

The Shambhala Guide to Sufism

By Carl Ernst, Ph.D. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1997. Pp. 251+xxi. \$15.00, paper.

Reviewed by Erik S. Ohlander

THE PUBLICATION OF this comprehensive, yet very approachable, volume could not have come at a better time. The recent explosion of interest in Sufism in the West, most evidenced in the widespread popularity of classical Sufi poetry such as that of Jalaluddin Rumi, has undoubtedly created an audience for such a study. While the twentieth century has witnessed the publication of a number of excellent surveys and specialized studies on the subject, prohibitive language and assumed knowledge have placed them largely outside the grasp of the educated public. In opposition to this trend, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* displays a clarity and an intellectual rigor that eluci-

dates the many mysteries of the Sufi traditions—taking the reader on a serene journey through the fragrantly spiritual gardens which permeate the Sufi tradition.

Directed toward the nonspecialist, Ernst's book attempts to trace the conceptual and historical boundaries of the Sufi phenomenon. Contextualizing his discussion within the textual framework of Islam, Ernst succinctly explores, in turn, the most prominent themes of the Sufi tradition. He takes the reader on a journey whose ports-of-call include: the sacred sources of Sufism, saints and sainthood, the Names of God, Sufi devotional practice, brotherhoods, and Sufism in the contemporary world. He prefaces this exploration with a very interesting critique of both Western and Islamic attitudes toward Sufism, coming to the conclusion that, historically, both have in varying degrees misrepresented the Sufi phenomenon in light of their own intellectual and religious backgrounds.

The volume also discusses the most ubiquitous phenomena of the Sufi tradition: the twin institutions of sacred poetry and music. Both subjects have aroused considerable discussion in the Islamic and Western world, and as Ernst himself points out, "of all the products of the Sufi tradition, by far the best known and most appreciated is the legacy of Sufi poetry." Conscious of this fact, the book tackles both subjects with sweeping authority, discussing the centrality of figurative language in mystical poetry and the delicate tension which exists between "spiritual exercise" and "aesthetic experience" within Sufi music. Ernst also discusses the mass marketing of recorded music and versions of traditional Sufi poetry within the West, asking how these contemporary manifestations "can be understood in terms of the role of music and dance in earlier Sufi tradition."

Overall, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* is an achievement in synthesis. Ernst's capable handling of an inherently difficult and often misunderstood subject allows for a lucid presentation of the various facets of the Sufi tradition. He achieves this without subverting the aim of the book—namely to provide "a broadly sketched interpretive essay based on themes that provide an overview of the Sufi tradition in varied contexts"—and when coupled with Professor Ernst's careful scholarship and sensitivity for his subject, one is indeed left with a deeper appreciation of the vast and spiritually rich tradition which is Sufism.

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