

## **The Comfort of the Mystics: A Manual and Anthology of Early Sufism**

*Gerhard Böwering and Bilal Orfali*

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The early period of Sufism still remains insufficiently explored within western scholarship. Despite the contributions of a range of academic authorities over the past two centuries, stretching back to the publication of Lt. Graham's 1819 essay, "A Treatise on Sufism, or Mahomedan Mysticism," followed by the first major European study of the subject two years later by the young Friedrich A. Tholuck, *Ssufismus, sive Theosophia Persarum Pantheistica (Sufism, or the Pantheistic Theosophy of the Persians)*, there still remains a great deal of work to be done in order to better understand the complex, embryonic stages of the Islamic mystical tradition. In this light, *The Comfort of the Mystics* is a welcome contribution to our growing but still inadequate knowledge of the first few centuries of *taṣawwuf*.

The present work is a critical edition of Abu Khalaf al-Tabari's (d. 1077) *Salwat al-'Arifin wa Uns al-Mushtāqin (The Comfort of Those Knowing God and the Intimacy of Those Longing for God)*, a Sufi manual authored in the middle of the eleventh century, shortly after Qushayri's (d. 1072) famous *Risālah*. Gerhard Böwering and Bilal Orfali are to be credited with publishing the *Salwat* for the first time through a close study of the Cairo manuscript (MS Tal'at Tasawwuf 1553) which was transcribed a decade before Qushayri's death. While they were unable to access the only other existing manuscript of the entire version of the *Salwat*, located in Iraq, due no doubt to the political instability of the region and the post-war destruction of the country's infrastructure, they did manage to compare the work against two later abridged versions. Along with the text, they provide a meticulously referenced introduction which situates the treatise within its broader historical and religious context. The Arabic text is also accompanied by exhaustive indices (127 pages) for Qur'anic verses, hadiths, key figures, locations, technical terms and poetic verses which will be of particular use for researchers.

With respect to the author of this little known work, Böwering and Orfali note that the primary sources do not provide us with a great deal of information about his life. On the basis of a well-researched analysis of the medieval source material, they conclude that Tabari was known for his contributions not to the field of Sufism but Shafi'i law, having studied under some of the leading representatives of the school, including 'Abd al-Qahir al-Baghdadi (d. 1038), well known for his *Al-Farq Bayn al-Firaq*, a heresiological survey

of the various theological factions which had divided the Islamic world. While Tabari is credited with the authorship of some important works on Shafi'i *fiqh*, an area in which he was known to have held juridical views which sometimes diverged from that of the majority of his Shafi'i interlocutors, his only known contribution to Sufism remains the *Salwat*. The treatise itself was produced for Tabari's patron, al-Mani'i (d. 1071), who, as the editors inform us, was a leader of Sufi chivalry, a wealthy supporter of the ulama, and responsible for the construction of numerous mosques, schools and Sufi lodges (p. 9). Al-Mani'i was also commissioned by the vizier Nizam al-Mulk (d. 1092) to construct the great mosque of Nishapur. This was the same vizier, incidentally, who enjoyed close relations with Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), whom he appointed as the head of the Nizamiyya of Baghdad. The broad, intellectually vibrant network of relations of which Tabari was a part gives us a sense of the rich cultural milieu in which the work was produced.

Böwering and Orfali reiterate throughout their introduction that in his authorship of the *Salwat*, Tabari did not intend to produce an original work. Instead, he wanted to gather together, as they put it, a "selection of the choicest Sufi statements he could find, presenting them as a kind of anthology that was to entertain the reader and recommend Sufis for their piety and their righteous beliefs and practices" (p. 26). Most of the material in the treatise is therefore drawn from other important Sufi texts in circulation in his time. Böwering and Orfali estimate that only ten percent of the work is original, although the guess is somewhat speculative considering, as they themselves acknowledge, that a significant portion of the material in the *Salwat* cannot be traced to any known sources.

As for the material that is traceable, Böwering and Orfali demonstrate that the *Risālah* of Qushayri served as the author's primary source. In Tabari's time, Qushayri's treatise had established itself as one of most authoritative handbooks on Sufism. Tabari's debt to the *Risālah* is reflected in the fact more than 1,000 text passages are culled directly from it. The *Salwat*, which is about two-thirds of its length, even resembles its principle source in structure and format. It is no surprise therefore that Subki noted that the "indifference toward this book," by later progeny, "is due to this resemblance" (p. 7). Tabari's tendency to cite sayings and anecdotes drawn from the Iraqi as opposed to the Khurasanian Sufi tradition also reflects a feature of Qushayri's treatise (p. 27). Besides the *Risālah*, the two other main sources for Tabari were Sulami's (d. 1021) *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyyah* and the lesser known *Tahdhīb al-Asrār* of Kharkushi (d. 1016) (p. 24). What these three works had in common was their authorship by Sufis from Nishapur who belonged to the Shafi'i school of *fiqh* and the

Ash‘ari school of *kalām*. In this sense, the work reflects a form of Sufism colored by certain juridical and theological tendencies which had spread in the region. While there are sections in Tabari’s work that can also be found in other early compositions, the material that overlaps with the contents of the three aforementioned sources was, the editors argue, in all probability drawn from the latter.

The actual text of the *Salwat* covers a range of topics conventionally addressed in Sufi literature of the time. These range from the virtues, typically subsumed within classifications of the “states” and “stations,” to more contested areas such as miracles, *samā‘* (a Sufi “listening” ceremony), and the nature of sainthood or “friendship” with God. Tabari’s decision to divide his work into seventy-two chapters is a curious one, and while unaddressed by the editors, was likely not without purpose when we take into account the significance attached to the number in Islamic numerology. One is reminded of the factions that will be damned according to one hadith and saved according to another, the promised *hūr al-‘ayn*s, and Ibn al-‘Arabi’s (d. 1240) division of the first *faṣl* of the *Futūḥāt* (excluding prologue) into the same number of chapters, which, as M. Chodkiewicz has shown, correspond to the *basmalah*’s seventy-two *darajāt* (“levels”).

The only noticeable omission in an otherwise comprehensive editorial introduction is of any mention of Makki’s (d. 996) *Qūt al-Qulūb* and the role it might have played in Tabari’s own composition. Judging from the evidence Böwering and Orfali present, it seems highly improbable that the *Qūt* served as a source-text. Thus they likely felt no reason to address the question. Nevertheless, it might have been a good idea to express this point more explicitly considering that they do take the time to discount the *Salwat*’s debt to the *Kitāb al-Luma‘* of Sarraj (d. 988) and the *Ta‘arruf* of Kalabadhi (d. 990) (p. 25), two texts which along with the *Qūt*, formed something of a triad in the tenth century. Moreover, when we consider that the *Risālah* and the *Qūt* were the two most widely read manuals in early Sufism, as Arberry (d. 1969) noted, some comment, even in passing, about the *Salwat*’s relation to the *Qūt* might have been in order.

As to whether or not Tabari was a Sufi, or the extent to which he was (p. 11), this seems, in the opinion of this reviewer, to be something of a moot point. Judging from the contents and tone of the Arabic text, especially the opening chapter, Tabari clearly recognized *taṣawwuf* as a science integral to the development of essential qualities of the soul, such as sincerity, detachment, gratitude, and so on. Even though the *Salwat* was authored for Tabari’s patron, it is, as the editors themselves acknowledge, far

from an existentially disengaged academic work. With respect to his name not appearing in Sufi biographical works (p. 11), all this appears to suggest is that he had either not developed a reputation as a master of the science or that he may not have been publically affiliated with its recognized authorities. The editors might have been better off reframing the question of the author's Sufi identity more restrictedly around the nature and scope of his relationship with *taṣawwuf* (a subject which they do address). Another approach would have been to define what it means to be a "Sufi," and then to have proceeded from there, to offset the kind of confusion so often associated with the term.

These minor issues aside, *The Comfort of the Mystics* is a finely produced collaborative work of painstaking scholarship and meticulous detail by two leading figures in the field. It sets the bar high for future scholars intending to publish critical editions of medieval Arabic texts.

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