Sviri, Sara: *Perspectives on Early Islamic Mysticism. The World of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and his Contemporaries.* London/New York: Routledge 2020. XII, 364 S. 8° = Routledge Sufi Series 23. Hartbd. £ 115,00. ISBN 978-0-415-30283-8.

Besprochen von **Pieter Coppens:** Amsterdam / Niederlande,
E-Mail: p.coppens@vu.nl

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This is a very good book that everyone interested in Islamic mysticism as a historical phenomenon should read. Where Karamustafa's much acclaimed introductory work *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh UP, 2007) is an ideal work for courses on the history of Sufism on BA and MA level, this more advanced and detailed work should be obligatory reading for PhD candidates and early career scholars. It is an ideal source to advance their knowledge and research skills on Islamic mysticism in the formative period, and to become up to date with the most important theoretical and methodological discussions pertaining it. Through the lens of the ideas and works of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 295/908) and his contemporaries, it makes the reader aware of the many challenges and pitfalls when working on this in many ways opaque period.

The introduction contains an important overview of main issues in the study of Islamic mysticism in the formative period, that Sviri intends to address through this work. It has a somewhat unusual personal start for an academic study, which turns out to be highly valuable. The author explains her journey towards the topic of early Islamic mysticism in general, as well as the figure of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī in particular. She mentions her main sources of scholarly inspiration, with Paul Nwyia, to whom the book is dedicated, as the ultimate inspiration. For early career scholars this is a gentle reminder how also senior scholars that we tend to look up to were once like us, and how one's work and career is shaped by many coincidences and personal curiosities. What would Sviri have done with her life if the grand MJ Kister was not her Arabic teacher in high

school? Would she have delved so deeply into this particular subject if she was not puzzled by the question why al-Tirmidhi had not become a household name in the later Sufi tradition, and intrigued by his uncommon doctrine of the ‘Seal of Saints’ (*khātam al-awliyā*)?

The overview she offers of scholars and works that inspired her in her own work (p. 3–5) is an indispensable reading list for anyone who wishes to work on this particular period. The only thing that surprised me in this list is the absence of indispensable studies of early Islamic mysticism in German, from the likes of Meier, Ritter, Gramlich and Radtke (who published on al-Tirmidhi as well). I first thought this might be a language issue, since these works are regularly overlooked for this reason. These works in German do figure in the bibliography however. The works of Ritter and Meier have been translated to English as well, and the inclusion of Josef van Ess’ classic on al-Muḥāsibī in her list of inspirations makes it clear that German is not an obstacle. Is it perhaps an ideological choice then? That would surprise me, since her historicist yet still warm approach to the material is very comparable to theirs. If indeed so, this is something the author should mention, since this would be informative for the reader to understand the subtle differences in approaches between several schools in the study of Islamic mysticism, and the tensions they sometimes cause.

Sviri then goes on with introducing some important remarks on methodology and concepts when dealing with the formative period of Islamic mysticism, that are fundamental to her book. She proposes to analyze the material at hand from two perspectives simultaneously: (1) finite and closed, and (2) fluid and open-ended. The addition of the second perspective is indispensable in the study of any formative period she argues, since focusing only on the first perspective bares the risk of understanding ‘evolving processes as *faits accomplis*’. It instead ‘should be reviewed alongside its built-in distortions and bias’, which the combination of the two guarantees (p. 6).

Late Antiquity, she argues, is something that should be considered as innate to that fluid perspective. Early Islamic mysticism can only be understood as a continuity of late antique traditions of mysticism. This is a lacuna in the currently thriving scholarship on Islam and Late Antiquity that she thinks should be filled. This fluid perspective also necessitates a revision of the idea of ‘influence’ in history. Sviri holds this too rigid a concept to understand the relation of Islamic mysticism to Late Antiquity, since it supposes an active attitude and awareness of historical

agents and receivers, while these processes were in reality much more an ‘osmotic flow’ (p. 6). She prefers to speak of ‘continuity’, which opens up analysis for processes of exchange that were not necessarily conscious and aware. It then suffices to establish common thought patterns, concepts and themes, without ending up in inevitably ideological reconstructions of who influenced whom and who borrowed from whom.

Sviri also problematizes the use of the terms Sufism and Islamic mysticism in the introduction, as has become quite common by now in scholarship on Sufism. The relevance of al-Tirmidhi to later mainstream Sufism lies in his teaching on *wilāya*, as well as his ‘Mystical Psychology’, especially the role of polar categories in it. She is critical of the mainstream paradigm that Sufism evolved from asceticism (*zuhd*), which she promises to further elaborate on in Chapter 1. The term Sufism cannot be projected back on al-Tirmidhi and his likes from the formative period she holds, since it became mainstream only later, and certainly was not undisputed among early mystics. Contrary to several recent studies, she deliberately chooses not to choose a neologism, but to liberally apply the term ‘mysticism’ and its derivatives to these proto-Sufi movements. This is despite being conceptually alien to Islamic tradition, rooted as they are in Greek and in Christianity. She believes it is ‘a valid term for a particular *type* of religious quest’, not in the sense of a designation, but of a ‘*delineation* of the typology’ (p. 12).

This particular type of religious quest, motivated by a sense of unfulfillment with ‘sheer religious observation or by hopes of reward in the afterlife’ contains certain specific elements: ‘search, intimate nearness to God, love of and by God and God’s knowledge’ (p. 12). To reach this, seekers need ultimate sincerity (*ikhhlās*) and trustworthiness (*ṣidq*), for which their ‘culpable interiority’, the *nafs*, has to be trained and the heart (*qalb*) polished. Communal practices for this, as we know so well from later Sufi tradition, mainly in its organization in *ṭuruq*, are still largely absent in the writings of the formative period. Remembrance of God (*dhikr*) does resurface collectively however, beside the individual practice. Sviri calls this ‘performative language’, which was a sacred and potent tool against personal and collective calamities for al-Tirmidhi. She promises to further discuss this in Chapter 12. Sviri wishes to focus on both individual and collective spaces in the formative period of Islamic mysticism. The writings of al-Tirmidhi contain a lot of introspection, but also correspondence with other mystics, most notably the ‘People of Blame’ (*al-malāmatiyya*), that can ‘fill in some lacunae

in sketching the multifaceted landscape during this early period of Islamic mysticism'. To this she promises to dedicate specific chapters.

Let us now turn to the chapters of the book that contain her actual historical analysis, to see whether she delivers on all these valid and highly important points mentioned in the introduction. The book is divided into five thematic parts, all consisting of two or three chapters. Most chapters (1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13) have been published before as separate studies. They therefore sometimes contain some points of repetition and do not always contribute to the thematic cohesion of the monograph. This does make it perfectly possible to read them as separate essays however. The relatively short length of chapters (every part would normally roughly make up a regular chapter) makes them comfortable to digest.

Part I deals with the asceticism/Sufism paradigm, that she challenges. In Chapter 1 she further explains her vision on the Sufism/mysticism conundrum. She shows her dislike for post-Eliade and Saidian criticisms on the terms, and wants to be less radical in her historical inquiry. To escape the over-theorization of terms current in history of religion, she proposes to return to the primary sources themselves, and analyze how these actually discuss the terms. She defines mysticism as 'a current within religions and cultures, associated with voluntary efforts, usually beyond and in addition to traditional religious practices, aimed at gaining an intensified experience of the sacred' (p. 24). The Sufi from the third/ninth century onwards definitely falls within definition according to her, but for the formative period it is more dubious: 'it turns out that not all *Ṣūfis* were mystics and that not all mystics were named *Ṣūfis*' (p. 25). She shows how the label *al-ṣūfī* in the formative period did not refer to mystics at all, but to 'two different social types – the rough-living, harsh and controversial ascetic on the one hand, and the honourable, pious, well-to-do religious leader on the other' (p. 30). The diachronic and linear paradigm of mysticism evolving from asceticism Sviri considers a fallacy, too simplistic for the complexities of this formative period. She challenges it as an invention of Ibn Khaldūn that later scholars uncritically adopted. Ascetics were not even proto-mystics according to her, and the trends kept coexisting with each other as separate trends throughout Islamic history, that sometimes coincidentally had tangent planes.

Chapter 2 further focuses on *zuhd*, that Sviri purposely translates with asceticism, considering recent translations as 'abstention' or 'renunciation' unnecessary. According to

her *zuhd* signifies an attitude rather than a conduct, and the term 'asceticism' emphasizes that sufficiently. She defines three types of *zuhd* in the formative period, coexisting simultaneously: (1) an extreme type; (2) a mild type; (3) *zuhd* as an elementary, primary and necessary mystical station. Since (3) existed from the very beginning, it makes no sense to speak of a development of later Sufism from *zuhd*. Sviri shows how under influence of al-Tirmidhī the mystics developed an attitude of relinquishing asceticism for the sake of asceticism (*tark al-zuhd* or *al-zuhd fī al-zuhd*). True *zuhd* is an illusion, since the divine realm cannot be attained by one's own efforts: one should renounce one's own desires and ambitions, including *zuhd*, and submit oneself fully to the will of God.

Chapter 3 explains the relation between early mystics, *zuhd* and monasticism. It shows how early Islamic mystics solved their closeness to monastic practices despite clear texts from the Prophet forbidding a monastic lifestyle, by distinguishing between two types of monasticism: one that was sincere, true to the original teachings of Jesus, that would ultimately integrate into Islam; and one distorted and hypocritical, too extreme and ostentatious in its ascetic practices, and built on a distortion (*tahrīf*) of earlier Scriptures. The analysis in this chapter is meticulous and original, including sources of exegesis in her understanding of the relation between Islamic mysticism and monasticism, and Islamic visions on the origins of monasticism. It would have been worthwhile to address how al-Tirmidhī's criticism on the outward aspects of 'wrong' monasticism, like tonsures that he considered exhibitionist, may have been related to current *malāmātī* ideas on eye-service (*riyā'*) and was also a criticism of two types of *zuhd* in his own age.

Part II focuses on schools and teachers in early Islamic mysticism, and consists of three chapters as well. Chapter 4 is a republication of a work from 1999, and deals with the relationship between *zuhd*, the Path of Blame (*malāmatiyya*) and Sufism. As has become the standard narrative on the formative period by now (see earlier mentioned work of Karamustafa), Sviri shows how the formative period in Nishapur witnessed several mystical circles that often differed with each other on issues of mystical psychology. These would only in later compilations become known under the banner of Sufism, with ideas considered errant by then removed, as was the case with the Karrāmiyya. A point of contention among these different circles was outwardly shown *zuhd*, that the People of Blame considered a form of eye-service (*riyā'*). Sviri takes this as a proof that mysticism did not evolve from *zuhd*, but often was in opposition to it. Al-Tirmidhī was also critical of the People of

Blame, who according to him were ironically too focused on knowledge of the *nafs* in their attempts to eliminate it. The *nafs* could only be absolved by God, a complete focus on knowledge of God was therefore necessary.

Chapter 5 offers further evidence for the gradual merging of local mystical trends from Nishapur and Baghdad to a global movement under the common name of Sufism. The main value of this chapter lies in a methodological proposal: one should ‘map the affiliations that connected individual mystics of this period to one another’, ‘to review the socio-historical and local context of their activities’ (p. 105). As a start to this, Sviri analyzes a thus far overlooked manuscript, al-Khargūshī’s (d. ca. 406/1015–6) *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, to conclude that a shared Sufi-Shī‘ī tradition had developed in Nishapur. She proposes this work should be further studied alongside al-Sulamī’s works, with an analysis of both *isnād* and *matn*. Applying such a method to these sources shows how trends from Nishapur and Baghdad gradually grew more towards each other through shared teachers, and how the People of Blame slowly left behind the idea of hiding their inner devotional life.

Chapter 6 analyzes the correspondence between al-Tirmidhī and Muḥammad b. al-Faḍl (d. 319/931), another mystic who encountered hostility in Transoxania. Sviri suggests that al-Tirmidhī mainly encountered hostility for claiming that the *walī* has a better understanding of *sharī‘a* matters than the regular ‘*ālim*, because he has deeper wisdom of God’s purposes with the law, and for incorporating elements in his mystical theory that aroused suspicion of Shi‘ism. In the case of Ibn al-Faḍl it should rather be sought in political and theological changes in Balkh during his life.

Part III deals with the polarity in mystical understandings of God and the world, an inevitable strategy in navigating the theodicy question from a mystical perspective. Chapter 7 shows how the idea of polarity in mystical states is rooted in (Late) Antiquity as well as the Qur’an, and discusses some aspects of the ‘theory of opposites’ in early Islam mysticism, and the entanglement of polarity in God and human. In Chapter 8 Sviri gives an overview of theories on transformation of the self (*nafs*), and how polarities here also play a role in the stages on the way. She shows how practice and discipline are necessary according to these theories, but ultimately transformation comes through divine grace. Chapter 9 shows the polarity between the concepts of *ḥaqq* and *raḥma* in the writings of al-Tirmidhī, its continuity with Late antiquity, and its embodiment ‘in historical personalities as well as in social and religious groups’ (p. 202).

In two chapters, Part IV delves into aspects of spiritual hierarchy in the formative period. Chapter 10 pays attention to the concept of *wilāya* (which Sviri translates as ‘friendship of man and God’) as developed by al-Tirmidhī. She compares his doctrine of *wilāya* with a tree, with a large diversity of branches that one can analyze from the viewpoint of anthropology, space and temporality. Typical for al-Tirmidhī is that he considers the *awliyā’* the ultimate heirs of the prophets, and the highest spiritual authorities. Before the end of time, a seal (*khātim*) of *awliyā’* will be sent, who like the seal of prophets will have the unique right of intercession, and is in parallel with the Prophet in sincerity. Chapter 11, in my opinion the best chapter of the monograph, explores the (Late) Antique motif of a myrtle as a symbol for the ‘righteous’ in early Islamic mysticism, through an interpretation of a spiritual dream from a 9th-century Muslim woman from Transoxiana. Through this case study, Sviri further elucidates an issue raised in the introduction, how it is better to speak of ‘continuity’ of this motif than of ‘influence’ from Late Antiquity.

Part V is dedicated to language and hermeneutics, in two chapters as well. In Chapter 12, Sviri reconstructs al-Tirmidhī’s theory of what she dubs ‘mystical linguistics’: ‘it is the mystic, the Friend of God (*al-walī*), and not the magician (*al-sāḥir*) who truly acquires the knowledge of the power that words contain’ (p. 269). Words are God-given, inseparable from the essence of the named; mystical knowledge of words is retrieved through inner senses, that function optimally when the inner life is regulated; language does not only lead to mystical insight, but is also produced as empowered language by mystical insight. The *walī* thus has the most powerful language that places him highest in the spiritual hierarchy. Chapter 13 deals with the practice of *istinbāt*, deducing meanings from texts, in a specific Sufi context. Sviri shows how the ability to deduce mystical meanings from texts, according theories of the likes of al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) and al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), is highly dependent on the individual spiritual state of the interpreters, and their corresponding ability of attentive listening, which is a prerequisite to come to understanding and witnessing.

All studies are thoroughly researched, show a good command of the primary literature, as well as the ability to analyze these texts in their late antique context in lucid language. A minor point of criticism is the way chapters are structured: it would sometimes be helpful to have some stronger reiterating conclusions (as Ch. 2, 11, 12 and 13 do have), to remind the reader of what Sviri is arguing, and

to point out how the individual essays, most of them published before in journals and edited volumes, fit within the larger narrative of the monograph. This goes for the monograph itself as well: a concluding chapter would have helped the reader to experience more unity and coherence throughout this otherwise excellent work, which due to its comprehensiveness in both themes and methods is an ideal starting point for aspiring researchers in the field of early Islamic mysticism. Although more than half of the work was published before, it is very useful to have it all available together in a single monograph, as a testimony of the important work Sviri has done for our understanding of early Islamic mysticism.