BOOK REVIEWS

The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture

Volume 2: The Individual and Society in Islam
A. Bouhdiba (Chief Editor) and M. Ma’rūf al-Dawālibī (Co-Editor)
ISBN 92-3-102742-5

Volume 4: Science and Technology in Islam
Part I: The Exact and Natural Sciences
Part II: Technology and Applied Sciences
Prof. A. Y. al-Hassan (Editor), Prof. Maqbul Ahmed (deceased), and Prof. A. Z. Iskandar (Co-Editors)
ISBN 92-3-103830-3
ISBN 92-3-103831-1

Volume 5: Culture and Learning in Islam
Ekmeleddine Ihsanoğlu (Chief Editor)
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It was at its nineteenth session, held in Nairobi from 26 October to 30 November 1976, that the General Conference of UNESCO authorized the Director-General to “take the necessary measures to prepare and publish a work on the different aspects of Islamic culture” (5). Almost twenty years later, we have three out of the six planned volumes and, judging by the quality of work, the long wait has been worthwhile.

The project is rather modest, if one takes into consideration the extensive resources available to UNESCO and the financial help provided by World Islamic Call Society, a Libyan organization, for the six-volume project which aims “to show these various aspects [of Islamic culture] both from a historical standpoint and with reference to the present relevance.
of a civilization whose role and brilliance in the future are expected to equal what they were in the past” (5). This optimism about Islamic civilization was a characteristic feature of the mid-1970s, when freshly found financial resources from oil exports were coupled with a general wave of “renaissance thinking” throughout the Muslim world, spurred in part by the advent of the fifteenth century of Islam. Thirty-six years later, that promise of renaissance having been squandered, geopolitical situation of the world drastically changed, and a general Islamophobia reigning supreme, these volumes are just the right antidote to despair: the sheer breadth of the accomplishments of Islamic civilization in learning, in arts, crafts, science, and technology, its lofty idealism and supreme goal of elevating individual lives beyond the mundane, are all coupled with an immutable anchorage in Revelation, just as they have over the last fourteen centuries. What these volumes present is, indeed, an intellectual feast for the general readership.

Federico Mayor rightly observes in his preface to the work that “for the peoples who, from the China Sea to the Atlantic coast of Africa, embraced Islam, [Islamic civilization provided] a set of cultural references and values that served to fashion their unity while preserving their own specific characteristics. What is more, this civilization, which aspired to universality from its beginnings, exercised an undeniable influence on neighbouring peoples in several fields” (5). The six volumes have been organized along thematic rather than chronological lines and they intend to “acquaint the widest possible readership with the different aspects of this living culture” (6):

Volume 1: The Foundations of Islam
Volume 2: The Individual and Society in Islam
Volume 3: The Spread of Islam Throughout the World
Volume 4: Part I: The Exact and Natural Sciences
Volume 4: Part II: Science and Technology in Islam
Volume 5: Culture and Learning in Islam
Volume 6: Islam in the World Today

Each of these volumes covers a specific aspect of Islamic culture:

1. the pillars of faith and the foundations on which Islam rests,
2. the status of the individual and society in Islam,
3. the spread of Islam since the Revelation: the Arab, Asian, African and European areas opened up before the new profession
of faith and the way in which the rights of the converted peoples were preserved, (4) the fundamental contribution, in the scientific and technical fields, of Islamic civilization to the adventure of human knowledge, (5) the educational and cultural environments—in literature, art and architecture—, and (6) Islam today; between fidelity to its past and the necessary conquest of modernity. Neither a learned compilation nor an attempt at popularization, these volumes are none the less written to the most exacting standards with contributions by scholars from all over the world.

The quality of articles varies in the three volumes so far published, but in general the work displays an excellent level of scholarship. The project has attracted some of the most respected contemporary scholars of Islam. Volume 2 was the first to appear (1998); this was followed by the two parts of Volume 4 (2001); the last to appear was Volume 4 (2003). Considering the intended readership, each volume provides a panoramic view of the field, is rich in breadth, and brings to attention numerous strands of thought in the limited space available.

While a short review of these volumes cannot give details of each volume, one cannot resist mentioning the conceptual richness of the three published volumes. For instance, Volume 2 (The Individual and Society) begins with a chapter entitled “Norms and values” and ends with “Everyday life in the cities of Islam” (ch. 16), covering between them such interconnected topics as the “Rights, responsibilities, and freedom of the individual” (ch. 2); “Moral thought” (ch. 3); “Social thought” (ch. 4); “The family basis of the Islamic city” (ch. 5); and “Islamic education” (ch. 6). The full description of the entire project as well as of each volume can be found on UNESCO’s website, which now has a separate portal devoted to this project.

The voluminous Volume 5 (Culture and Learning), consisting of 926 pages, is divided into six sections: The Languages of Islam; Literature; Philosophy in Islam; Muslim Mysticism; Human Science; and Artistic Creations. Each section contains several chapters, each devoted to a special subfield within the general topic covered by the section. Thus arranged, the volume presents a panorama of culture and learning in Islam—ranging from characteristic features of various Islamic languages to the intricate designs of carpets and metalwork. Given the importance of visual images for this volume, the poor quality of illustrations is unfortunate.

Divided into two parts (“The Exact and Natural Sciences” and
“Technology and Applied Sciences”), Volume 4 (Science and Technology in Islam) has been the result of the efforts of some of the most respected historians and philosophers of Islamic science and presents fruits of lifelong reflections and research. Contributions by George Saliba, Ahmad Y. al-Hasan, Roshdi Rashed, Julio Samsó, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Donald R. Hill, among others, make these two volumes (consisting of 1250 pages) one of the most important secondary works now available to general readers.

These volumes need the largest circulation possible, especially in the Muslim world, where most books published in the West remain out of reach for interested readers due to their prohibitive price. UNESCO’s website for the project indicates the preparation of electronic versions of these volumes. This is an excellent decision, especially if they are made available at no or a minimum cost.

Taken together, the three volumes already published fulfill the aim of the project. Their planned translations into French and Arabic will make them more widely accessible. The project does not envision translations in other languages, but perhaps UNESCO can establish a mechanism with the help of regional publishers or private organizations interested in local editions and produce translations of these volumes into various Islamic languages. Readers of these volumes will eagerly wait for the rest.

Muhammad Ali Khalidi (ed.): Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 186 pp, PB
ISBN 0 521 52963 8

The aim of this anthology is to provide “a representative sample of the Arabic-Islamic philosophical tradition in a manner that is accessible to beginning students of philosophy, as well as to more seasoned philosophers with little or no exposure to this tradition” (xii). As such, the main challenge of the editor was of selection procedures; Khalidi chose to include “extracts from longer philosophical works rather than entire texts or a large number of brief passages from a variety of text” (xii). The result is an admirable volume containing five selections from five most influential authors: al-Fārābī (ca. 878-950), Ibn Sīnā (980-1037), al-Ghazālī (1058-1111), Ibn Ṭufayl (ca. 1109-1186), and Ibn Rushd (1126-1198).

The selection immediately raises a question, preemptively answered
by the editor: why end with Ibn Rushd to perpetuate the false notion that Islamic philosophy died with him? Khalidi’s answer is problematic, as it complicates the idea: “Despite the survival of philosophical activity of some kind in the Islamic world, I would argue that a ‘style of reasoning’ did indeed decline after Ibn Rushd, one that is seamlessly connected with natural science, a logic-based, Greek-influenced, and rationalist enterprise” (xii); one has only to go to Qum and sit in one of the lessons of an Ayatullah Jawadi or any other master of philosophy to arrive at a different conclusion. This, however, does not seriously detract from the merits of the book, which attempts to achieve a certain degree of thematic unity by focusing broadly on metaphysics and epistemology rather than on ethics and political philosophy.

In his introduction Khalidi provides brief biographical information about the five authors as well as the selected works. As general information about the authors is readily available elsewhere, his introductory remarks are kept to a bare minimum, saving space for introducing the selected texts. All but one of the five texts have been previously translated, though Khalidi has translated them afresh from published Arabic editions.

Al-Fārābī’s Kitāb al-Ḥurūf (The Book of Letters) had never before been translated into English; Khalidi has chosen to include its middle section. This section represents a fundamental break from the first and last sections, in that here al-Fārābī gives a sequential account of the origin of language and the emergence of various disciplines (in the first and last sections of his book he is concerned instead with the meaning of philosophical terms).

In choosing a part from On the Soul, from Ibn Sīnā’s Kitāb al-Najāt (The Book of Salvation), which is a condensed version of his magnum opus Kitāb al-Shifā’ (The Book of Healing), Khalidi omitted the first three chapters. These concern, respectively, the vegetative soul, the animal soul, and the internal senses of the soul, and he thus begins his selection with the chapter on the human rational soul. The choice is most appropriate for the book, for here Ibn Sīnā (as well as numerous other Muslims influenced by Aristotle) are at their best in their efforts to reconcile Aristotle’s account with Islamic teachings. Ibn Sīnā’s concept of soul rests on his dualist account in which souls can achieve different grades depending on the degree to which its potential has been actualized.

Perhaps no editor of an anthology of this kind can resist selecting a portion from al-Ghazālī’s autobiographical masterpiece, al-Munqidh min
Khalidi includes an intriguing portion of this book—the section where al-Ghazālī demonstrates in three distinct ways that prophecy is a genuine phenomenon which surpasses reason. He first offers a rational demonstration that nonrational apprehension is possible; secondly, he shows how prophecy can be affirmed through direct, albeit restricted, awareness of the mystical state; and, finally, al-Ghazālī shows how prophecy can be established through trust in testimony and second-hand corroboration, which he interestingly terms Īmān (faith).

Like al-Ghazālī’s al-Munqidh, Ibn Ṭūfayl’s Ḥawī bin Yaqzān (Alive, Son of Awake) is a compelling choice. Relying on Albert Naṭrā Nādir’s 1993 edition, Khalidi has retranslated over three quarters of the book, omitting the extensive introductory section and the concluding epilogue.

The fifth and the last selection is from Ibn Rushd’s famous response to al-Ghazālī’s Incoherence of the Philosophers, Tahāfut al-Tahāfut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence). Ibn Rushd’s response can be read as a debate between the two philosophers, though Ibn Rushd always has the last word. This aspect of the work, however, is not as overwhelming as it might be, since al-Ghazālī had the foresight of including future objections to his arguments in his own work. The excerpted section regards the seventeenth issue of twenty and deals with the nature of causation. This is perhaps the most important section of the book, since it deals with the respective positions of the two writers on causation and miracles and leads to the last four sections, which discuss the natural sciences.

Overall, the book is an excellent introduction to the intricate and involved world of medieval Islamic learning—an enriching experience for both general readers and advanced students.

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Gad Freudenthal: Science in the Medieval Hebrew and Arabic Traditions
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Each new volume in Ashgate’s Variorum Collected Studies Series provides researchers and the general public an opportunity to access articles
written over a long period of time in their “raw” form—just as they first appeared. It is a compromise, of sorts: the writer of the articles does not have to put much time or effort to see his or her work published in one volume; readers do not have to search for scattered articles; and the publisher does not invest greater resources into printing the book. This arrangement has attracted a significant number of historians of science and the Series has been a huge success in terms of its importance for the history of ideas. With the publication of his Science in the Medieval Hebrew and Arabic Traditions Gad Freudenthal has joined such respected names as C. E. Bosworth, Edward S. Kennedy, Franz Rosenthal, A. I. Sabra, and Roshdi Rashed, all of whom have published in this Series.

Freudenthal’s collection of sixteen articles, written over a period of twenty years, is thematically divided into three sections: Science in the Medieval Hebrew Tradition: Socio-Cultural Considerations (two articles); Maimonides, Gersonides and Some Others (eight articles); and Reverberations of Greek Theory of Matter in Arabic and Hebrew (eight articles).

The occasion of this collection’s publication also gave Freudenthal an opportunity to reminisce; the short preface provides insight into his career, scholarly interests, and friendships. Written primarily for specialists, this collection of articles is useful as a barometer, telling us much about the obsessions and ideas of a particular generation of historians of science concerned with two non-Western scientific traditions which never intersected in real time, but which have remained closely associated with each other because of their common view of nature: Jewish and Muslim philosophers of the past shared a certain common domain which made it possible for them to study nature in a like manner; this common dimension can be seen in the third section of this book. The title of the book is somewhat misleading, as there are only three articles out of sixteen which deal with Arabic Tradition.

William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (eds.):
Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe
ISBN 0-262-14075-6

To the modern mind, uttering the word “alchemy” conjures images of a
remote past filled with charlatans claiming to turn base metals into gold through their craft. To those not accustomed to examining the present in more than its immediate context it may, therefore, be shocking to realize that it was only toward the beginning of the eighteenth century that there emerged a marked tendency to sequester alchemy from the new science of chemistry and, although the divorce is now irredeemable, alchemy retains its own place in the annals of human thought. Notwithstanding its centuries’-old history, modern historians have little time for alchemy—those who do spend a paragraph or two in their accounts of the sciences treat it as no more than a precursor to modern chemistry. This view led people to conclude, as Titus Burckhardt notes in his magisterial *Alchemy*, 

"that an insatiable desire to make gold had persistently caused men to believe in a heap of fantastic prescriptions, which, rightly seen, were nothing more than a popular and superstitious application of natural philosophy of the ancients".

*Secrets of Nature* reexamines this idea and similar popular views about alchemy and astrology. Divided into eight chapters, this book with its beautiful dust-cover jacket presents the work of ten historians of science who examine the subject from various perspectives, ranging from problems of historiography to contemporary attitudes and practices in astrology and alchemy.

The book is unevenly divided between astrology and alchemy, with a greater portion devoted to the former. Special attention has been paid to several individuals including Johannes Kepler, Galileo Galilei, the Renaissance astrologer Girolamo Cardano, the Rosicrucians, John Dee, and the medical alchemist Simon Forman by devoting chapters to specific aspects of their work. The fourth chapter, for instance, examines dedicatory letters by Kepler and Galileo which accompanied their seminal works—*Astronomia Nova* (1609) and *Sidereus Nuncius* (1610)—bringing into sharp relief the wider socio-political milieu of the two scientists. The fifth chapter explores the legacies of Johannes Trithemius and John Dee. The book is an important contribution in the current attempts to reexamine the past from new perspectives.

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