Twelfth Annual Victor Danner Memorial Lecture in Islamic Studies

April 16, 2014 at 7:15 pm
University Club - President’s Room
Indiana Memorial Union

The Quest for Enlightenment in Classical Islam: Ibn Tufayl’s Hayy ibn Yaqzan

Presented by:
Professor Sebastian Günther
University of Göttingen

Opening Remarks by:
Professor Asma Afsaruddin
Chair of NELC

Co-Sponsored by the College Arts & Humanities Institute, the Medieval Studies Institute & the Islamic Studies Program
Sebastian Günther is Professor and Chair of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Göttingen. Günther’s research focuses on the intellectual heritage of Islam, including the Quran, religious and philosophical thought, and Arabic belles-lettres. He is the co-editor of the Islamic History and Civilization series (Brill Academic Publishers) and is a board member of the Religion Compass (Blackwell Publishing). Professor Günther has published extensively in peer-reviewed journals and international reference works. He is currently completing a monograph titled Medieval Muslim Thinkers on Education, which surveys the educational philosophies offered by major Muslim scholars of the 8th to the 16th centuries, for the first time in a Western language. He has published Averroes and Thomas Aquinas on Education (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2012) and edited Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

Abstract

The quest for knowledge and human perfection is one of the most stimulating characteristics of classical Muslim scholarship. It has found its literary expression in a remarkable and quite diverse body of medieval Arabic writings on philosophy, theology, history, and mysticism. In this literature, one book stands out for its particularly imaginative approach and its powerful language: the allegorical-philosophical novel Hayy ibn Yaqzan (or Alive, Son of Awake, as the Arabic title of this book can be rendered into English), written in Islamic Spain by the distinguished Muslim thinker Ibn Tufayl (1110–1185 CE). This narrative tells the intriguing story of a boy who grows up on a remote island, alone and without contact with human civilization, and who finds God solely through intellectual endeavor.

This lecture is devoted to Ibn Tufayl’s coming-of-age story, one of the most creative works of Islam’s classical intellectual heritage. It will explore this work in its historical and intellectual contexts, examining closely its Muslim predecessors and its reception in Islamic lands and in medieval Christian Europe. In the process, it will inquire into the perceptions of classical Muslim thinkers concerning the power and the freedom of the human intellect in seeking human growth, happiness, and salvation.
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 WWII. 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 Washington D.C.-based Foundation for Traditional Studies, 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
We would like to offer our sincere thanks to the generous people who have already contributed to the Victor Danner Memorial fund, especially Dr. Mary Ann Fadae Danner

Contributions to the Victor Danner Fund can be made at:

IU Foundation
Victor Danner Memorial Lecture Fund
Account No. 37-AS26-03-9
P.O. Box 500
Bloomington, IN 47402

Thank you!

Asma Afsaruddin
NELC Chair & Professor