

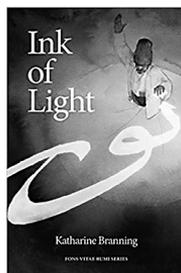
Ink of Light

By Katharine Branning

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Reviewed by Brian Welter



Katharine Branning's simple, accessible book offers a wealth of spiritual, cultural, and historical insights across the span of time. She shows how Catholic-raised French Sufi Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch (1909-1999) bridged many divides to live multiple vocations. An exceptionally well-rounded individual, she worked at the French governmental National Center for Scientific Research while carrying out studies first on Plato and ancient Greek thought and then on Sufism.

Ink of Light portrays de Vitray-Meyerovitch's life-changing embrace of Islam (which Branning carefully distinguishes from the Christian *conversio*). Turned off by post-World War II Parisian consumerism, de Vitray-Meyerovitch found inspiration in the words of Rumi (1207-1273), then unknown to the West, through the writings of another then-unknown (to the West), Muhammed Iqbal (1877-1938). All of this took place against the twentieth-century backdrop of post-Christian French society where psychoanalysis and existentialism held much sway. Branning convincingly argues that de Vitray-Meyerovitch never severed her Muslim self from this cultural background, but instead built on it. Paris-born de Vitray-Meyerovitch, widowed with two young sons by the late 1940s, lived a fully French, fully Islamic life that included intellectual

salons where she met Islamic scholars (Catholic priest Father Louis Massignon, Henry Corbin), other Catholics (Jacques Maritain, Cardinal Danielou), journalists, and philosophers.

Branning intertwines this with the life of Rumi, though curiously without offering much direct access to his writings, a major drawback. De Vitray-Meyerovitch was, according to the author, particularly affected by the few poems of Rumi that Iqbal cited, yet readers never see these writings. Including this poetry would have made *Ink of Light* not only much more enjoyable, rewarding, and memorable, but would have introduced us to Rumi more directly. Despite this lack, Branning's portrayal of the great Khorasan-born mystic illustrates notable aspects of Sufism, including the intense relationships fostered by Sufi life. Branning successfully and colorfully depicts the parallels between de Vitray-Meyerovitch's and Rumi's lives, described through the narrating voice of de Vitray-Meyerovitch that Branning employs in this fictional biography: "Oh, your beloved Shams! The arrival of Shams was the upheaval in your existence, just as you have been in mine. He swooped down upon your soul and triggered a shift in your approach to piety and spirituality. You discovered that beyond the safe and traditional forms of obedience such as prayer, fasting, and applying the *sharia* law, there was another way to creatively celebrate your relationship with God" (81). Rumi's intense spiritual connection with Shams-i-Tabrīzī (1185-1248) came to an abrupt end, much-lamented by the Mevlana. Rumi had to turn inward to find what he had searched for outwardly; de Vitray-Meyerovitch also had to look to inner strength throughout her life: as a member of the French resistance; as a young widow; as an intellectually-curious revert to a much-misunderstood religion.

De Vitray-Meyerovitch's intense relationships and ambitious reading, writing, and translating spurred her spiritual growth. In addition to Rumi, she was deeply influenced by the writings of Iqbal, "a giant of a man: a philosopher, professor, lawyer, poet, politician, and statesman... He wrote essays and poems in Urdu, English, and Persian" (53). Such brief entries on Islamic thinkers make *Ink of Light* an apt introduction to Islam, Sufism, and mysticism for the novice. Branning conveys de Vitray-Meyerovitch's enthusiasm for these teachers alongside the humility and willingness to learn even well into her middle age and beyond: "How could I have never heard of such a brilliant mind? I began to realize

how little I knew of other cultures: here I was preparing a doctorate on Plato, and I had never read one Islamic philosopher. I felt somewhat ashamed" (53). Readers, especially those unfamiliar with Islamic thought, will also feel somewhat dazzled by the wide-ranging, profound, yet timely philosophical and religious issues addressed by Islamic thinkers without the New Age backdrop so commonly connected to Rumi.

Just as de Vitray-Meyerovitch had many important teachers in her life, beginning with Iqbal and Rumi, so she became a much-beloved teacher to others. This further exemplifies the centrality of personal relationships for the Sufi path. Branning describes de Vitray-Meyerovitch's habit of inviting people over to her apartment for philosophical and religious discussions. She would offer people genuine friendship even upon a first meeting. Once, while giving a talk at a famous Parisian bookstore, she met a Moroccan who would in turn later introduce her to a Sufi master: "After the lecture, a young man approached me hesitantly and introduced himself.... His face was so luminous and gentle that I knew we had to spend more time together... Little did I know then that in the upcoming years, he would become one of my most precious friends and intellectual partners" (113-114). Her relationships with others, often much younger than she, were friendships, not exclusively teacher-student. Branning depicts her as eager to receive the insights and perspectives of many, including her students. This receptivity was essential to her spiritual journey.

Another key to her teaching was the "scattershot" approach employed by Sufis including Rumi: "You did not present a philosophical system, organized in form and content in a linear fashion. These were not stories of dos and don'ts and certainly not the traditional dogma like the catechism I learned with the *bonnes soeurs*. You considered doctrinal points of secondary importance to your principal goal of touching the heart of the student and helping to transform him into a lover of God and the Prophet in order to become the finest possible person. You taught me much about the art of non-assertive teaching" (91-92). The lack of consideration over doctrine, as depicted by Branning, at times isolates Sufism from the wider Islamic world. Aside from allusions to dietary restrictions, little reference is made in *Ink of Light* to Islam's five pillars and the more basic, seemingly humdrum, practices and beliefs inherent to every religion. This conveys a somewhat distorted picture of both Islam and Sufism.

So we get the more exotic elements. De Vitray-Meyerovitch's far-flung journeys were closely related to her teaching and learning. Her first professorship, at the age of sixty, was at Cairo's Al-Azhar. Readers get glimpses of the Egyptian capital and what it would have meant to her, especially given its importance to Islamic scholar Massignon, a close friend and counselor in the first years of her Sufi life. Konya, where she rests today, was of particular importance being as it is the city of Rumi. In her later years, she also traveled to Morocco to follow Sufi master Sidi Hamza, who was a decade younger than she. Again, readers get a sense of her humility and thirst for spiritually and intellectually edifying conversation and knowledge, so at contrast with the technical, business-oriented concerns of her (and our) epoch.

Intertwined within the already twin threads of Rumi's and de Vitray-Meyerovitch's lives is the description of the Dervish *Sema*, and the symbolic value of each of its stages. This strand furthers the core idea of the book that Sufism is the movement of love. What is missing, though perhaps not a major lacuna given the narrow subject which the author does exploit to full benefit, is Sufism's intellectual-symbolic aspect as exemplified in Ibn Arabi's teachings and made known by, among others, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Henry Corbin. *Ink of Light* is a deep, satisfying, and even touching portrayal of *one* kind of Sufism, perhaps something that Branning should have clarified. Given that many in the West only know Sufism through Rumi and associate it with supposedly ecstatic whirling dervishes, even brief references to Sufism's more intellectual tendencies would have broadened some readers' perspectives.

Ultimately, Branning illustrates the possibility of coexistence between Islam and the West, and even how both can thrive and learn from each other. De Vitray-Meyerovitch lived a vocation that intentionally brought Islam together with western thought. This includes, perhaps surprisingly, Freud, Nietzsche, and a healthy respect for the Enlightenment. Branning emphasizes the inner struggles her subject encountered when embracing Islam while all the while remaining a westerner. Despite Branning's restricted approach, Sufism and mysticism are mostly not treated with rose-colored glasses, but depicted as offering a life of struggle, striving, and critical self-awareness that promises a more authentic human being, something sorely required in today's hustle and bustle.