennial values of Sufi writings in translations that are transparent and lucid beyond compare.