

# Moslem Saint or Sufi?

by **Geoffrey Clarfield and John Robert Colombo** (July 2015)

Introductory note: What you are about to read is a melange: a reworking of a review that John Robert Colombo prepared of a book written by Martin Lings, about a Moslem Saint or Sufi (your choice). Interspersed throughout *in italics* are comments on the review and the subject of the review that have been imaginatively, and retroactively attributed to the great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borge.

For those who are familiar with that giant of a 20<sup>th</sup> man of letters, his original tales were ever so slight retellings of true events, but with enough twists and turns that they could be nothing other than fiction, or perhaps, non verifiable alternate histories. We have followed in his footsteps here.

*Composed by "Jorge Luis Borges," John Robert Colombo, and Geoffrey Clarfield*

*It was hot, so hot, and all of Buenos Aires was hiding behind their air conditions. I picked up the book and then put it down, picked it up and put it down. Here was its title.*

## *Thoughts on a Moslem Saint or Sufi*

Notes on *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1971) published under the auspices of the University's Near Eastern Center.

*I labouriously lifted my pen and sipped at my Mate. I began to write:*

The appraisal that follows comprises my reactions following a single reading of the text of the biography of a man who in some circles is regarded as a Moslem saint or Sufi. The reactions – thoughts but essentially reactions and certainly disjointed ones at that – were generated after a somewhat close reading of this biography. The literary work itself was written by Martin Lings, the British Museum's long-time Keeper of Oriental and Printed Books and Manuscripts. Lings, an English-born writer and scholar, was known in the Moslem world as Abu Bakr Siraj Ad-Din. He died in England in 2005 at the age of ninety-six. The present volume is one of the many books that he wrote, but it is considered to be his most considerable and considered contribution.

It is the second biography written by Lings that I have read or tried to read. The first one was his acclaimed biography of the Prophet, "the first Moslem," titled *Muhammed: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (1983). I found the text of this book to be hagiography rather than biography and hence of limited interest to non-Moslem readers but probably quite engrossing and convincing to Moslem readers. There are two considerations to recommend it: it is written in a high style; it is indeed a work of consummate artistry. Believers will find it inspiring; non-believers will find it an accomplishment but hardly inspiring. Reading it will turn no heretic or sceptic into a follower or a believer, but it will certainly reward the believer and reinforce his (or her) love of its subject. It would be hard to go right with a critical biography of Muhammed; it is easy to go right with an appreciative biography of the Prophet. Lings goes right, but the work is, as I suggested, of circumscribed interest.

I have yet to name the book that I am discussing. It was originally published by George Allen & Unwin Ltd. in Great Britain in 1961 under the title *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century*. It came into existence as a doctoral dissertation for the University of London and in the process of being revised for book publication, the text never lost its fixed structure, though the author's style is fluidity itself. The title is one that is arresting enough to the reader who is interested in Islam and sainthood as well as in religious practices in modern times. For the average reader, with no such interests, it evokes no particular response. As I read it, I kept recalling the description of the *Book of Mormon* as a book of pseudo scriptures that was composed in the style of the King James Version of the Bible. Lings's book has the style or stylization of a "holy book." After all, who is this modern-day Moslem saint? The book was published for a limited readership but to unlimited acclaim for its research and insights. It may not be the first in its field but it is considered the field's finest. I could research the matter and quote from "critical" reactions to it, but both the casual and the concerned reader would find it to be what the French call *parti pris*, or "position taken."

*What was I doing? Who was I trying to fool? I know that mystics cannot write about what cannot be written. What was I doing writing this review, which was becoming a review of a review, or perhaps an essay on a review of a review. I thought to myself perhaps if I calculate the time it takes to write this and my hourly rate as Professor of English at the University of Buenos Aires I can justify the exploration of this paradox.*

The biography was republished as *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* in 1971. So it may be seen that within one decade it warranted a second edition, revised and enlarged by the author, an edition that bears the imprint of the University of California Press in Berkeley which published it "under the auspices of the Near Eastern Center." This is the edition that I have read with equal amounts of frustration and fascination. The decade between the appearance of the two editions was marked by an increased interest in Sufism, at least in the Western world.

I have not seen a copy of the first edition, but I have examined the second edition and it bears the subtitle "His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy." The personal pronoun refers to Shaikh Ahmd al-'Alaw? who established his own *zāwiyah* or study centre (seminary, monastery, tekka) in his birthplace of Mostaganem, Algeria. It proved to be a spiritual powerhouse for it wielded a tremendous influence throughout the Levant, the Maghreb, Western Europe, and the United States. The Shaikh was the founder of a popular modern Sufi order, the Darqawiyya Alawiyya, a branch of the Darqawi Shadhili tariqa. It was within its walls in the 1960s that Robert Irwin, then a student, now the noted Orientalist, undertook to become a latter-day Sufi. Decades later he published an account of his youthful, energetic, and varied experiences in *Memoirs of a Dervish: Sufis, Mystics and the Sixties*, a lively and even irreverent account. It dented my appreciation of Sufism, for I found myself asking the question, Is this the way Sufis are trained?

*I cannot review this in a meaningful way. Can I write that that is indeed the case? Would my readers know what it is I am trying to explain? Would those youngsters who were off at ashrams in Nepal and India even want to read what I think about this? Perhaps I am writing it for when they are my age. Perhaps for the children.*

I cannot review *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* in any meaningful way as I have no context in which to place it, except in terms of my own experiences and these do not extend to

Islam, whether Shite or Sunni, Sufism, Algeria, the Middle East, or what it means to be a Moslem in the early Twentieth Century. I assume those readers who know more will know better, but that is an assumption that I take on faith – my faith. It is not a belief, because I am disconcerted as may be the reader, casual or committed, by the points that I am about to make.

The Shaikh was a man of no formal education and his sole training was as a cobbler. He came from a poor family and his relatives were scattered about and the family kept relocating in the region. One of his boasts is that he lies in “direct line of descent” from the Prophet, a direction of thought that carries more weight in the Middle East than it does elsewhere in the world. As for his own family life, he was married and divorced four times. In managing the *zāwiyah* he employed his close family members.

Why is he regarded as a saint, at least by Lings? No miracles have been attributed to him, though it has to be said that in his day he mightily impressed his followers with his holiness and sanctity, his devotion and knowledge, as well as his insights into religious custom and practice. He also impressed outsiders like his personal physician, the French doctor who wrote knowingly and understandingly about his patient, whose memoirs are quoted at length in these pages. Indeed, his face is often compared with that of Jesus, but it is the painful frown of the Sorrowful Jesus or the Crucified Christ that observers have in mind, not the resplendent image of the Resurrected Christ. The sole foreign language he knew was French and he did spend some time in Paris, but otherwise his travels were circumscribed to the world he knew best. It seems he felt that Islam could relax and modernize and treat with the West without condescension, without excoriating Western values, the needless and heedless route undertaken by the French Traditionalist René Guénon who did enough of this to last a number of lifetimes. There is no evidence of wide reading, or indeed of any reading, outside the scriptures and the standard commentaries on them. He did write a number of self-published texts of commentaries as well as a number of collections of aphorisms and poems. Reading these literary works in the English translations that appear in these pages is a disheartening experience, as it seems that his aphoristic insights and philosophical-lyrical poems have defied the translator, presumably Mr. Lings. For much of his life he suffered poor health.

*What did he look like? What was he like when he was young? I want to know what he experienced in Paris? I want to write a point for point comparison of the Paris that I know, my Anglo Argentinian Paris. I want to know if these two cities know each other. Can I place the music that he listened to beside my own? Can I turn it into a film? I will write Buñuel and ask him what he thinks.*

Authorities in Algeria and elsewhere regarded him with suspicion and in no way assisted him in running his *zāwiyah*. He had disciples and followers rather than friends and well-wishers, though I take that to be one of the hazards of establishing oneself – or being established by followers – as a religious leader, as a super-imam, so to speak. The direction that he took was regarded as theologically unsound by some, unorthodox by others. In records of conversations with him, and in the recollections of his pupils or students, he displays no knowledge of the world or of people other than his own. Many of his major decisions were undertaken (or were said to be taken) following prophetic dreams and visions, the distinction between these two modes of insight being unclear, unlike the distinction between inspiration and revelation, which seems clarity itself; as far as I could see, he did not claim the blessing of revelation. The last two pages of the book are taken up with his “spiritual ancestry” in the form of a family tree, sort of a “descent of man,” a notion that as I suggested in the Middle East holds more sway than it does in the West. Finally, I must admit that although I find the two titles of these so-called biographies to be arresting, I feel uneasy when I contemplate them.

The Shaikh was unquestionably a Moslem, and he was described by his followers and perhaps so described by himself as a Sufi. But “saint”? He was undoubtedly an inspired teacher. Yet during his lifetime and thereafter, leading Orientalists in France and elsewhere failed to take him and his movement seriously. Perhaps he was ignored because he was pietistic, poetic, philosophical, and maybe even pretentious. “His fame has none the less reached [Emil] Dermenghem, who refers to him in passing as ‘one of the most celebrated mystic Shaikhs of our time’ ... and [Louis] Massignon also very occasionally mentions him, though here again it is never more than a passing reference.” Do I note condescension there? If I do, it was not given any attention by the author. No reason is given for this neglect by the leading Orientalists of his day except for the statement that “he knew that most of what he wrote was not for everybody.” This is a critical biography?

The book is not without its lighter moments. Here are insights that made me pause to reflect further.

It is one of the excellencies of Islam that there is no laity and that every Moslem is in a sense a priest, spiritual authority being shared by the community as a whole. On the other hand it is one of the excellencies of Christianity that it has a definitely constituted spiritual authority consisting of a small minority of men whose lives are dedicated to religion, the other-worldliness of their office being stressed in various

ways and in general by the fact that its function does not extend to the domain of temporal power .... (88-9)

*We still do not know where Sufism came from. Is it a survival from Hellenistic times? Is it the softening of the hardness of Islam? Is it the expression of the abstract made personal, or is it simply an oriental version of the Amerindian shaman?*

Hujw?r?, an eleventh century Sufi of Lahore, quotes the tenth century Fushanj? as having said: 'Today Sufism is a name without a reality, but formerly it was a reality without a name,' and Hujw?r? himself adds: 'In the time of the Companions (of the Prophet) and their successors this name did not exist, but the reality thereof was in everyone; now the name existeth, but not the reality.' (34)

A remark that I will not soon forget is one acerbic one attributed to René Guénon who is quoting with approval an earlier but unidentified Shaikh: "If Christians have the sign of the Cross, Moslems have its doctrine." (99)

Lings may well be constrained by his subject matter, perhaps because so little background material exists in print and hardly any of it probes psychological depths. Because his erudition floods the text of the chronological study of his subject's life, the reader senses that the author would rather pause at odd junctures and dwell on peripheral points. Is there any independent research upon which the author could draw? The flood's overflow is caught in the copious footnotes that appear on the bottom third of pretty well every one of this study's 231 pages.

As I feel uneasy about recording these reactions – and they are reactions rather than reasoned responses – so that there is the sense that I am missing the message of the book. I am certainly bypassing any expositions of "the doctrine" which is alluded to in passing, as if it were too precious to be discussed, and I am likely short-changing many of the spiritual insights. (One point that does stand out is that with one's spiritual life, one must make efforts to rise above one's own spiritual power.) But what the author's message or purpose or "Wont" is, I am not certain. I suspect that Martin Lings, who has not given his reasons for recording all of this information in a semi-critical fashion, is expressing an honest wish to acknowledge this man's contribution, an immense one from what I gather, as the influence of the man continues to be felt in Sufi circles to this day. Yet, as of this writing, the website

of the *zāwiyah* is out of commission. (Maybe I am old fashioned but I find it odd that a Sufi order would even have a website.) One wonders what the order is doing to find followers, people who are Muslim at heart and need no head to convince them to declare themselves otherwise.

Many and various are the reasons for bothering to write books. Some books are composed for reasons that are middling or mean, others to further lost causes. This book (in its two editions) has been carefully contrived to express a point of view, a *parti pris*. The author has laboured mightily; the reader may find it the expression of an opinion, an expression that is contagious or infectious, without necessarily finding it or its subject at all moving or convincing. This book is certainly a "classic" in its field. But it is not a first-rate biography, leaving as many questions unasked and artfully unanswered.

*Must I send this off to the publishing house? What will they think? What about my friends there? Will they not ask me at the end of all of this, are you a Sufi, have you ever been a Sufi, do you understand the burden of Islam and perhaps this is the way they make their revelation bearable? I fear I cannot write about that. I will prepare my lecture on Beowulf and then send this review to the publishing house. I will ask Alberto to do so. "Manguel," I call out in the darkness. He answers, "Si el professor." I tell him, "I have a task for you ..."*

---

**Geoffrey Clarfield** is an anthropologist at large.

**John Robert Colombo** is a Toronto-based author and anthologist with a special interest in Canadian lore and literature as well as the paranormal. His latest book is "The Northrop Frye Quote Book" (Dundurn Group).

To comment on this article, please click