Th. Emil Homerin (ed. and trans.)


Th. Emil Homerin's edition and translation of ʿĀʾisha al-Bāʿūniyya's treatise brings to English-speaking audiences a fascinating piece written by one of the most remarkable figures of post-classical Islam. Al-Bāʿūniyya (d. 923/1517) was a scholar of Qurʾan, Hadith, fiqh, and poetry in addition to Sufism, and Homerin tells us that she was the most prolific woman writer of Arabic texts prior to the twentieth century. She garnered wide respect and renown during her lifetime, and some of her poetry and prose still survive, but Homerin has been the only scholar in Western academia to devote any significant attention to her works. His translation of The Principles of Sufism (Kitāb muntakhab fī usūl al-rutab fī ʿilm al-taṣawwuf) adds a new dimension to the items in Bāʿūniyya's oeuvre Homerin has already made available to English speakers, complementing his previous publications of her biography, poetry in translation, and analysis of her didactic writings.1

He begins the present volume with an introduction that helps the reader contextualize the treatise within the body of al-Bāʿūniyya's writings and al-Bāʿūniyya herself as an elite Mamluk-era scholar and mystic. The biographical portion is a shortened version of what he has written about her in already-published pieces, and some of the material introducing The Principles of Sufism is also a recasting of information found in Homerin's past work, but his summary of what the book covers and enumeration of the most-cited scholars in it will still be useful to readers. The footnotes (throughout the text) also do a fine job of indicating where similar passages are found in other Sufi works.

Al-Bāʿūniyya's treatise comprises a short introduction and four chapters—one each on repentance, sincerity, remembrance, and love—plus an epilogue on love. Each chapter forms a compilation of sources on the Sufi principle

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at hand that deal with various aspects of the terms (tawba, ikhlāṣ, dhikr, and maḥabba). The text suggests that each of the four principles discussed is a key to spiritual attainment, and the experiences and advice contained in the excerpted sources can help the reader journey toward these virtues. Al-Bāʿūniyya follows a generally discernable structure, starting with Qur’ānic phrases and verses with Sufi interpretations, and sometimes a definition of the term under discussion. From there she proceeds to relevant aḥādīth, and then to Sufi scholars’ sayings, anecdotes, and verse on the topic at hand. Each chapter concludes with the author’s own teachings, instructions, and poetry. This anthologizing style, characteristic of Mamluk-era texts, represents carefully chosen excerpts chosen by the compiler, and al-Bāʿūniyya’s own remarks complement these selections nicely. This method of construction shows respect for mainstream aḥādīth and affirms their compatibility with a Sufi outlook. Homerin’s introduction notes which scholars are most widely cited in al-Bāʿūniyya’s book, notably al-Sulamī, al-Qushayrī, and al-Kalābādhī, but he stops short of addressing the important feature they shared. It is not accidental that al-Bāʿūniyya focuses on excerpts of text written by academically-inclined Sufis who respected fiqh and kalām, especially al-Qushayrī with his concern for the compatibility of legal and theological thought with Sufism.

The lengthiest and most robust sections of al-Bāʿūniyya’s book are the sections on love, which will not come as a surprise to readers familiar with her mystical verse. Indeed, the chapter on love and the epilogue contain the most poetry, the most diverse anecdotes (including tales about various prophets and women), and the most invigorated commentary from al-Bāʿūniyya herself. The “signs of love” she identifies seem to be a culmination of sorts of the previous three principles of Sufism: proximity to the Divine, obedience, a heart focused only on God, and other such signs of love are the results of sincerity, remembrance, and repentance. The relationship between love and longing is less uniformly affirmed: some reports suggest that longing is a sign of love, while others say longing is for the common folk since it is necessitated by absence, which does not suit the spiritual elite. The impassioned Epilogue on Love is entirely in al-Bāʿūniyya’s own voice, equating love with God’s most wondrous secret, divine grace, and a fire that does not die. Its end result is fanāʾ, confirmation of divine favor, and an irrevocable intoxication.

The variation in register and style among the sources al-Bāʿūniyya includes poses a challenge for any prospective translator. Homerin manages to stay close to the wording of the Arabic text while rendering the translation in a style that educated readers of English will be able to follow without trouble, even in the case of poetry and Qur’ānic verses, of which he produces his own translations. His rendering of all technical terms into English is thoughtful and