Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.)


I have always found the Cambridge/Oxford/Routledge/Wiley-Blackwell _Companion_ to be an odd genre. With the exception of the Bloomsbury _Companions_, which are aimed directly at researchers, these _Companions_ are not for experts, nor are they for _Dummies_. They are not handbooks, textbooks, or _Festschriften_. They are, according to their publishers’ basic pitch, accessible, written by experts, intended for non-specialists. Unfortunately they rarely define the critical terms of that equation: accessible to non-specialist readers. Does accessible describe a particular linguistic register, a low expectation of prerequisite knowledge, or a manageable level of detail? And who are these non-specialist readers? Undergraduates in an introductory course? Graduate students in the process of becoming specialists? Experts looking for a quick entrée into another field? The home shopper browsing online bookstores? A survey of exemplars from the genre reveals that many contributors do not always have a clear sense of the answer either. Some authors write genuinely introductory essays, while others assume considerable prior knowledge. Some authors write straightforward summaries of one aspect of the field, while others write jargon-packed essays about a particular problem or debate that our poor non-specialist must take great pains to penetrate. In my view, for a _Companion_ to succeed _qua Companion_, the entire volume should hang together holistically, each chapter complementing the others, guiding the non-specialist into and through a particular field of study at a predetermined level of detail and comprehensibility. Clearly, responsibility lies with the editor to assemble a stable of qualified authors, corral them into writing complementary chapters for an explicit purpose and readership, and all executed in an “accessible” style. This is a Herculean task and the reason that many _Companions_ fall short. Nevertheless, these are the only standardizable criteria by which one can assess such an unusual genre. Therefore, rather than treating a _Companion_ as a loose collection of conceptually linked but disparately targeted essays, the reviewer better serves prospective readers by assessing 1) how well the editor envisions and defines her readership; 2) how well the editor conceptualizes and subdivides the topic, carefully balancing breadth with depth; and 3) how well each author implements that vision in service of the topic.

For readers looking for an introduction to Sufism that assumes no prior knowledge there are more than a dozen such titles currently available in
English. And now, with over 500 Cambridge Companions and counting (not to mention the many hundreds of Companions from other houses) Cambridge has finally published a Companion to Sufism, edited by Lloyd Ridgeon. This is not another introductory text. Instead, Ridgeon has explicitly set for himself the much more pointed and valuable task of preparing a volume that will “build upon the achievements of [the available introductions] by addressing a range of questions that are of concern to academics and students across a broad range of disciplines. . . .” It is designed to help readers through and beyond the ‘introductory’ level (xv–xvi). From the outset, then, Ridgeon promises a coherently articulated purpose and a clear sense of readership: those acquainted with the broad historical and phenomenological contours of Sufism who wish to deepen their knowledge further. One happy consequence of Ridgeon’s precise editorial vision is that it obviates the need for a lengthy introduction that defines the topic, relates the history of its study, surveys the current state-of-the-art, or provides redundant chapter summaries. Readers of the Companion to Sufism do not need such an introduction, for they are already prepared to dive in. Furthermore, Ridgeon’s sharp conceptualization of purpose and readership allows him to organize the volume’s contents with much more breadth, both chronologically and thematically, than an introductory text.

The Cambridge Companion to Sufism contains twelve chapters organized into three chronological periods. The four chapters of Part One, “The Early Period,” are a mix of historical and thematic treatments of the first four centuries of Sufism. In “Origins and Early Sufism,” Christopher Melchert details the emergence of Sufism in tenth-century Iraq as a distinct form of mystical piety and practice. Along the way, he deals with issues of non-Islamic “influences,” the continuities and discontinuities with earlier renunciant traditions, the Late Antique context of those traditions, the relationship of early Shiism and Sufism, the spread of Sufism beyond Iraq, the legal-theological affiliations of early Sufis, and the production of Sufi manuals. The chapter summarizes and updates Melchert’s prior work on the subject and is one of the clearest and most succinct accounts of early Sufism I have read. Laury Silvers then takes up a thematic study of “Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women.” She argues that while early Sufi literature consistently marginalizes the role of women in developing and transmitting Sufi thought and practice, careful attention to that literature reveals that the “textual marginalization of these women does not seem to reflect their actual participation in pious or mystical circles” (27). Rejecting any claim to recover an authentic or static “women’s spirituality,” Silvers focuses on reconstructing the lives and networks of early Sufi women while underscoring the gendered norms and assumptions embedded within early Sufi literature. Erik Ohlander’s contribution is a densely comprehensive survey of