

# REVIEW

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Muhammad 'Abdur Rabb's *Abu Yazid al-Bistami* (Dacca.

The Academy of Pakistan Affairs.1971) pp. xii + 253. Price N.M.

The full title of the book is: *The Life, Thought and Historical Importance of Abu Yazid al-Bistami*. The title is long and intimidating; the book is not. In fact, it is a refreshingly written account of the thought and person of one of the pillars of sufi tradition who became a legend in his own life time. Abu Yazid was exiled from Bistam seven times (p. 63). He is said to have stirred in his mother's womb whenever she took a forbidden food (p.40). It is reported of Abu Yazid that once he stood all night with a mug of water in his hands which he had brought for his mother who had gone back to sleep after having asked him to fetch water for her (ibid). He is also reported to have intimate knowledge of scholarly books even without having ever gone through them (p. 54). But Abu Yazid is not interesting merely because of his conscientiousness, his piety and obedience to his mother. He is important as a sufi. He is sufi who gave sufism and sufi doctrine depth and profundity (pp. 3-5). It is this aspect of Abu Yazid's to which 'Abdur Rabb has paid much attention and it makes this study a welcome addition to sufi literature in general and on Abu Yazid in particular.

The study is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter(pp. 9-34) surveys the major and minor sources of the research. Among them, 'Abdur Rabb counts Junayd Baghdadi, al-Sarraj, al-Kalabadhi, al-Sulami, 'Abu Ny'am, al-Qushayri, al-Hujweri, al-Sahlagi etc. The minor sources include orientalist such as Massignon, Horten, Arberry, Zaehner, Deladric etc. This distinction between the major and minor sources is a significantes. 'Abdur Rabb, has mainly relied upon the major sources, because there are not primary sources (p.10) and has mentioned the minor sources in order to criticise them with possible exception of Arberry.

The second chapter (pp. 35-80) deals with the life of Abu Yazid. 'Abdur Rabb, in this chapter, collects a mass of information regarding Abu Yazid and evaluates this information objectively. His task is not an easy one, since

he confesses, "the material on the biographies of the early sufis came to be linked up with legends and anecdotes which are more indicative of the esteem in which others held a sufi than they are of sober historical fact"(p.35). 'Abdur Rabb, however, is pretty successful in constructing from the facts available, discerning and true to life portrait of Abu Yazid.

From chapter 3rd onwards is discussed Abu Yazid's doctrine of Zuhd, Fana, Tawhid and Marifa (chap. IV). Fana is explained to have two aspects (a) negative and (b) positive. There are also degrees of fana starting from the dissociation of one-self from the physical, reaching the highest in 'fana an al-fana' (p.115). 'Abdur Rabb enumerates four levels or degrees of fana (pp. 114-115); he also sees, as I have mentioned, a positive aspect of fana. And this positive aspect is experienced in the union with God. This is tawhid. Abu Yazid believes that 'Having lost his own attributes, Sufi is clothed in Divine attributes; and achieves the experience of tawhid" (p. 115). Tawhid, however, is "much more than mere confession of God's oneness; it is a verification of His oneness by means of personal experience" (p. 117). The Sufi here realizes that "God is one, has no partners in his actions and no one does His acts" (p.119). In fact, the Sufi is one with God; he "wills by God's will, he looks according to God's looking, his heart is elevated by God's elevation, his soul (nafs) moves by the power of God "(ibid). If tawhid is understood in this sense then one can also have some insight into the paradoxical utterances of Abu Yazid, the famous Shatahat.

'Abdur Rabb has devoted forty three pages to Abu Yazid's Shatahat, and rightly too. Some sufis are reported to have made statements which, taken on their face, appear to go contrary to accepted Islamic ways regarding Hallaj's Anal Haqq. Abu Yazid's Shatahat, however, have special significance because they come from the lips of a sufi who is reported to be a "devoted orthodox Muslim .. "(p. 146). Abu Yazid made such statements' as "glory be to me! How great is my majesty!" "Indeed, my grip is stronger than His (God's)" (ibid). How one can account for such sayings?

One easy and ready mode of explanation of Abu Yazid's Shatahat would be that he uttered these words in a state of intense ecstasy. Al-Hujweri, for example says the same thing (pp.150-152). 'Abdur Rabb, however, disputes this explanation and observes that if what al-Hujweri says is correct how will we account for the cases where Abu Yazid "after having returned to the state of sobriety, asked his disciples to cut his throat" if he even again uttered such

things (pp. 147—48)? More-over, there are instances where we find Abu Yazid all sober and without being in a state of sukr, making such paradoxical statements (p.149). I think the point is well taken. However, the problem of the explanation of Shatahat remains unsolved. In this regard Rumi's explanation is worth mentioning to which 'Abdur Rabb also makes a reference Rumi asks why God cannot speak with human tongue? That God does speak in this manner is shown by the fact that his words in the Quran were spoken on the lips of Muhammad" (p. 183).

In the chapter VI (pp. 184-221) is discussed the 'problem of possible Indian influence on Abu Yazid. This is a very important chapter and 'Abdur Rabb has done some pure research work here. Students of sufism are not unaware that good many western orientalisists have repeatedly stated that sufi doctrines and sufi practices have been influenced by Budhist thought (Nicholson). Massignon rather guardedly suggested possible Hindu influence and Horten "tried industriously to prove that there was an Indian influence in Abu Yazid, al-Hallaj and al-Junayd" (p. 187). 'Abdur Rabb who has done his home work carefully, disputes the contentions of western orientalisists and rejects them justifiably.

'Abdur Rabb has been successful in establishing that there is no relation between the Sufi concepts of 'Tana' and the Budhist doctrine of Nirvana; no parallel between the Sufi 'Shajarah' and the Hindu 'Svattah's and, Abu Yazid's 'Subhani' and 'Mahyam eva Name Namah' of the Upanishids (pp.188-202). 'Abdur Rabb concludes that there is little to show that Abu Yazid was influenced by Indian thought.

This conclusion, I believe, can be generalized to cover other sufis and sufism in its wider context. That this will not be an illegitimate generalization, gets support from the influence of Abu Yazid on subsequent Sufi doctrines. We can say that what holds good in the case of Abu Yazid, that he is not influenced by Indian thought holds true with regard to later sufism as well.

As I have already said, the book under review is a welcome addition to the growing literature on Sufism. I, however, believe that read in the context of recent philosophy, sufi thoughts and dectrines have a very contemporary ring. The doctrine of 'Tana an al-fana' can be said to be a very early existentialist expression. Similarly, the existentialists notions of Nothingness, Non-Being, the argument about the Contingency of Existence, and the desire for an authentic existence leave a decidedly sufi colour. It is possible to establish a rational dialogue between Sufism in general and Abu Yazid's in

particular and contemporary existentialism. At least this is what I have felt going through the book under review.

There are not many printing mistakes but I have found three: on page 10 read 'Major source' for 'Major Sour'; on page 176, line 21 read 'Shatahat' for 's-taha,; the same line, next sentence read 'It' for '-t'. The book, however, is handsomely brought out.