



MEIER, FRITZ

MEIER, FRITZ (b. Basel, 10 June 1912; d. Dornach, 10 June 1998; [Figure 1](#)), Swiss Islamicist renowned for his influential and wide-ranging writings on Sufism. Fritz Meier grew up in Gelterkinden in the canton of Baselland. When one of his teachers at the local school in Bökten spoke to the ten-year-old boy about Luther's bible translation, he thereby laid the foundation for Meier's love of languages. Meier later studied at the Humanistisches Gymnasium in Basel, before he began his studies at the University of Basel in 1932. Although at first he enrolled to study Semitic and Greek philology and Assyriology, he quickly changed his field to Islamic Studies, because, as he himself has explained (oral communication), he could not live without literary culture. Meier was awarded his doctorate in the winter semester of the 1936/37 academic year, for his thesis "Die Vita des Scheich Abū Ishāq al-Kāzarūnī," which he completed under the supervision of his revered teacher, the historian of Turkey Rudolf Tschudi (1884-1960), who proved to be a consistently helpful and generous supporter of his work. It was Tschudi who had sent Fritz Meier in 1935 to Hellmut Ritter (1892-1971) in Istanbul, where he helped him with the important task of identifying the Arabic and Persian manuscripts held at local libraries. Meeting Ritter was decisive for Fritz Meier's future academic career, because this renowned German Orientalist encouraged his high esteem of philology as the indispensable foundation for the study of other cultures, as well as his predilections for Islamic mysticism and Persian poetry. These manuscript studies in Istanbul laid the foundation for Fritz Meier's future work on various topics in Arabic and Persian cultural history. The notes and excerpts from those times among his unpublished



papers contain the names of almost all the individuals and concepts with which he dealt in the course of his life.

In 1937, Meier went for the first time in his life to Iran, where he spent most of his time in Tehran, Isfahan and Shiraz. In 1938, he was awarded a prize at the University of Basel for his research on the Persian mystic Najm-al-Din Kobrā, and later in the same year he returned to Istanbul to continue his study of manuscripts of Islamic mystical texts.

In 1941, Meier wrote his habilitation thesis on the medieval Persian poetess Mahsati. His habilitation lecture in 1942, which was entitled “Vom Wesen der islamischen Mystik,” described the daily activities and spiritual experiences of a mystic, a subject that was then something previously unexplored. In 1946, he was appointed professor extraordinarius at the University Of Basel, and later in the same year he was appointed “Maître de conférences” for Persian philology at Farouk University in Alexandria, where for two years he taught Persian language and linguistics in Arabic. In 1949, Meier succeeded his teacher Rudolf Tschudi as professor of Oriental philology at the University of Basel, where he stayed until his retirement in 1982. He interrupted his teaching only once, in 1959, when he went to Iran for nine months for research purposes and then added an excursion to Afghanistan. Meier was awarded honorary doctorates from both the University of Tehran (1974) and the University of Freiburg im Breisgau (1982), and the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft made him an honorary member in 1984.

Meier turned down offers of positions at institutions abroad, including the chair at Harvard following the retirement of Sir Hamilton Gibb. He preferred to teach as well as to write in his native German, which he had mastered to the point that he could use it as an extremely precise and refined means of expression. In addition to his clear and eloquent verbal instruction of students, he also took pride in his ability to use an elegant and lucid prose style in his writings. He took seriously the task of presenting difficult concepts clearly and with a high degree of precision, and this was possible for him only in his native language. Towards the end of his life, Meier was saddened by the decline of German as a scholarly language, because his works had as a result received much less attention abroad than they deserved. In order to address this problem to a small extent, 15 representative articles by Meier were translated into English with the editorial assistance of one of his own former students, Bernd Radtke (*Essays on Islamic Piety and Mysticism*, 1999). In fact, some of the lectures Meier had given at the Eranos conference in Ascona, had



already been published in English translation in the Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks Series (*The Mysteries*, New York, 1955, pp. 149-68; *Spiritual Disciplines*, Princeton, 1960, pp. 267-304; *Spirit and Nature*, New York, 1954, pp. 149-203). These translated lectures, which were originally published in German, are “The Mystery of the Ka’ba. Symbol and Reality in Islamic Mysticism,” “The Spiritual Man in the Persian Poet ‘Aṭṭār,” and “The Problem of Nature in the Esoteric Monism of Islam,” respectively. A further article which had already been translated into English is his classic survey of the history of Sufism, entitled “The Mystic Path,” which was included in *The World of Islam* (Lewis, ed., pp. 117–28).

The most important academic field for Meier was Islamic studies, to which he contributed in a distinguished and influential way. For him, this field included Arabic and Persian philology – he mastered both languages equally well in the spoken and written form – as well as the cultural and religious history of Islamic civilization, and he focused in particular on Islamic mysticism. One of Meier’s main objectives was to combine historical research with the understanding and exploration of the “human phenomenon,” and the goal which he pursued for his entire life was to grasp the essence of religion.

Meier approached his subjects cautiously; he focused on uniquely complex and problematic matters, and was not usually inclined to write general surveys on broad cultural questions even in his areas of specialization, because he could see that much work still needed to be done before the bigger questions could be answered. As Meier himself has put it, he strove “to cross boundaries through the study of specific problems” (oral communication).

Works. Four of his major books each deal with an individual medieval Persian mystic. The differences between these figures and their particular roles offers a rich insight into the manifold aspects of medieval Sufism. His first major work, based on his PhD dissertation, was *Die Vita des Scheich Abū Ishāq Kāzarūnī* (1948). This is an edition of the *Ferdows al-moršediya fī asrār al-ṣamadiya*, the Persian reworking of an Arabic biography, by a Maḥmud b. ‘Oṭmān, of Abu Eshāq al-Kāzaruni (d. 426/1035), the influential Sufi shaikh from Fārs after whom the “Kāzaruni” order was named. Meier’s comprehensive German introduction to the text, which deals with the religious ideas and works of Kāzaruni and critically discusses his sources, has been published in Persian several times.

Meier’s second major book, *Die Fawā’ih al-Ġamāl wa-Fawātiḥ al-Ġalāl des*



Nağm ad-Dīn al-Kubrā (1957), is also an edition of a medieval text, in this case of the Arabic work, the *Fawā'eḥ al-jamālwa fawāteḥ al-jalāl* by Najm-al-Din Kobrā (d. 618/1221). This author, who was the eponymous founder of the Kobrawiya order, discusses the auditory and visual inner experiences of the mystic wayfarer in a highly original fashion in this pioneering work. In his lengthy and detailed introduction, Meier has compiled a biography of Kobrā, described the uniqueness of his character and analyzed his mystical thought, highlighting how this contrasted with earlier forms of Sufism.

The subject of his third book is a contrasting figure who occupies a place of prime importance for Khurasanian Sufism, namely Abu Sa'īd b. Abi'l-Ḳayr (q.v.; d. 440/1049). Meier's *Abū Sa'īd-i Abū l-Ḥayr. Wirklichkeit und Legende* (1976; Persian tr. Bāybordi, Tehran, 1999) is about this Sufi master from Mēhana, whose mystical path was characterized by bliss and joy in the experience of God. By virtue of his closeness to God, Abu Sa'īd experiences in this world the bliss that he will find in the hereafter. It is not only poetry, music and dance that help him to maintain this joyful feeling, but also his humane attitude and "royal" demeanor. Several chapters deal with his family and the group that had formed around him, as well as with his successors. In the appendix, Meier analyzes the feelings of joy expressed by later mystics up to the nineteenth century.

The fourth monograph written by Meier, *Bahā'-i Walad. Grundzüge seines Lebens und seiner Mystik* (1989; two Persian trs: Bāybordi, 2003, Mošarraḥ, 2003), was a detailed analysis of a kind of diary, called the *Ma'āref*, which has been left behind by Bahā'-e Walad (d. 628/1231), the father of Rumi. In the *Ma'āref*, Bahā'-e Walad reveals his mystical experiences with a hitherto unprecedented openness; he emphasizes distinctively the sense of pleasure (*maza*) which one receives from the presence of God with man (*ma'iyat*). But for Bahā'-e Walad, religious experience is not restricted to Man alone. He searches for God in and behind material things, as well as from the fulfillment of ritual duties and the experience of spiritual truths (*ma'āni*). Meier presents a detailed and sensitive account of Bahā'-e Walad's mysticism on the basis of his *Ma'āref*, while, with the help of hagiographic sources, he also reconstructs his biography.

Meier strove to depict the lives of these illustrious individuals as vividly as possible with the help of the literary sources available, including not only his reconstructions of their biographies and the historical context in which they lived, but also their inner experiences and what they may reveal about the



nature and development of the human soul in general. He considered it his challenge to slip into the personality of his subject, while at the same time remaining an outside observer, in order to describe the object of his study accurately but from a certain distance. It should also be pointed out that three of these four mystics were introduced to European scholars of Sufism for the first time through Meier's pioneering works, the exception being Abu Sa'īd about whom Reynold A. Nicholson had already written in his *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge, 1921).

Meier's final book to deal with mystical questions, published when he was 82 years old, focused on a Sufi order rather than an individual Sufi. His *Zwei Abhandlungen über die Naqšbandiyya* (1994) discusses the teachings and practices of the Naqšbandi order, focusing in particular on the relationship between the living master and the disciple (*rābeṭa*). The disciple's concentration on his master is identified as a characteristic feature of this order, although it is clearly not an original invention of the Naqšbandiyya; Meier shows that other mystics and their followers have practiced this as well, including 'Abd-al-Qāder Jilāni, Kobrā, Dāya and Abu Ḥafṣ Sohrawardi. For the Naqšbandi disciple, his shaikh is a special location where God appears (*mazhar*), and he can only approach God through this place. While the first part of this study deals with the "devotional bonding" between master and disciple, the second part deals with the shaikh's *taṣarrof*, or supernatural influence, on the souls of his disciples, as well as on other people.

In addition to introducing readers to their immediate subject matter, the books and articles by Meier on Sufism have established a precise and detailed German terminology for this field of Islamic studies, as a result of his determination always to find the exact German equivalent of the corresponding Arabic and Persian Sufi concept. Thus, continuing the work of Hellmut Ritter, he created an excellent tool for anyone who writes on Sufism in German.

Meier's habilitation thesis, "Die Schöne Mahsatī" (published in 1963), reveals another field in which he was particularly interested, namely Persian poetry. Meier not only collected and translated the scattered quatrains (*robā'iyāt*) of this medieval Persian poetess from Ganja, but he also wrote a general history of the quatrain form and introduced the earliest Persian poetesses, while also analyzing Mahsatī's own poetry and tracing the history of its recurrent motifs. Meier had in fact intended to publish a second volume on the popular romance of Mahsatī and Amir Aḥmad (Hekāyat-e Mahsatī o Amir Aḥmad), but



his work was interrupted when he had almost finished by the discovery of a further manuscript of the same text which offered a different version of the story, thus necessitating a reworking of his entire manuscript. This romance will now be published, forty years after the publication of the first volume of Meier's research on Mahsati, by Gudrun Schubert and Renate Würsch.

Not only his monographs but also many of Meier's articles have been highly influential in his fields of specialization. He wrote on the diverse forms of Islamic mysticism, Islamic manuscripts in Istanbul, the Persian and Arabic languages, the relationship between Middle Eastern and European cultural history, the history of religion in general and popular culture. On the occasion of his eightieth birthday, a selection of these articles was published along with the author's addenda and an index in a separate volume (*Bausteine*, 3 Vols., 1992). This collection not only gives evidence of the wide range of subjects dealt with by Meier during his career, but it also shows that he had the ability to cover geographical areas as far apart as Khorasan and Morocco, even if his interest in the western Islamic world admittedly developed only towards the end of his life. The fields of scholarship represented by Meier's most influential articles are listed below:

Sufism. Even in his shorter writings, Meier introduced new texts of major importance for the study of Islamic mysticism, such as in his first article "Stambuler Handschriften dreier persischer Mystiker: 'Ain al-quḍāt al-Hamadāni, Naḡm ad-dīn al-Kubrā, Naḡm ad-dīn ad-Dāja" (1937), and his later article, "Ein Knigge für Sufi's" (1957), which introduced the *Ādāb al-moridin*, a manual on the proper etiquette of the Sufi that Meier ascribed to Najm-al-Din Kobrā. His article "Quṣayrīs *Tartīb as-sulūk*" (1963) is in a sense complimentary, in that it is about a Sufi manual of a different kind, one which focuses on the inner experiences of the Sufi.

Many of Meier's articles are biographical in content, or analyze the historical and literary sources about a particular individual, such as "Zur Biographie Aḡmad-i Ġām's und zur Quellenkunde von Ġāmī's *Nafaḡāt ul-uns*" (1943), "Die Schriften des 'Azīz-i Nasafī" (1953), "Der unbekanntes Schriftsteller al-Muwaffaq al-Ḥāṣī" (1989), and "Ein wichtiger Handschriftenfund zur Sufik" (1967), the last of which is a detailed description of an Arabic manuscript miscellany belonging to the Kānaqāh-e Aḡmadi in Shiraz (first briefly presented by Iraj Afšār, in *Yaḡmā* 18, 1965, pp. 251-54). One text of this manuscript, the *Adab al-muluk*, has since been edited by Bernd Radtke (1991), and translated into German by Richard Gramlich (1993).

Meier's article, "Ein briefwechsel zwischen Šaraf ud-dīn-i-Balḥī und Mağd ud-dīn-i Bağdādī" (1977), concerns an exchange of letters between master and disciple from around 1200, in which the master interprets the visionary experiences and dreams of his disciple. This work and "Ṭāhir aṣ-Ṣadafīs vergessene schrift über westliche heilige des 6./12. jahrhunderts"(1984), about a hitherto unknown source on saints of the Islamic West, demonstrate the wide geographical scope of Meier's expertise in Sufism. Another article of major importance important to the study of Sufism is Meier's "Ḥurāsān und das ende der klassischen šūfik," in which he describes the development of the relationship between master and disciple over the centuries, from mere theoretical teaching (*ta'lim*) to practical training (*tarbiya*).

Popular culture. Meier's most important articles in this field are "Das Volk der Riemenbeinler" (1967) and "Drei moderne persische Texte zum "Wettreden" " (with annotations by Richard Gramlich, 1964). The former is about the *dovāl-pāy* (s.v. Dehḳodā), a kind of evil spirit with straps for legs. The belief in this kind of spirit existed already among the Greeks and the Romans, before having migrated to Persia together with the legend of Alexander the Great. The latter focuses on traditional Persian rhetorical contests. It consists of the translation of an article by Moḥammad-Ja'far Maḥjub (*Soḳan* 9, 1958, no. 6, pp. 530-55; no. 7, pp. 631-37; no. 8, pp. 779-86), together with excerpts from two further articles about this popular event, which was organized by a special guild whose members represented a diverse range of professions. Such rhetorical contests between members of different guilds were public, taking place in coffee-houses.

Meier made use of a several months' stay in Iran during 1959 to study manuscripts on folkloric subjects, especially primary literary sources on the jinn. His articles "Orientalische belege für das Motiv "nur einmal zuschlagen"" (1974) and "Ein arabischer "bet-ruf""(1979) are concerned with the question of the relationship between Man and jinn, the position of the jinn in Islamic cosmology and the term *jenn* in its etymological context. Meier's unpublished works also include copious and detailed source material on Islamic demonology.

The religious sciences. Meier's article "Ein profetenwort gegen die totenbeweinung" (1973) deals with the belief, based on several variant hadiths, that a dead person must atone for the mourning and weeping of his relatives. Meier specifies the meaning of the expression "yo'addabo be-"by quoting the relevant commentaries of religious scholars, and he concludes this



article by tracing the history of this concept among the most diverse religious communities, from ancient Persia to Scotland.

In “Das sauberste über die vorbestimmung. Ein stück Ibn Taymiyya” (1981), Meier explains Ebn Taymiya’s (d. 728/1328) doctrine of divine providence by relating it to the theory that God has two types of will, the will to create existence (*al-erāda al-kawniyya*) and the will to command (*al-erāda al-diniyya al-šar‘iyya*). Ebn Taymiya accused Sufis of lacking a sense of duty and for over-emphasizing the importance of personal experience and belief in the supernatural. In his view Sufis erred by giving priority to God’s will to create existence over His will to command, thus failing to follow what he believed all Muslims should, namely to accept that divine providence is behind everything, and at the same time to follow the divine command.

Meier’s article “Almoraviden und marabute” (1983) deals with the use in the western Islamic world of *rebāṭāt*, or garrisons, as a system of defense against the Christian enemy. These fortifications, which were often under the supervision of a pious person, required of their residents the unusual mixture of combativeness, piety and scholarly learning. The function of the *rebāṭ* and the *morābaṭa*, Meier concludes, lies somewhere between divine worship (*‘ebāda*) and warfare (*jehād*). He then proceeds to discuss the concept of *morābeṭ* in all its variations throughout the centuries, as demonstrated by numerous historical examples. Meier shows how its meaning changed from a military fortification to non-military *rawābeṭ*, mostly in the shape of Sufi monasteries (*zawāyā*), and finally took the form of the European word “Marabout,” which can mean either a saint or the tomb of a saint. The beginnings of the Almoravid movement are discussed next, explaining how the term *morābeṭ* turned into a proper name synonymous with *mojāhed* (holy warrior). He also refers in this context to Almoravid men who kept their mouths covered, and traces the reasons why under the Almoravids men wore veils, a characteristic for which they were mocked by their rivals, the Almohads. Meier shows that veiling was understood as a means of defense against both magical and physical harm.

This article reflects Meier’s interest in the western Islamic world, which he discovered in his later years through his studies on the reception and veneration of the Prophet in his community. A further result of this project was his article, “Die segensprechung über Mohammed im bittgebet und in der bitte” (1986), which demonstrates the importance for Muslims of the invocation (*do‘ā*) within the benediction of the Prophet (*tašlīa*). Meier explains



that this is not simply an expression of gratitude for the favors bestowed on the believer by the Prophet, but also a kind of “advance payment” for the intercession that one hopes to receive from him on the Day of Judgement. Although Meier did not manage to complete his project on the Prophet Moḥammad, it is now being prepared for publication (Radtke and Schubert, eds., 2 Vols., 2002–).

Literature and language. Meier’s article “Turandot in Persien”(1941)was his first article to deal with a literary topic. He traces the development of the history of Turandot, the model for Puccini’s opera as well as for the dramas of Gozzi and Schiller, from the earliest narrative in Neẓāmi’s *Haft paykar* (written 593/1197) and the first prose version, ‘Awfi’s 13th-century *Jawāme‘ al-ḥekāyāt*, to the version in *Les Mille et un Jours* of Pétis de la Croix (1710).

Meier’s interest in the relationship between Oriental and European literary traditions is exemplified in further articles that he wrote. In “Zwei islamische Lehrerzählungen bei Tolstoj?” (1958) Meier identifies Tolstoy’s use of the Islamic principle of replacing the pilgrimage to Mecca with ethical behavior for the benefit of society in his *Dva starika* (Two Old Men), and also demonstrates the link between a story by Jāḥeẓ and a second story by Tolstoy, entitled *Vraž’e lepko, a Bož’e krepko* (Hatred is Sweet, But God is Strong).

The article “Aussprachefragen des älteren neupersisch”(1981), which has already been reprinted together with an additional detailed index (*Bausteine*, 1992), is a major contribution to the field of Persian Studies. It presents new linguistic discoveries which were the fruits of Meier’s extensive reading of medieval Persian texts, and has thus become an indispensable reference tool for the field.

Having finished one of his works, Meier would continue to ponder the problems it dealt with for some time, rather than putting it aside to move on to his next project. He would continue reading about the subject to discover further literary evidence and to refine his own conclusions. The critical apparatus in his works always provides invaluable help for further study, and in this way bear witness to this method of scholarship that he followed. Even once he had submitted his work for publication he would continue to ponder what he could have done differently or to enhance the work further. Never content with what he had already achieved, he would keep changing his text even in the galley-proofs. This is why so many of his works have a separate appendix of notes and corrections. Even in the *Bausteine*, which contain 34 of



his articles, one can witness that most of them have an author's addendum, thus testifying to the fact that, once they were printed, his works were never simply put aside.

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