New Blackfriars

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Comment: *The Sufis*

Persian Sufis, published in 1964 by Fr Cyprian Rice OP (Allen & Unwin), and long out of print, has been reissued, rather expensively (Taylor & Francis Ltd Routledge, 2011, 104 pages, £65.00). It is all that survives of the English Dominican initiative in Persia.

Cyprian Rice had a chequered career, even for an English Dominican. Born in 1889, son of the Baptist minister at Woodchester, Gloucestershire, young Rice entered the Levant Consular Service, which looked after British interests in the Ottoman Empire. He was sent to study Arabic, Persian and Turkish at Cambridge, where he became a Catholic. Throughout the First World War he served in the Middle East. In 1919, as soon as he could, he entered the novitiate (at Woodchester). He found the Provincial, Fr Bede Jarrett, very responsive when he shared his dreams of an apostolate among Muslims, in Persia particularly (as Iran then was). In 1927 the French Dominicans, having got wind of Rice's expertise, had the Master of the Order assign him to join them at Mosul (in Iraq). After two years, Jarrett succeeded in moving him to the Apostolic Delegate's staff in Tehran. In 1933, with Fr Dominic Blencowe, Rice opened the English Dominican mission in Shiraz, one of the oldest cities in the world, then as now the holiest and most beautiful place in Iran. Thwarted by the new Delegate's suspicions as well as by the Persian government, the venture did not prosper, lasting less than two years. (Blencowe had previously served sixteen years on the Caribbean mission and eventually volunteered to return, dying in Grenada in 1960.) Rice spent the next twelve years in various parishes back in England. In 1947 he was drafted to the Dominican Institute of Oriental Studies in Cairo. In 1956, however, he went to Rome as a penitentiary at St Mary Major's, hearing confessions in several languages: the longest uninterrupted spell of ministry in his whole life as it turned out. He returned to England in 1966, to die on 26 August. He was buried at Woodchester.

The Dominican association with Persia goes back to 1246. Some 130 years of flourishing apostolate ended in martyrdom when Timur conquered the country in 1381. Later on, a generation of Armenian Orthodox monks who became Catholic adopted Dominican customs, and renewed the Dominican presence for another two centuries. The house in Tehran founded in 1962 by the Irish Dominicans now serves the international, mostly expatriate Catholic community.

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What we know as Sufism appeared in the ninth century. A generation of Muslim ascetics became known as Sufis from their coarse wool (*suf*) robes, the controversial etymology that Rice for one accepts. Their aim was to spiritualize Islam from within, to give it a deeper, mystical interpretation, and infuse into it a spirit of love and liberty.

When Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council Rice (then in Rome) decided to offer his study of Islamic mysticism as a modest contribution to better understanding of the inner life of the vast Muslim populations of Asia and Africa. Perhaps romantically, he even envisaged 'a welding of religious thought between East and West, a vital, ecumenical commingling and understanding, which will prove ultimately to be, in the truest sense, on both sides, a return to origins, to the original unity'. Historically, it is true, Sufism has attracted adherents among both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, as well as Jews, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists, more widely and eclectically, through such Persian sages as the poet Rumi (1207–1273) and the philosopher al-Ghazali (c1058–1111).

In today's Islamic world, however, adherents of the Sufi way are savagely persecuted in many Muslim countries, such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and also in Iran. For Islamists, like the Wahhabis and the Taliban, the Sufis are simply heretics. To think of Islam without considering the Sufis is to ignore the most crucial clash: not the conflict between allegedly fundamentalist Islam and the supposedly Christian or secular West, but the struggle within Islam itself. Probably a fifth of the world's Muslims today identify with Sufism, and for many millions more, women especially, Sufism is an atmosphere in which to breathe. Sufi practices and attitudes dominate in non-Arab Muslim societies: in India and Pakistan, in Indonesia and Malaysia, Nigeria and Senegal, and in Central Asia. The Sufis, we may say, are, potentially, the best hope for pluralism and democracy within Muslim nations.

Nobody could imagine that building bridges with Sufis will resolve the problems that divide the West from the (very complex) Islamic world. Sufi traditions could provide from within much more effective resistance against terrorism and tyranny than anything the West imposes by military interventions and financial inducements. While Cyprian Rice's hopes for Catholic/Muslim 'commingling' may have been utopian, the best hope for global peace is surely not a decline or (even more unlikely) secularization of Islam, but rather a renewal of that faith, in its spiritual and mystical Sufi dimensions.

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