

H.T. NORRIS, *Popular Sufism in Eastern Europe. Sufi brotherhoods and the dialogue with Christianity and 'Heterodoxy'*, Routledge, London & New York, 2006, 155 p.

The Routledge Sufi Series edited by Ian Richard Netton is known to provide brief surveys of the different forms and aspects of Sufi culture, allowing both the general public and the scholarly community a deeper understanding of the topic in all its variety. The two major underlying principles that the series observes, 'sound scholarship and readability', are fulfilled impeccably by the book we are reviewing herewith.

Harry T. Norris, the author of this book, is an expert in Muslim culture, Middle Eastern folk epic and Arabic literature, especially Sufi literature and history as observed in Eastern Europe, the Caucasian regions, Lithuania, Poland and the Ukraine. Emeritus Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (London), he held the post of Dean of Undergraduate Studies until 1991. He published numerous articles in journals at home and abroad – the "Bulletin of SOAS", "The Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies", "The Journal of Semitic Studies", "The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society" – while his principal published books cover an extensive range of topics relating to the Arabic language and literature, Tatars in general, and the Karaites in particular¹. His pioneering survey of the Lithuanian Tatars, developed over a long period of time, brought light on this neglected chapter of the East-West connections. As Noel Brehony mentioned last year, at the ceremony where Prof. Norris was awarded the Prize of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies 'For Services to Middle Eastern Studies', he seems to have become even more productive after he retired from the SOAS faculty. Fascinated by travels and travellers, not only did he write about other people's journeys², but he also spent many weeks every year doing research in Africa, East and Central Europe, and the Baltic countries. His interests in Sufism in South East Europe were revealed in *Islam in the Balkans* (Hurst, London, 1993), where Harry Norris addressed the entire historical development of the Muslim communities in the area between Central Europe and the Caucasus. He made further contributions to these studies in the volumes that he edited jointly with other specialists: *The Changing shape of the Balkans*, with F. W. Carter (UCL, 1996), and *Religious Quest and National Identity in the Balkans*, with Celia Hawksworth and Muriel Heppell (Palgrave, London, 2001).

His latest book, *Popular Sufism in Eastern Europe*, was born from his long-standing attraction towards the less known Sufi communities which, although far from their doctrinal roots geographically, kept strong connections with the Sufi movement of the origins. His deep knowledge of the topic rests on an uninterrupted contact with the specialized literature, including that published in Eastern Europe. Moreover, to document this new book, Harry Norris travelled far and wide in Eastern Europe, collecting data and searching for historical proof of the existence of Sufi communities in several Eastern countries. This quest also brought him to Romania in 2006, where he visited the major Muslim cities and towns (Constanța, Mangalia, Babadag) and their architectural monuments, getting acquainted with the local elements of Muslim civilization, past and present.

Popular Sufism... provides a description of the various Sufi movements present in the Balkans, the Crimean peninsula and Central Europe in the aftermath of the Ottoman conquests. Divided into 9 chapters, the book is a well-planned journey on the Sufi trail of Eastern Europe, taking the reader through Bosnia, Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia and Crimea, reaching as far as the Caucasus regions. The temporal span is equally wide: from Sufism in the age of the Crimean Khanate, to the Turk, Greek and Bektashi Albanians at the beginning of the 20th century. The *Appendices*, two brief historical surveys that could have constituted chapters in their own right, are followed by a *Glossary*, *Notes*, a *Select bibliography*, and *Index*.

¹ H. T. Norris, *Saharan Myth and Saga*, Oxford, 1972; *The Tuaregs*, London, 1975; *The Adventures of Antar*, London, 1980; *Sufi Mystics of the Niger Desert*, Oxford, 1990, etc.

² See e.g. his article *Ibn Battuta on Muslims and Christians in the Crimean Peninsula*, in *Iran and the Caucasus*, Vol. 8.1, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2004, pp. 7–14.

The author states his purpose and methodology in the *Preface* (x–xii), where he also defines the two aspects of Sufism in which his book is principally centred. The first is 'Popular Sufism', which includes Sufi beliefs, ceremonies and rituals, together with the role they have played in the daily lives of Muslims of Eastern Europe. The second theme is 'the interplay, the tolerance and the cruelty, of popular faiths and of frequently mutually exclusive religions'. This particular aspect is characteristic of the uninterrupted condition of a religious minority that – with the exception of the Albanians – has been characteristic of Muslims of Eastern Europe, living side by side with Orthodox and Catholic Christians. Additionally, the *Introduction* includes arguments for the author's interest in the 'shamanistic figure' of Sari Saltik, who is regarded by many Muslims as a superhuman dervish, holder of a 'dual, even multiple, personality', an *abdal*. A historical figure mentioned by the Arab traveller Ibn Battuta in the 14th century, his name was given to many localities in Turkey and Eastern Europe: the Romanian town of Babadag is also related to him (< Sari Saltik Baba).

In Chapter 1, *The geographical setting of Popular Sufism in Eastern Europe* (6–9), H. Norris briefly describes the situation of the ethnic groups and minorities in Eastern Europe (Karaims, Armenians, Albanians, Bosnjak, Pomaks, Kizilbash, Turks in Bulgaria, Tatars, etc.), reminding the reader that 'most of the Balkans were at one time included within the term 'Near East''. Chapter 2, *Sufi brotherhoods and the impact of Sufism on national identity within the Balkan Muslim communities* (10–18), is a survey of the attitude towards Popular Sufism, from the applause of artistic forms of Sufism, especially the music, to the blame against excesses that are regarded as "a downright perversion of the true message of Islam". Reports from Western diplomatic officials shed light on the mixed feelings towards Popular Sufism at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th. Traveller's tales contain numerous descriptions of the *zikr* ceremonies held by Sufi *uruq* (pl. of *tariqa*, 'brotherhood'), either with curiosity and admiration, or with deprecation and shock. The 'Whirling (or Spinning) Dervishes', the 'Qalandari' (self-mutilating) Sufis, the Haydaris (ascetics), the Rifa'iyya of Albania are presented thereafter, based on contemporary accounts.

Chapter 3 (19–30) outlines the situation of the Bosnian Church – erroneously considered Dualist or "Bogomil" by certain foreign sources – and its relations with the local Sufi brotherhoods: Bayramiyya, Mevleviyya, Qadiriyya, Naqshabandiyya, etc. In Chapter 4 (31–41), H. Norris discusses the Persian thought which is to be found in the poetry of major Albanian poets, and particularly the Sufi inspirations of Naim Frashëri (1846–1900), Albania's greatest poet³. Known to the Romanians due to works printed in Bucharest in 1894–1896, Frashëri, an expert in Persian verse, shared the spiritual views of the Bektashia movement, borrowed and expanded from Ibn 'Arabi's doctrines. His books published in Bucharest (discussed here on pp. 32 and 38–39, under *Major Bektashi and Hurufi works by Naim Frashëri*) testify to the Romanians' responsiveness to all oppressed minorities, an open attitude which is also accountable for the absence of tension between the majority of the Orthodox Christians and the Muslim minority, mainly based in Dobroudja.

While Chapter 5 (42–53) is focused on Popular Sufism in Bulgaria and Macedonia, Chapter 6 is a detailed report on 'The heterodox hero', the mythical Sari Saltik and his many tombs in Albanian and in Tatar lands (54–66). Covering a large area both in Europe and the Near East, his exploits are traced from Central Asia to Northern Europe. Harry Norris diligently recorded here the reports, legends, documents, traveller's notes (including those of Evliya Çelebi), and references to this fascinating character, also including a photo of the Saint's tomb in Babadag, still visited by Muslim pilgrims (p. 56). To our knowledge, this is the most up-to-date and most thorough survey of Sari Saltik both as a historical figure and a mythical hero. For the Romanian researcher this report holds a special interest, in that it provides data from other regions that could prove useful in analyzing the Romanian chapter in this character's life (see especially *Exploits of Sari Saltik elsewhere in Eastern Europe*).

In the following chapters (Ch. 7, pp. 67–77, and Ch. 8, pp. 78–91) the author puts his experience as a traveller in Eastern Europe to good use, reporting on his findings in Albania and on the border with Greek Epirus. The survey is also based on archive documents and the letters of press correspondents at the beginning of the 20th century. As H. Norris duly notices, the predicament of the Albanian Bektashis

³ See Lucia Djamo-Diaconiță, *Un clasic albanez: Naim Frashëri*, off-print from "Studii de literatură universală", vol. IX, București, 1967, pp. 77–93; Kristo Frashëri, *Histoire d'Albanie (Bref aperçu)*, Tirana, 1964, pp. 153–161.

under Ottoman rule sadly recalls more recent events in Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia. The final Chapter, 9 (92–105), is a reflection on the role that Balkan Sufism could play in the future, also focusing on the Tatars of the Crimean peninsula. Comments included in *Sufism in the Crimean peninsula* and *Sufism in the age of the Crimean Khanate* bring important insight into a problem that already fascinated Demetrius Cantemir at the beginning of the 18th century. Having lived 22 years in Istanbul, his contacts with the populations of the Caucasus during the Russian military campaign (1721–1723) account for his interest in the Sufi movements that he surveyed knowledgeably in his *Book of the System or the Organization of the Muhammedan Religion*⁴, published in Russian by request of Tsar Peter I ('the Great').

One of the major qualities of this book is its deep rooting in contemporary events: from statements of Russian officials in 2003 (Vitaliy Naumkin, President of the Center for Strategic and Political Studies in Moscow, see *Conclusion*, pp. 106–108) to *The heyday of the Bektashi 'tekkes' in Iraq* (Appendix 1), the discourse evolves freely, not only across Mediaeval Asia and Europe, but also through modern times, wherever Sufi movements are active.

A most useful *Glossary* (122–128) allows the reader a better understanding of specialized terms, followed by extensive *Notes* to the text (129–148). In the closing *Select bibliography* (149–151), 'Classics' – Franz Babinger, Claude Cahen, Edith Durham, F. W. Hasluck – are recorded alongside the 'Moderns' – Alexandre Popovic, Nathalie Clay, Gilles Veinstein. The author makes a special mention of the books published by the International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations in Sofia, entitled *Muslim Culture in Bulgarian Lands*, which he defines as "a unique contribution to the study of 'Popular Sufism' and of recent research into its varied manifestations in Bulgaria" (p. 151)⁵. As a matter of fact, the example of the Bulgarian scholars is worth following by researchers in other South-East European countries, including Romania: to quote just one of their recent contributions to this field, Milka Andonova Hristova, a graduate of the 'St. Clement of Ochrid' Theological Faculty, University of Sofia, is the author of a study on *Musulmans et Chrétiens en Bulgarie du XIV^{ème} siècle à nos jours*⁶.

Addressing a considerable number of topics connected to religious movements in Central and Eastern Europe, *Popular Sufism...* provides an outstanding description of the spiritual landscape of these regions, mostly known so far, in their finer details, through focused contributions such as those of Machiel Kiel⁷ or Michel Balivet⁸. Moreover, this book brings up-to-date information and direct-source observations on communities living today in Balkan countries and beyond which, due to their strong roots and historical connections with Islam and the Oriental beliefs, have endured in spite of all obstacles, hostility and persecutions. Two decades after Alexandre Popovic and Gilles Veinstein's book *Les Ordres mystiques dans l'islam, cheminement et situation actuelle* (EHESS, Paris, 1985), Harry Norris offers to the scholarly world, and the general public as well, a comprehensive study that comes as a substantial addition, in historical, social, and literary terms, to the understanding of Sufism and its varieties in the Balkan area, Central Europe and the Near East.

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⁴ *Kniga sistima ili Sostojanie muhammedanskija religii*, Sankt-Peterburg, 1722. This is the first book written by a Romanian scholar where Sufi brotherhoods (*abdali*, *bektaşi*, *qadri*, *kalenderi*, *mevlevi*, *naksabandi*, etc.) are surveyed in detail. Beside Cantemir's Latin original, a Bulgarian and a Romanian version have been prepared so far.

⁵ The series (*Mysylmanskata Kultura po Bulgarskiite Zemii*) is edited by Dr Rossita Gradeva and colleagues at the Institute of Balkan Studies, with support from the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations (CSIC) at Selly Oaks, Birmingham.

⁶ Published in *ISLAMOCHRISTIANA*, 28(2002), pp. 125–147.

⁷ M. Kiel, *Sarı Saltuk: Pionier des Islam auf dem Balkan im 13. Jahrhundert* (in *Aleviler / Alewiten. Cilt 1 Band. Kimlik ve Tarih. Identität und Geschichte*, Mitteilungen 59, 2000, Deutsches Orient-Institut Hamburg, pp. 253–305); idem, *Ottoman Urban Development and the Cult of a Heterodox Sufi Saint: Sarı Saltuk Dede and Towns of Isağa and Babadağ in the Northern Dobruđa*, in *Syncretismes et hérésies dans l'Orient seldjoukide et ottoman (XIV^e–XVIII^e siècle)*, Peeters, Paris, 2005, pp. 283–298.

⁸ M. Balivet, *Islam mystique et révolution armée dans les Balkans ottomans. Vie du Cheikh Bedreddin 'le "Hallâj des Turcs" (1358/59–1416)*, Isis, Istanbul, 1995.