Eighth Annual Victor Danner Memorial Lecture in Islamic Studies

April 19, 2010 at 7:30 pm
University Club
Indiana Memorial Union

“Qurrat al-ʿAyn:
Reflections on Poetry, Mysticism, and Civilization in the Seventh Century Hijra”

Presented by:
Professor Michael Sells
University of Chicago

Opening Remarks by:
Professor Nazif Shahrani
Chair of NELC

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Thank you!
Michael Sells studies and teaches in the areas of Qur'anic studies; Sufism; Arabic and Islamic love poetry; mysticism (Greek, Islamic, Christian, and Jewish); and religion and violence. The new and expanded edition of his book *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* appeared in 2007. He has published three volumes on Arabic poetry: *Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes*, which focuses upon the pre-Islamic period; *Stations of Desire*, which focuses upon the love poetry of Ibn al-'Arabi; and *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature, Al-Andalus*, which he coedited and to which he contributed. His books on mysticism include *Early Islamic Mysticism*, translations and commentaries on influential mystical passages from the Qur'an, hadith, Arabic poetry, and early Sufi writings; and *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, an examination of apophatic language, with special attention to Plotinus, John the Scot, Ibn al-'Arabi, Meister Eckhart, and Marguerite Porete. His work on religion and violence includes: *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*; and *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy*, which he coedited and to which he contributed. He is currently completing a book with the working title of *God of War: American Power in a World of Religion*. He teaches courses on the Qur'an, Islamic love poetry, comparative mystical literature, Arabic Sufi poetry, Arabic religious texts, and Ibn al-'Arabi.
Professor Victor Danner was born on October 22, 1926, in Irapuato, Guanajuato, Mexico to Arthur James and Maria Lopez Danner. As a young man, he served his country during World War II. After the war he attended Georgetown University where he received his B.A. magna cum laude in 1957. Later that year he traveled to Morocco to become an instructor and eventually director of the American Language Center, sponsored by the US Information Service. While there he took advantage of the opportunity not only to get acquainted with the country but also to perfect his knowledge of classical Arabic texts.

In 1964, Professor Danner returned to the US for his doctoral studies and graduated from Harvard in 1970. He came to IU in 1967 and was a professor of Arabic and Religious Studies at Indiana University until his death in 1990. He served as chairman of the Near Eastern Languages and Cultures Department for five years, and was an enthusiastic supporter of the Middle Eastern Studies Program.

He was an internationally renowned scholar in the fields of Islamic mysticism, comparative religion, and classical Arabic literature. In 1976, he was invited to speak at the international World Festival of Islam in London. Professor Danner was also active in a number of professional organizations, including the Foundation for Traditional Studies, based in Washington, D.C., for which he served as secretary-treasurer. He wrote *Ibn ‘Ata ‘Allah’s Sufi Aphorisms* (1973); *Ibn ‘Ata ‘Allah: The Book of Wisdom*, (1978); and *The Islamic Tradition: An Introduction* (1988), in addition to over twenty-five articles and reviews.

One of his students, Lauri King Irani, captured his essence: “As a teacher, Victor Danner had few equals. He taught Arabic, classical Arabic literature, Islam, Sufism, the Qur’an, comparative religion, comparative mysticism, and Eastern religions. His dignified bearing, elegant gestures, and verbal eloquence transformed his lectures into performances which had the power to captivate and inspire his students, whether he was discussing Arabic grammar or Islamic theology. His concern for and encouragement of his students, coupled with his understated sense of humor, earned him a well-deserved reputation as a caring and committed educator who taught not only when behind the classroom lectern, but also by example.”

*He who is illumined at the beginning is illumined at the end.*
-from the *Sufi Aphorisms* by Ibn ‘Ata ‘Allah (d.1309)
Translated by Victor Danner