

Sufi Master and Qur'an Scholar: Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī and the *Latā'if al-Ishārāt*

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Over the past few years, an increasing number of academic publications have focused on the life and work of the Sufi master and theologian Abū l-Qāsim 'Abd al-Karīm b. Hawāzīm al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072 in Nishapur). While this increased interest has filled in many gaps in our understanding of this man, an important figure for the Islamic mystical tradition, Nguyen's monograph represents the first in-depth inquiry into Qushayrī and his doctrine.

Nguyen's book, developed from his doctoral dissertation, concentrates on the *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt* (hereafter *LI*), typically considered a mystical exegetical treatise but which Nguyen shows should be seen in a broader and more nuanced light. He analyzes the text through the concept of "tradition," reading it as the result of a network of different cultural and spiritual influences. Their unification in this exegetical treatise can be considered Qushayrī's main achievement. As such, Nguyen's work represents a major contribution in the fields of Qur'anic and Sufi studies as well as the broader field of medieval intellectual history.

The book's nine chapters cover the following subjects: In the introduction the author positions the *LI* vis-à-vis the different exegetical traditions (juridical, encyclopedic, and theological), arguing that it belongs to what Walid A. Saleh calls the "Nishapuri school" of exegesis. Thus, as Nguyen points out, Qushayrī's *Tafsīr* is "located and contextualized onto a number of different but overlapping historical axes" (p. 16).

In order to understand Qushayrī's personal and cultural background, Nguyen devotes the first two chapters to his life and intellectual and spiritual training. This reconstruction relies upon a great variety of sources, some of which are still in manuscript form. As such, Nguyen's account is the most historically reliable analysis to date. In it, he shows that the different typologies of the biographical sources mirror the multifaceted career and formation of Qushayrī himself, whose life has been recorded as a mystic, a patrician of Nishapur, a theologian, a jurist, an exegete, and a poet. Nguyen manages to reconcile different bio-hagiographical sources and render a vivid image of Qushayrī the disciple and then Qushayrī the master.

Chapter 3 introduces the book's main subject: Qushayrī's exegetical vision. Here, the author presents Qushayrī's works in the field of Qur'anic exegesis. Although a more detailed account of his commentary on the 99 Divine Names (*Al-Taḥbīr fī 'Ilm al-Tadhkīr*) would have been welcome here (the *Taḥbīr* has several chapters of theological value in which this subject is addressed), nevertheless the reader will find this chapter to be one of the book's major contributions. Nguyen clarifies the nature of a second commentary, *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* that, according to his biographers, Qushayrī is supposed to have composed earlier in his life. Nguyen examines two manuscripts that may represent parts of the original commentary and analyzes the main authorities quoted in the texts. In doing so, he provides a reasonable hypothesis about the plausibility of the attribution of those manuscripts to Qushayrī. Moreover, Nguyen clarifies the confusion about the above-mentioned *tafsīr* and Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī's (Qushayrī's fourth son) commentary. He also points out that scholars interested in the *LI* must have recourse to manuscripts, since the printed edition is far from being a scholarly one.

Chapter 4 studies the hermeneutic of the *LI* as presented by Qushayrī in his commentary's introduction. Here, Nguyen stresses how the *LI* is not only a mystical treatise "but expresses continuity with other traditions of thought and exegesis" (p. 121). This chapter also demonstrates that Qushayrī's doctrine and life are reflected in the *LI*'s exegetical framework. Main concepts, such as the relationship of *'ilm* to *ma'rifah* (exoteric and mystical knowledge, respectively) are presented. Special attention is paid to Qushayrī's style. Nguyen argues that the change in register of his comments – in some cases from simple glosses to elaborated eloquence – signals to the reader that Qushayrī's "own exegetical personality has entered the text" (p. 128). Nguyen also addresses whether or not the *LI* is a consciously composed or an ecstatically uttered work. On the basis of Annabel Keeler's inquiry into this subject, he argues that the commentary remains linked to the oral teaching, since it was dictated and thought out during *majlis* sessions. The master had his pupils in mind

when writing this text, and thus the orality of the source must be kept in view in order to acquire a better understanding of his commentary.

Chapter 5 raises some important questions about how Qushayrī composed his commentary. One of the work's most characteristic aspects is the lack of named authorities; almost all references and quotations are expressed anonymously. Nguyen painstakingly traces the reports (*khbar*) and hadith used in the work. Through several case studies and a reconstruction of Qushayrī's network of hadith transmission (in chapter 6), Nguyen shows that the material he used belongs to well-attested traditions in Sunni circles. Chapter 7 studies the presence of legal matters in the *LI*. Here Nguyen argues that the text reflects Qushayrī's engagement with Shāfi'ī jurisprudence. Through several case studies, he shows that Qushayrī uses the commentary's legal nature as a base for developing spiritual metaphors.

Chapter 8 investigates the connection between the text's theology and Qushayrī's Ash'arism. Here Nguyen shows to what extent Qushayrī was involved in theological debates and the implications of this involvement on the *LI*. The intersection of theology and exegesis in Qushayrī's thought appears in the very commentary on the first occurrence of the *basmala* in Q. 1:1. Nguyen underlines how Qushayrī's Ash'arism, far from representing a rationalistic approach to the understanding of God's reality, relies heavily on transmitted reports. Faithful to his anti-Mu'tazilī position, Qushayrī rejects the possibility that the human intellect can fully penetrate the reality of reports typically understood to be "anthropomorphic," arguing that their reality falls outside the range of human comprehension. Human knowledge relies solely on what is expressed by divine transmission and not by rational speculation.

But what is at the heart of the intersection of theology and Sufism in the *LI*? The problem is maybe not entirely solved in this chapter. Perhaps a deeper insight into Qushayrī's commentary on the divine names (the above-mentioned *Taḥbīr*) would have served as a parallel source for comparing Qushayrī's theological ideas expressed in the *LI* with those found in his other works. For instance, the *LI* apparently never addresses the problem of cultivating the divine qualities as human character traits (what is called, among others terminologies, *al-takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh*). But the commentary on divine names focuses on this very issue, a key concept for understanding where Qushayrī locates the passage from theological discourse to initiatory spiritual progression.

Significantly, chapter 9 concludes the book with an inquiry into Qushayrī's understanding of Sufism as laid out in the *LI*, which is, as the author argues, the central theme of his commentary. Nguyen presents several

major points: (a) the question of the miracles of God's saints (*karāmāt al-awliyā'*), a theme that also occupies an important chapter in his *Risālah*; (b) the spiritual hierarchies: Qushayrī presents, in the form of hierarchical scales, different aspects of the spiritual life. Human beings and their spiritual faculties are arranged in a hierarchical way, from the exterior physical senses to the human being's innermost spiritual self (i.e., the "secret"); (c) in the same vein, he positions different sorts of spiritual and religious men on a hierarchical scale; and (d) the master-disciple paradigm and the believer's spiritual struggle against his/her lower self.

There are some minor typographical errors or misreadings: *Musnid* of Khorasan (p. 50) instead of *Musnad*; *al-Qāḍī 'alā al-Dihqān* as "the Qāḍī over the Dihqān" (p. 30) as a title referring to Qushayrī in Sam'ānī's report quoted by Subkī. In reality, one should read "*al-Qāḍī 'Alī al-Dihqān*," who is the person to whom one should grant the title of Judge. [‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Dihqān al-Marwazī (d. 464H) was a judge of Merv who studied in Nishapur; see Ṣarīfīnī, *Muntakhab*, ed. Muḥammad Kāẓim al-Maḥmūdī (Tehran: Mirāth Maktūb, 2012, p. 699)]. But these truly minor errors should in no way lessen Nguyen's significant contribution to the field, as it is said, *jalla man lā yashū*.

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