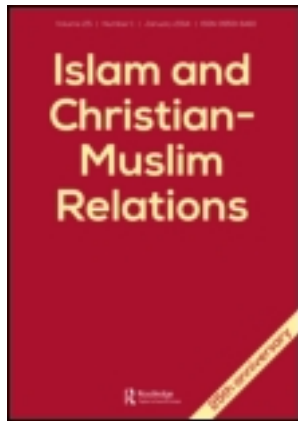


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Publisher: Routledge

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Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cicm20>

From the School of Illumination to Philosophical Mysticism

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Published online: 17 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: Mohammed Rustom (2014) From the School of Illumination to Philosophical Mysticism, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 25:2, 279-280, DOI: [10.1080/09596410.2013.841394](https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2013.841394)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2013.841394>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2013.866367>

From the School of Illumination to Philosophical Mysticism (An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia 4), edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Mehdi Aminrazavi, London, I. B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2012, 532 pp., £39.50/\$70.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-8488-5749-0

The series “An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia” is a massive multi-volume project that seeks to give coverage to Persia’s rich philosophical heritage, from its pre-Islamic past down to the end of the nineteenth century CE. Etymologically, the word “anthology” refers to a “gathering” or “selection” of flowers. The Persian sensibility to flora notwithstanding, it therefore makes perfect sense that the editors – both eminent scholars of Islamic philosophy – would choose such a format, which allows for the broadest possible presentation of a diverse range of materials. Indeed, when the fifth and final volume is published, the full series will present over 2000 pages of texts in translation.

Volume 4, *From the School of Illumination to Philosophical Mysticism*, begins with “The School of Illumination”, which is associated with the name of Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 1191). Given Suhrawardī’s impact on the later history of Islamic thought, it is of course fitting that the first third of the book (Part I) would be devoted to him and the activity associated with his “school”. We have in Suhrawardī not only a stringent critic of Avicenna (d. 1037) and a first-rate thinker who recasts several major philosophical problems bequeathed from the ancients, but also a sustained exposition of a unique metaphysics of light. To be sure, Suhrawardī’s perspective in this regard would prove extremely influential upon such towering personalities of later Islamic philosophy as Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640), portions of whose glosses upon Suhrawardī’s masterpiece, *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* (“The Philosophy of Illumination”), are translated in this section.

This part of the work also features texts by Suhrawardī’s follower Shams al-Dīn Shahrazūrī (d. 1288); Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī (d. 1309), an important commentator upon both Avicenna and Suhrawardī; and the Twelver Shī‘ī philosopher-mystic Ibn Abī Jumhūr Aḥsā‘ī (d. after 1501). Suhrawardī also composed a number of important texts in beautiful literary Persian that demonstrate the concrete and practical dimension of his more abstract philosophical writings. We get a good idea of some of the key concepts discussed in one of these Persian texts, *Hayākil al-nūr* (“The Temple of Lights”), along with an important commentary upon it, in a section devoted to the important figure Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī (d. 1501).

Part II is dedicated to the revival of the Peripatetic tradition in later Islamic philosophy. In many ways, this revival is ushered in by the polymath Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 1274) and his all-important commentary upon Avicenna’s *Ishārāt*, wherein Ṭūsī replies, point-by-point, to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s (d. 1210) critical commentary upon the same text. After Ṭūsī, we encounter several other major authors who were in direct conversation with him, such as Najm al-Dīn

Qazwīnī (also known as Kātibī) (d. 1276) and Quṭb al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 1374), both of whom wrote books of lasting importance. We also find here selections from Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī (d. ca. 1213) (commonly referred to as Bābā Afḍal). Although not a Peripatetic philosopher as such, there are Peripatetic elements in his writings. Yet Bābā Afḍal's primary concern was with "autology" or self-knowledge. He was, moreover, able to craft the Persian language to speak philosophy in a very concrete manner, thereby allowing him to present the aims of the philosophical life to those who lacked specialized training in the discipline.

Part III, entitled "Philosophical Sufism", contains texts of astounding sophistication and spiritual insight. Its main emphasis is upon some of the key thinkers who were influenced by Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240), such as his step-son and foremost student Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 1274), one of whose important metaphysical treatises is translated here in its entirety. Other figures covered include the Shī'ī gnostic Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. ca. 1385) and the great sage Maḥmūd Shabistarī (d. 1320-21), who is featured alongside his important interpreter Shams al-Dīn Lāhijī (d. 1506-7).

Lest we associate philosophical Sufism only with Ibn 'Arabī and his followers, this section of the anthology also contains pertinent texts by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), his brother Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. 1126), and the latter's student, 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī (d. 1131). Although today he is not very well-known outside of Iran, 'Ayn al-Quḍāt is particularly important in the later Islamic intellectual tradition. In many ways, he changes the direction of Islamic philosophy, theology and mysticism for good, standing as a link between the Ghazālī brothers and Ibn 'Arabī.

From the School of Illumination to Philosophical Mysticism is particularly instructive in that it covers many authors who typify the synthetic trend we notice in later Islamic philosophy, where several different streams of philosophical, theological and mystical inquiry converge in a single person. This means that, at minimum, many of our thinkers defy neat and easy classification. This explains why several authors covered here also appear in other volumes of the Anthology, since their writings can and do fall into more than one category. Ṣadrā, for example, is in the present volume under the rubric of "The School of Illumination", but will appear in the final instalment as the principal member of "The School of Isfahan" (and here is where Ṣadrā's departure from Suhrawardī also becomes clear). Or let us take another figure, such as Ṭūsī. We have seen him here in Peripatetic form, but he is also prominently featured in earlier volumes, where his contributions to Ismaili thought and Twelver Shī'ī philosophical theology are highlighted.

Needless to say, it is considerations such as these that should compel scholars to seriously rethink their understanding of the meaning and purpose of "philosophy", with reference to both the past and the present. Undoubtedly, the fragrances emanating from the selection of flowers presented in this volume can help lead the way.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2013.841394>