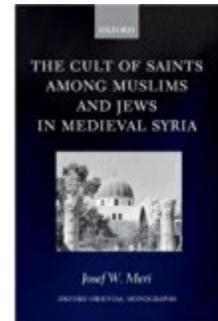


Josef W. Meri. *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. viii + 327 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-925078-3.

Reviewed by Richard McGregor (Department of Religious Studies, Vanderbilt University)
Published on H-Mideast-Medieval (June, 2004)



A Pillar of Fire Is over His Grave: Saints and Shrines in Medieval Syria

This book is an impressive contribution to our knowledge of the medieval practice of saint veneration and pilgrimage among Syrian Jews and Muslims. It is well researched and carefully organized. In approach this book is descriptive. Although it offers no dramatic new explanation of the cult of saints, it is very thorough, bringing much new material to light. Presenting the two religious traditions in parallel offers many avenues for further comparison and consideration. Meri's goal is to understand the practice and nature of the cult of saints among Muslims and Jews between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. His investigation draws on historical material from outside greater Syria on the assumption that a "common language of ritual idiom and practice existed throughout the Near East" (p. 5). His use of the term "sainthood" is appropriate to the Islamic and Jewish traditions. The Muslim and Jewish designations of a "saint" were functional, that is, sanctity need only be indicated by popular patronage of a shrine or the circulation of miraculous tales. The connections to scriptural figures in the Jewish tradition, and the theological significance of certain individuals in the Shi'a tradition, are additional dimensions discussed in this context. Meri draws on a variety of sources, including pilgrimage manuals, travel accounts, historical chronicles, creedal and polemic literature.

The first chapter looks at topography. How devotees identified landscapes and particular sites as sacred is addressed first through the use of scriptural sources by devotees and second through the manifest signs which both Muslims and Jews encountered at graves. Signifi-

cantly, both traditions also correlate their sacred Syrian topographies with established eschatological traditions. The sites of Mt. Qasiyyun and al-Rabwa are discussed in some detail, but less is said in the treatment of Aleppo. Chapter 2 examines the doctrine of sainthood. The first part seeks a definition of the saint from Islamic theology, which, however, has little to say on the subject. Meri proposes a distinction between "traditional saints" such as prophets and patriarchs and "historical saints" who lived in the Islamic period. This distinction is useful, and will be expanded upon later in the chapter. However, Meri's point that "in contrast with the stories of the prophets and the Talmudic sages, those of historical saints constitute a corpus of historical biography mainly depicting people interacting with them in real situations and commenting on their personal experiences" is unclear (pp. 60-61). Yes, miracles related in Hadith literature, for example, are presented in a different style than those appearing in later hagiographies, but beyond the literary distinctions how are these instances different? The author moves on to point out the presence of *zaddiqs* and *hasids* in the Jewish tradition, noting the importance of the shrines of Biblical figures.

Meri touches on the question of the origin of the Islamic cult of saints, and wisely backs away from Goldzihier's proposal that miracles attributed to the Prophet cleared the way for saint veneration. He concludes that "the immediate reasons for the formation of saint cults were social and spiritual and in practical terms had little to do with the formulation of doctrines of sainthood, creeds, or the circulation of traditions concerning the

Prophet's miracles" (pp. 70-71). Yet the assertion that saint cults were created for social reasons, though probably true, seems unprovable to me. I also wonder if there is not more to the "doctrines of sainthood" mentioned here. Meri does not take up fully the Sufi literature on the subject, having instead relied heavily on the theologians and doctors of law. Sainthood or *walaya* was substantially elaborated upon by early Sufis like Dhu al-Nun al-Misri and al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi. The elaborations of later Sufis on the signs, nature and offices of sainthood surely played some role (though likely little among the unlettered masses) in the Muslim understanding of sainthood. Meri touches on the distinction between the prophetic miracle and the common saintly miracle, or *mu'jiza*. He also indicates the importance of asceticism, but his portrayal of the Malamatiyya as a group practicing "extreme" self-punishment should be clarified (p. 77). As a further elaboration of his distinction between traditional and historical saints, Meri proposes a three-fold typology of saints, based on their historiographical designations: prophets, the early Companions and family of the Prophet and the medieval saints (Sufis, rulers, scholars, etc.). In light of the functional definition of sainthood, and the book's wider concern with pilgrimages and shrines, this typology seems sound. A substantial discussion is provided of the marginally anti-social figure of the *muwallah* and some important Muslim relics are treated in relation to their ritual significance.

The third chapter takes up the voices critical of pilgrimage, such as those of Ibn 'Aqil, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, who, among other things, objected to the identification of local pilgrimages with the Hajj. Criticisms of this kind, Meri notes, were absent among the Shi'a. A survey of Egyptian and Syrian pilgrimage guides follows, along with evidence that these itineraries were not intended only for the common folk, but also for the learned and the political elite. Meri follows with a series of short histories of devotion to figures such as al-Khadir, 'Ali, Zaynab, Husayn, Abraham and John the Baptist.

Chapter 4 is an extensive discussion of Jewish pilgrimage practices. Drawing on historical and travel literature, Meri explores the shrines of Moses, Elijah, Moses B. Samuel and Ezekiel. Several sources shed light on the relations—usually good—between Jews and Muslims.

The final chapter focuses on the shrine itself. Meri very briefly discusses the "genesis" of Islamic shrines, noting the Prophet's prohibition of building over graves, contrasted with the medieval habit of building mosques over graves of the venerated dead. The chapter goes on to note that various post-Abbasid rulers built funerary monuments in order to secure their prestige. In light of the proliferation of *ribats* and *zawiyas* of the Mamluk period, Meri rightfully notes the need for further research into the relationship between sufi orders and shrines. A useful section follows describing, in some detail, shrine forms: *qubba*, *qabr*, *mashhad*, *masjid/jami*, *maqam*, *turba* and *jawsaq* among the Muslims; and *beit*, *binyan*, synagogue and *beit midrash* in the Jewish context.

In his conclusion Meri avoids the outdated elite vs. popular dichotomy and underlines the participation of the wealthy through their money, and the theologians through their efforts to control or correct pilgrimage practices rather than put an end to them. Meri's discussion of what constitutes "popular" practice (among Jews, Muslims and Christians) however is too brief (pp. 281-282). The implication is that this popular practice is to be distinguished from canonical orthodoxy, but I would argue the latter does not, in fact, offer an equivalent alternative practice. Is not all pilgrimage the result of negotiation between actual practices and (possible) theological criticism? More sound is Meri's proposal that the fundamental aspects of the cult of the saints—the saint, the shrine, the devotees and their rituals—offer grounds for a wider social perspective on religion and culture. The final pages point to aspects of the cult of the saints that would reward closer study. Particularly interesting is the "inconclusive" nature of sainthood in Judaism and the need for enquiry into its little known medieval veneration practices and texts (p. 286).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-mideast-medieval>

Citation: Richard McGregor. Review of Meri, Josef W., *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria*. H-Mideast-Medieval, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9486>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.