

renounce our reliance on this hoary hogwash."

Assume one has gone so far from faith that one trembles at the thought of even turning around. Rather than begin the admittedly difficult project of repentance and renewal, why not legitimate one's illegitimacy by reconstructing Islam? Manji has chosen Islam for her project for reasons pragmatic and personal. Pragmatic, because Muslim societies are defined by their Muslimness—any appeal that fails to make obeisance to this reality is doomed to deserved failure. Personal, because Manji cannot, for whatever reason, let go of Islam. She is unable to irrevocably cut the cord. This is good; its realization is incorrect.

Because Islam cannot or will not leave her be, Manji proposes a jihad to end all jihads, a way by which she can use Islam to end Islam, so that she can produce an Islam that no longer makes any uncomfortable demands, a happy, neutered, anesthetic Islam. As such, she will not have to feel guilty about her attack on Islam, because she will be using Islam to put Islam to sleep. The purpose is to attain her telos, and her telos is the establishment of a thoroughly and extremely liberal society, one that resembles her idealizations of the West in every way, shape and form, with Islam no more than the packaging the gift arrives in, outwardly important though soon discarded to reveal a bottomless hollowness that her progressivism cannot fill.

For what meaning can the Muslim ultimately take from her reduction of Islam to childishness? Pleasing God is pleasing other people, but you can displease other people if they displease other people, and in that case, God will be pleased with you, because you are displeased with those who displease you, and of course God is pleased and displeased based on what makes you pleased and displeased, and so God has become the kind of fawning friend who tells you, unnecessarily and repeatedly, what a great job you're doing. Thank me, because now you don't have to buy the book. You can learn its lesson instead. God has not been sidelined by the individual. The individual is God. Such is the vacuous bravado that knocks at the walls of Islamic scholarship. Pardon me while I decline to reach for a rebutting reference.

So infirm is the presentation that one might step back and let it collapse in on itself, as it is in the nature of paradox to perish. Nevertheless, there remains good cause for concern. Religion is the most potent and compelling aspect of human experience, inspiration and imagination. When one opens the doors of faith to absurd impulse and short-term caprice, without any overarching system that sustains and renders this religion realizable and comprehensible, then one perverts the most significant element of our humanity. Like Nietzsche's last men, following on the age of those who put futile faith in progress, only to see themselves consumed in chaos and thereafter replaced by mediocrity. It is telling that Manji is so manifestly closed that she does not substantively fathom where her *ijtihad*, if widely realized, would take the Muslim world, and the wider world of which it is an integral part. But we know what those who do not discipline themselves but blindly pursue their ends are capable of. And as such we reject them, and all those whose efforts would only detain and diminish us at a similar impasse. Islam is the path for the human to rise towards God; if it is only the road backwards into our timid and baser selves, then it is not Islam. It is stagnation. Which is, of course, the opposite of progress. ♦

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### **SUFI POEMS A Mediaeval Anthology** By Martin Lings

The Islamic Texts Society, 2004  
104 pages, 1903682177 Pb

**F**or the first time in English we have an anthology of translations of classical Sufi poems written in Arabic. There could not have been a better scholar for this task than Martin Lings. Most English translations of Sufi poetry (mostly dealing with the rich literature of Sufi poetry in Persian), are rendered in prose (or semi-prose style), with an eye to remaining as faithful to the original text as possible. Other translations have attempted to capture the poetic flavour of the verses, often resulting

in a doggerel version of the very profound originals, and, as is evidenced by some of the more recent translations of Sufi poetry, sometimes these renditions are embarrassingly inaccurate. But Martin Lings' poetic and mystical sensitivity, along with his deep understanding of sacred art and symbolism, allow him to see beyond the poem, as it were, into the very depths of the mystic's heart. Poems from familiar names such as Rabia, Dhul-Nun, Hallaj, Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn al-Farid are included alongside less well-known Sufis such as al-Tunisi, al-Sayyari and al-Shushtari. Lings provides brief but useful introductions to each poet, contextualizing their work historically and occasionally discussing some of their major ideas and uses of imagery which readers should expect to encounter in their poems, both in this anthology and elsewhere. The translations of these poems are anything but literal. This is mainly because of Lings' superior ability to convey each mystic's ideas into beautiful, semi-archaic (but highly idiomatic) English. Thus, readers expecting to learn how to read poetry in Arabic may be in for a bit of a surprise. Beginners of Arabic poetry would do well to consult Alan Jones' excellent two volume book, *Classical Arabic Poetry*. This is not to say that the parallel Arabic-English text presented in this anthology is of no use. Rather, it is simply to suggest that one needs to be an experienced reader of Arabic in order to see the logic behind why Lings chose to translate a poem in one way as opposed to another. But beginners of Arabic will still benefit from the Arabic text, for they will be able to appreciate the poetic beauty and rhythm of the originals. At the same time, the English translations certainly stand on their own, and this anthology would still have been effective were the Arabic not included.

The work's greatest merit is that the poems presented therein provide a very good overview of the main aspects of Sufi doctrine and practice, such as selfless love for God (*mahabbah*), the journey to God (*al-sayr ila Allah*) and the journey in God (*al-sayr fi Allah*), the passing away of one's own qualities (*fana'*) and subsistence in God (*baqa'*), gnosis (*ma'rifa*), and, most importantly, the Oneness of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*). With respect to the Oneness of Being—which refers to the fact that there is nothing in existence

but God's existence—it can be said that the poems compiled by Lings brilliantly deal with the implications of this doctrine, which, in the Sufi tradition, expresses this Reality in multifarious ways. Take, for example, the famous lines of Hallaj writing in the late ninth/early tenth century:

He am I whom I love, He whom I love is I,  
Two Spirits in one single body dwelling.  
So seest thou me, then seest thou Him,  
And seest thou Him, then seest thou Us.  
(Lings, 38)

Now consider the last few lines of a poem by the thirteenth century sage, Ibn al-Farid:

No difference, but it was Myself that loved  
Myself,  
And there is nothing with Me in the world  
but I,  
No thoughts of with-ness trespass mine  
intelligence. (Lings, 82)

As is well known in contemporary Sufi studies, the expression *wahdat al-wujud* belongs to the school of Ibn 'Arabi (although he himself did not use this expression). At the same time, however, the Oneness of Being is an idea which has its roots in the Qur'an itself. In fact, Lings explicitly states this in a note to his introduction to Hallaj's poems, which occurs in the context of his critique of Louis Massignon's erroneous position concerning the origin of the Oneness of Being (p. 94, n.26). From this perspective then, it is not surprising to find this doctrine expressed in the writings and sayings of the early Sufis as well, as has been shown above in the case of Hallaj. This is why Lings goes on to remark that "... the doctrine of *Wahdat al-Wujud* comes from the Qur'an itself and that Hallaj's spiritual life was based on it as were the lives of his great Sufi contemporaries and predecessors ..." (ibid). That the doctrine of the Oneness of Being pervades Islamic mystical thought is important to keep in mind—especially while reading through this excellent volume—lest the mystical symbols and images employed by the Sufis in their poems be mistaken for expressions of a profane nature, and, worse than this, that their statements of union and identity with the Beloved be

understood as some form of pantheism or monism.

This tiny but expensive anthology gives readers a glimpse into the profound esoteric universe of some of Islam's most eminent mystics who wrote between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries C.E. There is no doubt that it will prove to be of great value for students of spirituality, religious thought and Arabic and English poetry. Martin Lings is to be congratulated for yet another excellent contribution to Islamic studies in general, and Sufism in particular. ♦

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## TRAVEL/HISTORY

### ANDALUS

By Jason Webster

Black Swan, 2005  
312 pages, 0552771244 Pb

### TRAVELS WITH A TANGERINE The Journey in the Footnotes of Ibn Battutah

By Tim Macintosh-Smith

Picador, 2002  
352 pages, 0330491148 Pb

### THE TRAVELS OF IBN BATTUTAH

Edited by Tim Macintosh-Smith

Picador, 2003  
328 pages, 0330418733 Pb

### THE POLYMATH

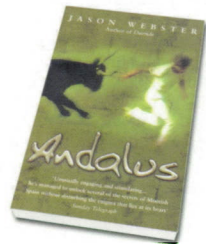
By Bensalem Himmich

The American University in Cairo Press, 2004  
256 pages, 977424821X Hb

### IBN BATUTA WITH DUENDE

The handful of books explored in this review all share a cunning ability to make us question reality and the way it is

presented. From the vigorous and polished prose of relative newcomer Jason Webster in *Duende* and *Andalus*, to the somewhat obsessive and utterly enthralling travelogues of Tim Smith on the trail of Batuta, to the kaleidoscopic vision of Ibn Khaldun in Himmich's *The Polymath*; here are a batch of books with immediate relevance to the Islamic world which also happen to be setting standards of quality writing.



It isn't often one sits down with an autobiography and reads until it is finished, somewhere round the chimes at midnight. Quite simply, Mr. Webster's *Duende* is a page-turning tour de force. A travelogue of his time spent trying to plumb the mysteries of Spain's flamenco subculture, the book grabs the reader and refuses to let go with a viselike grip seldom found in true stories. In the advertising found at the end of the paperback edition, we are told that Webster has chronicled his journey into Spain's Moorish past which bleeds into a very Spanish present with *Andalus*, his second work. Having whetted appetites with some of the finest writing I have read this year, it is awkward to pronounce that *Andalus* is a bit of a disappointment.

Note carefully that I said "a bit." For readers of the Arabist scholar turned wandering troubadour this translates as "you may be able to put *Andalus* down and take almost three days to read it." While Webster's command of language remains superb, he seems to have aged in the years since he basked his way through Spain's gypsy culture—a life spent playing music and stealing cars—to the point where he appears too often as a stodgy wet blanket to his acquaintances' antics in this second work. Since his flamenco adventure, we are informed, he has settled down to relative domestic bliss with