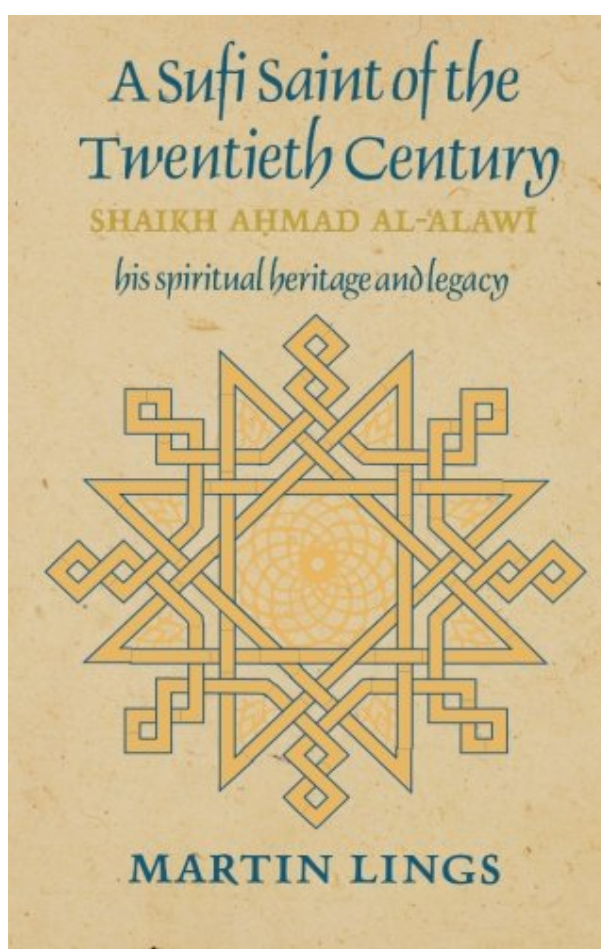


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CENTURY: SHAIKH AHMAD AL-ALAWI
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his spiritual heritage and legacy



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Review

"A masterly study of a man whose sanctity recalled the golden age of medieval mystics." -- A. J. Arberry

"What Martin Lings adds...may serve as a key to a deeper understanding of Islam as a whole." -- Titus Burckhardt

About the Author

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A SUFI SAINT OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: SHAIKH AHMAD AL-ALAWI (GOLDEN PALM SERIES) BY MARTIN LINGS PDF

'Almost a prerequisite for any serious study of Sufism in European languages': this was the verdict of Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his review of the first edition of the book. According to the Journal of Near Eastern Studies, it is 'one of the most thorough and intimately engaging books on Sufism to be produced by a Western scholar'. Certainly there is nothing second-hand about it. The author lets Sufis speak for themselves and, in a series of unusual and absorbing texts mainly translated from Arabic, he gives a vivid picture of life in a North African Sufi order. Against this background stands the unforgettable figure of the Algerian Shaikh who was head of the order from 1909 until his death in 1934. The last few chapters are mainly devoted to his writings, which include some penetrating aphorisms, and which end with a small anthology of his remarkable mystic poems.

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' account flows like a first-hand life composed by a disiple of a ...

By John Abrahams

Made purchase of 'Sufi Saint' by way of Thomas Merton's exceptional praise of the text which he read in the early 60's.

The first chapter, "Seen From The Inside" is an account of a doctor who cared for the Shaikh when ill and remained

a disciple of sorts/ confidante for many years. The inspired beauty of the M.D.' account flows like a first-hand life

composed by a disciple of a Christian Saint. The writing in this opening chapter is exceptional for its power to convey

the holiness and truth of Al-Alawi. Going further along with succeeding chapters may either interest or put off the reader.

If the reader is interested in the minutia of Sufism, here's your treat. If not--like myself--just skip those chapters. Does the

general public know that the Sufi sect of Islam is under attack by mainstream Islam. Isis kill off Sufi like the Church

once burnt heretics at the stake.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

this book is a good read. the first chapter was amazing

By Saad N.

this book is a good read. the first chapter was amazing.

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

A book about a Sage by a Sage.

By Ishroq

A very clear and intimate introduction to a saintly personality, Martin Lings' A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century is an important work on Islamic mysticism. It recounts in clear fashion the life of a twentieth century Sufi Saint, Shaykh Ahmad al-`Alawi. In this book, Martin Lings made a figure, relatively unknown to scholarship outside the Islamic world, better known. More importantly however, as the author himself remarks, the purpose of the book "goes far beyond academic orientalism"(p. 9) so as to allow a general audience access to its subject matter and therefore can be read without any sort of background in Islam. As the author puts it, only one quality is presupposed in the reader, namely, "a sincere interest in the `things of the Spirit'" (p. 9).

The book intends to provide insight to the reader about the `character' and life of the Shaykh al-`Alawi, through both people who knew him as well as through the corpus of writings that he left behind him. The structure of the book is divided into three parts, each part not only telling of aspects of the Shaykh's life, but also shedding light on the deeper reality of those aspects that he lived and breathed. Thus the author begins the first part with a section entitled a `seen from the outside', which speaks of how the Shaykh was seen by people outside his `circle', particularly by his French physician Dr Marcel Carret. Lings then moves to a section entitled `seen from within', wherein the Shaykh is viewed from within his circle, which includes his disciples as well as himself. What is interesting here is the movement made by the author from the outer to the inner, which is itself symbolic of the journey of the inner way that the Shaykh, as is made clear, very much lived. Part two expounds in brief fashion what the Lings calls "the Doctrine", of both the inner way in general and the Shaykh in particular through quotations and excerpts from his writings. Mention is made of the doctrine of `wahdat al-wujud' (Oneness of Being), which holds a most central place in the mystical tradition of Islam but also of all other orthodox mystical traditions. Alongside the doctrine of the `Oneness of Being', other aspects of the Shaykh's doctrine are mentioned such as, `The Three Worlds' the `hierarchies of Being', the `Great Peace' (the attainment of which is the goal of the inner way), in which important themes such as prophethood vs. sainthood are discussed. Regarding the latter, Lings says it was a problem which

was solved once and for all by Ibn `Arabi when he wrote "The Messenger is more universal in virtue of his sainthood than he is in virtue of his apostle-prophethood" (p. 261). The third part then deals with some selections from the Shaykh's aphorisms and poetry, with important commentaries on the former by Lings himself, which provide valuable insight into his familiarity with the subject he is dealing.

The text, in addition to introducing the remarkable personality of the Shaykh al-`Alawi to the average person, sets out to correct certain misunderstandings of orientalist scholarship. Beginning with the second chapter entitled 'The Origins of Sufism' certain problems arise that the author attempts to solve. Many works on Sufism, except for a number of noteworthy exceptions, that begin 'from the outside'- precisely because they are from the 'outside'- have failed to see the Islamic 'origins' of Sufism, apparently because of the doctrines that the later generations of Muslims formed and developed. The answer to this problem lies in what a tenth century Sufi of Bukhara said, "Then (after the second generation of Islam) desire diminished and purpose flagged: and with this came the spate of questions and answers, books, and treatises" (p. 43). Moreover, as the author shows, most the Quranic verses and sayings of the Prophet, as well as the verses regarding all supererogatory rituals, prayers, and litanies - all of which occupy such a central place in Sufism - were among the earliest to be revealed, which is enough, for the author, to indicate that "a strong mystical element was present from the outset" (p. 40). The development that occurred did not introduce anything new nor change or modify the fundamentals of Sufism. Rather, it came about from, as Lings' puts it, the "inevitable movement from concentrated synthesis to differentiated analysis" (p. 43), which was an unavoidable movement that took place in varying disciplines and methods to address the "analogous change that was taking place in human souls" as they distanced from the Center (p. 43). Historically based as well as 'qualitatively insightful' arguments are developed and adduced by the author to make this point.

Furthermore, the same must be said with the parts dealing with the doctrine of 'wahdat al-wujud' and the path of gnosis being superior to, although embracing, the path of Love. For "it is Love within the general framework of Knowledge" (p. 46) as the author says. In this section a few words are also said by the author, mainly in his footnotes, about some of the misunderstandings of some orientalists about the 'wahdat al-wujud' of the Sufis; dealing with its incorrect and often misleading translations - which themselves are the effect of an inaccurate understanding - of pantheism or 'existentialist monism' and the like. Against the accusations of the Sufis as 'falling into the pantheistic abyss' or even some of them as being 'dualists'(p. 53) Martin Lings suggests that the point of view or better yet the 'standpoint' of the Sufis should be considered; he says in his footnote, "The truth is that all the Sufis are 'dualist' or 'pluralist' at lower level; but it is impossible that any of them should have believed that at the highest level there is anything other than the Divine Oneness" (p. 126) and that explicit verses of the Quran like "Everything perisheth except His Face" (28:88) should be considered carefully. Unfortunately however, the general tendency has continued and misunderstanding still being entertained, namely, the accusation that scholars 'from within' tend to read certain things, specifically certain doctrines, from the later periods into the former ones. Such charges though completely fall to the ground if it is understood that the 'formulations' in question, intrinsic and essential meaning was very clear from the outset of Islam; one only has to take a look at a Quranic verse like, "He is the First and the Last and the Outwardly Manifest and Inwardly Hidden" (57:3) to pause and reflect about if they really understood the situation. New knowledge, in the Islamic tradition, can never be introduced due to the fact that the Quran contains all knowledge in 'principal'; the findings of the later Muslims were, in a sense, a way of making explicit what were implicit in the Quran all along.

In brief, throughout the book, from the whole structure of its style, to the content of the chapters, to the language used to convey the content in such exquisite a manner, the entire 'approach' to the book beginning with the fine introduction and ending with the beautiful poetry of the Shaykh, Martin Lings' 'lived' participation in the Tradition that the Shaykh himself was apart of, resonates through the entirety of this book. It serves as an excellent and well written introduction to the life and thought of a twentieth century

Sufi Saint and conveys to the reader with a 'sincere interest' that the quest for the timeless Truth can still be made today as it was made in the 'good old days gone by', a quest that the author himself undertook in his own life. As a good man once said, 'it is a book about a Sage by a Sage'.

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