
Colin Mitchell
Shahzad Bashir has offered here the first systematic, English-language study of the Nūrbaḫšiyya Order. The medieval confluence of shī‘ite notions of hagiography and eschatology with ṣūfī models of cosmology and cosmogony is well-represented in the Nūrbaḫšiyya ṯarīqa, and it is not surprising that the 15th century doctrines of Muḥammad Nūrbaḫš “should be regarded as a significant paradigm for understanding the development of religious history in general” (p. xvii). This study is divided into two broad sections, with one examining the life and intellectual import of Muḥammad Nūrbaḫš (1392-1464), and the other detailing the evolution of the Nūrbaḫšiyya movement as it faced numerous doctrinal, political, and ethnic challenges from the 16th century to the present. After an overview of Muslim messianic traditions in the first chapter, Bashir provides a thorough narrative in the subsequent chapter (“A Messiah’s Life”) of Nūrbaḫš’s education and career from Badaḫšān to Gilān. Nūrbaḫš flourished within the Kubravi tradition, and Bashir provides convincing evidence to suggest that the movement’s turn towards militancy under Šayḫ Kuttalānī and its suppression by the Timurid ruler Šāhrūḫ in 1423 was due to longstanding internal rivalries and the unsettling messianic claims of Kuttalānī’s designated successor, Nūrbaḫš himself. Nonetheless, Bashir is uncompromising in his characterization of Nūrbaḫš as a Mahdī claimant who, unlike previous charismatic personalities in Islamic history, eschewed a
messianic agenda dependent on violence and coercion. The underpinnings to these and other theological stances are discussed in greater detail in the third chapter, “Articulating the Messianic Message”, where Bashir flushes out and paraphrases Nūrbašī’s defense of his claim to Mahdi-ship in the oft-neglected and currently unpublished work, “The Treatise on Guidance” (Risālat al-hudā). With an innovative understanding of walāya (“sainthood”) in hand, Nūrbašī rejected the doctrine of the transmigration of souls (tanāṣṣūḥ) and instead embraced the notion that the divine essences of prophets and imams alike could be simultaneously “projected” (burūz) into a designated corporeal vessel living in the future. This chapter is then followed by an orderly presentation, supplemented by helpful charts, of Nūrbašī’s theosophical Weltanschauung, which Bashir arranges and discusses on the basis of cosmology, epistemology, methodology, and experiential concerns.

The remaining half of the book examines the diffusion of Nūrbašīyya ideas and the ultimate reorientation of the movement eastwards to Ladakh and Baltistan. Chapter Five (“The Mahdi’s Successors in Iran and Anatolia”) focuses on the activities of several important Nūrbašīyya disciples – such as Šams al-Dīn Muḥammad Lāhījī (d. 1506), the author of Mafāṭīḥ al-ījāz (a celebrated commentary on the Gulshan-i rāz), and Qavām al-Dīn Nūrbašī (d. 1537) – and their ability to weather the arrival of the Safavid shahs and their proclivity to violently assimilate or eliminate rival mystical organizations. However, by the 17th century, the Nūrbašīyya had lost prominence in Iran and any formal preaching and proselytism had been pushed eastward to the Hindukush range. The reasons for this geographic shift are provided in the sixth chapter (“Hope on a New Front”) where Bashir highlights the ability of the Nūrbašīyya notable Šams al-Dīn Muḥammad ʿIrāqī (d. 1526) to appreciate the ethno-religious syncretism of medieval Kashmir as well as navigate the capricious politics of the day in order to establish an impressive ṭūnqāh at Zadibal. ʿIrāqī is clearly the most important Nūrbašīyya figure after the founder himself, but Bashir is quick to point out that he rejected esoteric scholarship in favour of pragmatic guidance on ritual and liturgy: “Iraqi’s political behavior and his religious outlook constituted an effort to ‘exteriorize’ Nurbakhsh’s esoteric doctrine” (p. 241) Despite ʿIrāqī’s efforts, formal Nūrbašīyya practices would soon be subsumed by the aggressive policies of Mirza Hidar Dughlat and the subsequent incorporation of Kashmir into the Mughal empire. Vestiges of the original Nūrbašīyya belief systems are still evident, and it is in his last chapter (“Establishment and Survival in Baltistan and Ladakh”) that Bashir explains how this movement has mingled with and metamorphosed the predominantly Tibetan Buddhist society of Baltistan and Ladakh in the 19th and 20th centuries. Geographically situated among a competitive nexus of belief systems (sunni Islam, shi’ite Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism), this community has suffered in terms of numbers and is struggling to preserve its heritage. However, Bashir has followed closely the media reports and publishing activities of the Nūrbašīyya, and suggests that they are in a process of mutual engagement and dialogue; indeed, some of the same overarching debates taking place in the “higher” Islamic traditions, namely the appeal of modernity and innovation in the face of traditionalism and adherence to authoritative norms, characterize Nūrbašīyya discourse as of late.
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