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*Mysticism and Ethics in Islam* ed. by Bilal Orfali, Atif Khalil, and Mohammed Rustom (review)

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2. See Anziska, Seth. *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo*. Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018. and Falk, Richard. "Rethinking US-Israel Relations after the Lebanon War," *SAIS Review* 3, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1983): 43–63. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.1983.0046>

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## Mysticism and Ethics in Islam

*Eds. Bilal Orfali, Atif Khalil, and Mohammed Rustom*  
*Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 2022.*  
 476 Pages.

Is the science of ethics entirely separate from mysticism, or might mysticism be the foundation of ethics? Or, conversely, might mysticism be the fruit of a higher ethics? These and other such questions come to the fore in a variety of ways in this important volume, a commendable attempt to produce a historical and conceptual survey of the intersections between mysticism and ethics in Islam.

The book addresses the parameters of ethics within the Muslim tradition through the analyses of a variety of authors who wrote in languages as diverse as Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Russian, and Chinese. Many of them, we learn, were not necessarily bound to the postulates of Greek philosophy, even though the latter did exert a tremendous influence on the development of ethics in Islam by defining some of the key problems in the discipline.

The twenty-five essays included in this relatively exhaustive volume fall into sections neatly divided into four historical periods: "early," "classical," "late pre-modern," and "modern." Since constraints of space prevent this reviewer from critically examining each of the contributions, only a few shall be singled out for some cursory observations.

The editorial introduction sets the stage for the book by laying out the close relation between ethics and *ihsan* ("doing what is beautiful" or "excellence") as found in the famous Hadith of Gabriel, before turning to a short summary of early Sufism and the central place that the states and stations occupied in the mystical consciousness of early Islam. The *ahwal* and *maqamat*, as they were respectively known in Arabic, came to provide the building blocks for

the systematization of ethics in the later tradition. To quote from the editors' introduction:

While their order, number, and precise features varied from one master to another, their acquisition entailed not only a divestment of their corresponding vices, but also a general process of self-transcendence where one peeled away baser qualities of the self, stripping away the thick layers of the ego in order to encounter the divine presence that resides in the heart (p. 13).

This theme is further developed in Atif Khalil's essay on *sabr* ("forbearance," "steadfastness," "patience," and "self-restraint"), which opens with some observations about the significant place that *tabdil al-akhlaq* or the "refinement of character" held in Sufism. The early figures appeared to have been far more interested in ethical transformation and the acquisition of the virtues than in reaching higher states of mystical consciousness or obtaining miraculous, supernatural powers. Their primary goal was to obtain proximity with God and ethical considerations that played an invaluable role in this quest. Among the most important of the *akhlaq* or character traits they sought to internalize was *sabr*, a quality about which the Prophet Muhammad said, "it is a treasury from among the treasuries of Paradise." *Sabr* was so closely tied to the notion of *mujahada* or "spiritual combat" that it animated and made possible the mystical life itself, implying first and foremost control of the will.

Mohammed Rustom's essay focusses on 'Ayn al-Qudat's teachings on love and annihilation, offering a careful presentation of how love represents the culmination of the spiritual life in Islam. 'Ayn al-Qudat argues that love reveals the beauty of the Beloved to the lover, gently displaying the Beloved's myriad forms to his ravished heart. From another perspective, this great Persian sage sees love as a divine fire that burns away at the substance of the lover's selfhood until nothing remains but the fire of love itself.

Nora Jacobsen Ben Hammed explores the notion of *riyada* in the thought of Fakhr al-Din Razi in a thoughtful and well-researched contribution that helps us move beyond the often-over-simplified dichotomy of theology and mysticism, or philosophy and mysticism. Even though the representatives of these sub-traditions conceived of *tahqiq* or "realization" differently, there were key moments of intersection.

Ahmed El Shamsy offers an inquiry into the intellectual legacy of the forefathers of the Muslim reformist movement in Egypt. In his survey of the critical ideas of modernists such as Muhammad 'Abduh on ethics in classical Sufism, particularly with respect to their engagement with such foundational works as Ghazali's *Ihya'*, El Shamsy identifies tensions analogous to those we find in Razi's theological project. But unlike Razi, the modernists suffered from

an overly rationalistic bent of mind that prevented them from appreciating the full range of what was offered by classical Sufism.

Cyrus Zargar's essay on the controversies over the notion of union in 'Abd Allah Ansari's classic, *Manazil al-sa'irin*, furnishes important insights into the history of the debates that divided some of the schools of Sufism. For that purpose, Zargar examines in detail how the interpretation of the station of union (*jam'*) in Ansari's work by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya in the *Madarij al-salikin* was employed to form an intricate theological argument to safeguard "orthodoxy." This was done by the Hanbali student of Ibn Taymiyya in response to what he believed to be the illegitimate appropriation of Ansari's doctrines by some representatives of the Akbarian school, particularly 'Afif al-Din al-Tilimsani.

Further contributions in the volume that encapsulate the diverse array of perspectives found therein include Justin Cancelliere's exposition of the metaphysical ethics of the contemporary Muslim philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Mukhtar Ali's treatment of Taoism and Confucianism through the hermeneutical lenses of Akbarian Sufism, Marcia Hermansen's presentation of the ethics of Shah Wali Allah, William Chittick's important study and translation of a key text by Sa'ad al-Din Farghani, and Oludamini Ogunnaike's study and translation of the *Maqamat al-din al-thalath* by the great Nigerian master Shaykh Ibrahim Niase.

All things considered, *Mysticism and Ethics in Islam* is the product of a laudable effort to expand our knowledge of the rich and diverse history of ideas surrounding ethics in the Muslim tradition.

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