

Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology

*John Renard, S.J., trans. and introduced
New York: Paulist Press, 2004. 434 pages.*

A new collection of Sufi writings is, of course, greatly welcome. This book, geared to discussing gnosis (*ma`rifah*), features selections by al-Hujwiri, Suhrawardi, and al-Qushayri, among others, although with the incomprehensible omission of Ibn al-`Arabi. The idea for this collection is to present works by important Sufi authors on the knowledge of God, both exoteric (*`ilm*) and esoteric (*ma`rifah*). The introduction gives a brief snapshot of non-Sufi literature, brief biographies of Sufi authors, and a short review of the “post-classical” age. Part 2 features a selection of translations from the works of nine authors. The biographies are separated from the works of their authors, which may lead to a certain amount of flipping back and forth.

For al-Ghazali, Renard translates book 21 of *Ihya' `Ulum al-Din*. For Suhrawardi, he gives us three chapters of *`Awarif al-Ma`arif*. Renard has, however, selectively edited the texts: that is, he omits the honorifics and polite exclamations after the name of God and the Prophet. Although he states that he does this to save space and smooth out the reading (p. 5), the omission is distracting, because (a) you know the words should be there and

(b) etiquette – expressed in these phrases – is one of Sufism’s major emphases.

In theoretical terms, the biggest problem is that the author has not committed himself fully to either resisting or domesticating translation. Sometimes he over-translates, as in using “predestination” for *qadr* (p. 15) without further explanation. Predestination is the result of God’s *qadr* (power). He also uses “proponents” for *ahl*, which, he says, means “people”; other writers sometimes translate it as “folk.” (One could not happily translate the phrase *ahl al-kitab* as “Proponents of the Book.”) Also, in the introduction he states that the Mu`tazilites imprisoned Dhu’ al-Nun; however, it was the caliph who imprisoned people during the *mihnah* (inquisition) over the question of whether the Qur’an was created or eternal. At the time, the caliph *appeared* to take the Mu`tazilite view; this view is now considered an oversimplification. (For another view, see “A Reexamination of Three Current Explanations for al-Ma’mun’s Introduction to the Mihna,” *IJNES* 26, no. 4 [Nov. 1994]: 615-29.)

Renard says that *jahl* (ignorance) is related to the root *j-w-l* (p. 13), meaning to “wander aimlessly in circles.” Apart from the middle radical (“h”) coming immediately before the “w” (the middle radical in the second root) in the Arabic alphabet, this claim makes no sense, especially without either further details or authority (e.g., Lane).

In addition, the author maintains that he intends for readers to consider the masculine singular to include both the male and female person, since he finds “attempts at a balanced approach to gender-inclusive pronouns in texts like these are difficult at best” (p. 6). Many other authors have managed to alternate paragraphs of “he” and “she,” which really is inclusive, or use the indefinite plural “they.” Likewise, from a theological perspective, God is not a man; the *huwa* used for God can be translated as a neuter “it.” As a recent example, Toby Mayer used “It,” as in “the Necessary of Existence in Itself,” for an elegant avoidance of the masculine pronoun in speaking about God (Wilfred Madelung and Toby Mayer, *Struggling with the Philosopher* [London: I.B. Tauris, 2001], 33.). The reader cannot judge intent; she can only judge the words printed on the page.

It seems problematic to translate *ma`rifah* as “experiential knowledge” (p. 7) when it refers to intuitive, mystical knowledge. By translating *`ilm* as “discursive knowledge,” the author throws the burden of meaning on the adjectives, not the nouns. William Chittick specifically says that in his opinion, it is sometimes a false distinction to translate *`ilm* as knowledge and *ma`rifah* as gnosis, thereby separating them, as Ibn al-`Arabi does not gener-

ally distinguish between the two in meaning (William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* [Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989], 148-49.). Sometimes it just seems that Arabic has too many words. However, for a book dealing with knowledge, Renard spends too little time discussing these important points. But it is the nouns that are different in the original. Likewise, *hali* (the *nisbah* of *hal*) is translated as “spiritual” rather than “conditional” or “referring to a state,” which is misleading; he says that he is aiming for readability.

Finally, the bibliography lists German, French, and English translations of texts under the heading “Primary Sources.” The more usual practice is to have a subhead called “Primary Sources in Translation.” One hopes these issues may be resolved in a second edition.

Knowledge of God is intended for those who need a basic survey of Sufi thought from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. It brings together a variety of thinkers, from the Egyptian Dhu’ al-Nun to the rationalist al-Ghazali to Suhrawardi, the proponent of knowledge by presence. Luckily, there appears to be a burgeoning translation effort these days, making many more texts accessible to the non-Arabic-reading public. The greatest hope is that such collections will inspire new generations of students to study Arabic and eventually read the texts in the original language. In the meantime, they could use this text in conjunction with others, such as *Three Early Sufi Texts*, translated by Nicholas Heer and Kenneth L. Honderkamp (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003). This volume includes “A Treatise on the Heart,” “Stations of the Righteous,” and “The Stumblings of Those Aspiring.”

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