ABSTRACT

This work is a study of the Muslim saint Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya (ca. 717-801 CE), as she has been depicted in Sufi and non-Sufi literature. Although evidence suggests that a woman ascetic named Rabi’a actually lived in Basra, Iraq, in the eighth century CE, very little historical information can be established about her. The great majority of the Rabi’a narratives consist of tropological constructs and fictional accounts composed in the centuries after her death. Thus, this study is primarily about historical and literary representation and the construction of myth. The subject of historical representation is discussed theoretically in the Introduction. Four main tropes or master narratives are identified that define Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya as a Sufi saint: Rabi’a the Teacher, Rabi’a the Ascetic, Rabi’a the Lover, and Rabi’a the Sufi. Each of these tropes is discussed in detail in Chapters 1-4, tracing their development, major rhetorical themes, and doctrinal meaning in the Rabi’a narratives. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss Rabi’a the Icon, showing how she has become a symbolic figure in both Sufi and modern secular representations. Chapter 5 discusses her portrayal by the Persian Sufi Farid al-Din al-‘Attar (d. 1220 CE), who composed the first vita of Rabi’a and provided the outline for all further biographical narratives. Chapter 6 discusses secular versions of the Rabi’a narrative, which use tropes derived from modern philosophies such as existentialism and feminism. These tropes are also influential in the depiction of Rabi’a’s story in cinematic film and television. The Conclusion reassesses the historiographical issues raised by the Rabi’a narratives with respect to the role of literary theories and approaches in historical studies. This work draws on numerous sources, both medieval and modern, in Arabic, Persian, and European languages. It discusses the major schools of representation of Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya in medieval Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Egypt and takes the discussion up through modern scholarly writings and cinematic depictions. Using these writings and depictions as source materials, the work also provides a critical approach to the historiographical and literary study of sainthood.