

**Universal dimensions of Islam: studies in comparative religion**, edited by Patrick Laude, Bloomington IN, World Wisdom Inc., 2011, x + 168 pp., \$23.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-935493-57-0.

Professor Patrick Laude has assembled a remarkable anthology of literature about Sufi Islam that is both esoteric in subject matter and eclectic in scope and diversity. A collection of articles by various authors detailing religious, spiritual, esoteric, poetic and/or metaphysical issues always runs the risk of descending into the obscure, the obtuse and the oblique. However Laude successfully manages to keep the book focused and coherent. The aim of this book, as stated by the editor, is to 'make the case for a vision of Islam as a religion and civilization intrinsically equipped to address universal human predicaments, and converging thereby with the highest spiritual expressions of all authentic religious heritages' (p. vii). Whilst the articles are all in English, the selection does lean clearly towards authors from Francophone countries. Thus many articles are translations of French originals.

French-born Laude is at Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, where he has been teaching since 2006. His academic work is focused on comparative mysticism, the symbolic imagination in religion and literature, and Western interpretations of Islam and Eastern traditions. He serves as editor-in-chief for the inter-religious journal *Religions-Adyan* published by the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue. In *Universal dimensions of Islam: studies in comparative religion*, Laude demonstrates his on-going interest in the late Frithjof Schuon (also known as *Shaykh 'Isa Nur al-Din Ahmad al-Shadhili al-Darquwi al-'Alawi al-Maryami*). In fact, the name Frithjof Schuon turns up conspicuously and repeatedly – almost every author is in some way, however loosely, associated with the Alsatian-Swiss Sufi convert or his philosophical and metaphysical writings. One might almost describe this book as an omnibus of the *Philosophia perennis*. However, Laude does make a genuine effort to incorporate a wide spectrum of opinions on his pet subject. There are authors from across Europe and the Arab world, an Indian scholar, a Malian diplomat and even a Japanese graduate from Tehran University. However there is only one female contributor here, Professor Sachiko Murata, which seems somewhat amiss. Also there is an obvious gap in that the Turkish, Tatar, Balkan and Caucasian Sufi traditions seem to have been missed altogether. One might ask: where are the Mevlana or Bektashi writers?

I found the outstanding article of the anthology to be the 'Interview on Islam and inter-religious dialogue' with Professor Seyyid Hossein Nasr of Iran. With a breadth and depth of intellectual eloquence really only matched by the late Edward Said, Nasr effortlessly demonstrates the relevance of faith in a post-modern society. He dips and dives into the Qur'an, history, ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman civilizations, Islam, Western society, and Western intellectual and philosophical traditions, with a finesse that is sometimes breathtaking. Reading his interview is akin to watching a skilled master craftsman at work and only leaves one wondering why we do not seem to hear or see enough of him. The other highlight is the lengthy biography of John Gustaf Agelii, also called Ivan Aguéli, and also known as Sheikh 'Abd al-Hadi 'Aqili after his conversion to Sufi Islam. This Swedish-born peripatetic painter and author initiated the French intellectual René Guénon (Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya) into Sufism, but after the British deported him from Egypt he died in obscure circumstances in Spain in 1917. The biography is as interesting as his translated article.

This book will mostly appeal to students of Sufism and others, both Muslim and non-Muslim, eager to learn more about Islam. It is certainly meticulous in its content, lucid in exposition and style, and honest in terms of the editor's assumptions.

