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A STUDY OF A MEDIEVAL PERSIAN HAGIOGRAPHY AND INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SUFIS AND CHRISTIANS IN RUM AND UPPER MESOPOTAMIA

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ABSTRACT

The anonymous thirteenth century hagiography that describes the virtues of Awhad al-Din Kirmani (d. 1238), one of the most celebrated (and criticised) Persian Sufis of the medieval period, and how it depicts Muslim interactions with Christians is the focus of this study. Hagiographical writing has been viewed with suspicion by many for being less than an accurate portrayal of historical events, however, such a view needs to be qualified, especially if the hagiography was written within a short space of time of the death of the subject. Such literature is intrinsically useful because it depicts the worldview of the subject in an ideal fashion, thereby presenting the world as it should be. This particular hagiography should be, therefore, of vital interest for researchers investigating the Islamisation of Anatolia (or more specifically, the region around Rum and Upper Mesopotamia, where Kirmani propagated his Sufi worldview). The article commences with a survey of Muslim-Christian relations during the time in question, and it pays particular attention to how Sufis perceived Christians and Christianity. Subsequent to this contextualisation, the article utilises the hagiography about Kirmani, which has only recently been translated from the Persian into English, and for this reason has received scant scholarly concern. The episodes of the hagiography that deal with Christians and Christianity are analysed with reference to the existing customs and conventions of the times in an attempt to discover the author's view of Sufi interactions with Christians. The hagiography demonstrates neither a Muslim nor a Sufi demonization of Christians, yet nor does it present a completely harmonious relationship of co-existence. This may be somewhat surprising given that the period was one of Islamic expansion in the region, when the memories of the Crusades were still very raw. This ambivalence may be explained by the very different existence of Christian denomination in the region and how they were perceived, and also by the relative lack of importance that such Sufi writing accorded to the topic.

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