

MUSLIM INSTITUTIONS

RECLAIMING THE ISLAMIC
INTELLECTUAL TRADITION:

ISLAMIC TEXTS SOCIETY
AND ITS PUBLICATIONS



In 1981, a small group of scholars established the Islamic Texts Society (ITS) in England to produce English translations of important works of Islamic tradition and to publish new works relevant to contemporary issues concerning Islam and Muslims. The Society was subsequently registered as an educational charity in the UK.

The first publication of the Islamic Texts Society was Martin Lings' *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, a book that is regarded as the best English language biography of the Prophet of Islam. In fact, this biography is one of the finest single-volume works of sirah ever written in any language. Its thoroughly researched material is combined with an intense sensibility and immediacy to the sources, as if the author has lived and relived that era of fundamental changes in human history. The exactitude of its expressions, the subtlety of its language and the detailed narration of events has made this award-winning book an enduring legacy.

Since then, the Islamic Texts Society has embarked upon a publication program that has produced many acclaimed works. ITS has published material that has never before been available to English readership, including translations of unpublished manuscripts and the works of contemporary scholars from around the world. The Society's high standards have been maintained with each and every text. To date ITS has published over forty books.

The long term aim of the Islamic Texts Society is to provide a comprehensive selection of books on various aspects of Islam. Publications range from outstanding individual new works by contemporary scholars in their respective fields to revised and

updated editions of classic texts to translations of hitherto unpublished manuscripts.

A major thrust of the Islamic Texts Society is to bring the works of Muḥammad Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) to a wide English readership. Al-Ghazālī's wisdom and influence render him as one of Islam's most important scholars and his works have been studied throughout the Muslim world for centuries. To date, the Society has published five volumes in their al-Ghazālī Series, of which two have won the British Book Design and Production Award for the best general paperback: *Al-Ghazālī on Invocations and Supplications* (1991) and *Al-Ghazālī on the Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God* (1993).

Another series of the Society is the Muslim Personalities Series. Dedicated to the lives, ideas, and writings of major Muslim scholars who have contributed to Islamic thought throughout the centuries, this series aims to bring out scholarly monographs for the general public.

Books published by the Society fall into seven broad categories: (i) Qur'ān, *Sīrah* and Ḥadīth; (ii) Islamic Law and Jurisprudence; (iii) The al-Ghazālī Series; (iv) Muslim Personalities Series; (v) Translations from the Islamic Heritage; (vi) Monographs on Spirituality and Sufism; and (vii) General Titles on Islam.

Qur'ān, *Sīrah* and Ḥadīth

In 1983, the Islamic Texts Society published an edition of the Qur'ān that can easily be considered the most beautiful twentieth century edition of a book that has always attracted the finest artisans and calligraphers in Muslim history. Reproduced from an exquisite Arabic type that was handset at the beginning of the twentieth century, the text is very legible. The book is 848 pages, printed on off-white, wood-free paper that was produced specifically for this Qur'ān. The ink, also, was especially produced to meet the highest standards and splendid title pages, endpapers and the frames and ornamentation on every page are printed in gold, blue and black. The cover design was adapted from a Moroccan binding of the ninth century hijra (fifteenth century CE) by Dr. Mahmud Rasch. Even though this is a very expensive book (500 British pounds for leather and 350 pounds for linen), combining traditional techniques and motives with modern technology, it is a masterpiece.

For Muslims, ḥadīth literature ranks second to the Qur'ān in importance. In 1993, the Islamic Texts Society republished a revised

edition of Muḥammad Zubayr Ṣiddīqī's book *Ḥadīth Literature, Its Origin, Development and Special Features*. It deals with all aspects of origin, classification, and authenticity of ḥadīth, the problems of falsification of the material and a systematic approach to the literature. In 1997, two bilingual companion volumes appeared: the popular *An-Nawawī's Forty Hadith* and *Forty Hadith Qudsi*. Translated by Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies with an aim to produce a translation for accuracy and readability, the books are printed with the original Arabic alongside the English translation.

Sīrah literature deals with the life of Prophet Muḥammad, and ITS has published two definitive biographies. The biography by Martin Lings, which has subsequently appeared in nearly a dozen languages since ITS first published it, has been reprinted in English several times to meet the needs of the market. The other *sīrah* book is essentially ITS' only book for children: *The Life of the Prophet Muhammad* (1985) is a retelling of the story based on traditional biographical material by Leila Azzam and Aisha Gouveneur. The authors have written this book to make *sīrah* easily accessible for children, and have included passages from the Qur'ān and aḥadīth. The book's color illustrations sensitively depict traditional scenes in Arab life without portraying the Prophet or his companions.

Islamic Law and Jurisprudence

The discipline of *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) has many branches, and in 1987 ITS published a translation of *al-Shāfi'ī's Risāla*, a book that laid the foundations for Islamic jurisprudence in the second Islamic century. Recently, it has launched a series on Fundamental Rights and Liberties in Islam, and produced three volumes authored by M. Hashim Kamali: *The Dignity of Man* (2001), *Freedom, Equality and Justice in Islam* (2001), and *Freedom of Expression in Islam* (1997). Another important work is *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1996) by M. M. Al-Azami, which presents a detailed critique of a classic Western work from an Islamic perspective.

The Al-Ghazali Series

Numerous translators are working on different books of al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*), a book regarded as a perennial fount of wisdom. This major work on spirituality from the eleventh century has forty chapters that deal

with knowledge, religious requirements, social relationships, behavior, and the inner life of the soul. By bringing these new publications of a time-honored text into our hands, the Islamic Texts Society is making a great contribution to the world. No doubt, the al-Ghazālī Series will prove to be a long-term project.

Other books include a bilingual edition of al-Ghazālī's *Letter to a Disciple* (2003) and the award-winning *The Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God* (1992).

Muslim Personalities Series

The growth and development of Islamic civilization and culture was marked by major voices through the ages and ITS aims to focus on the lives of major figures who made significant contributions. This series will reflect current research and aims to prompt further investigation on not just religious scholars, but other intellectual giants in fields such as philosophy, architecture, mathematics, and poetry.

The first book in the series is on Ibn 'Arabī: *The Voyage of No Return* (2000) by Claude Addas. (It is notable that ITS has three other publications on Ibn 'Arabī in their Monographs on Spirituality and Sufism.) Other titles in the Muslim Personalities Series include *Avicenna, Intuitions of the Truth* (2004) and *Mullā Ṣadrā, Philosopher of the Mystics* (2003), with plans for new titles dedicated to Shāfi'ī, Ṭabarī and Fārābī.

Translations from the Islamic Heritage

A hallmark of ITS' books are that the translations are done by scholars of the language as well as of the material. For example, Penelope Johnstone who translated the fourteenth century text of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *al-Ṭib al-Nabawī (Medicine of the Prophet, 1998)* has a doctorate in the history of Arabic medicine and teaches Arabic at Oxford University. Peter Avery, who translated Farīd ud-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's Persian classic, *Mantiq ul-Ṭayr (The Speech of the Birds, 1998)* was a Persian lecturer at Cambridge University for thirty-two years. Some of the titles feature an Arabic-English parallel text, glossary, bibliography and/or index. Many of the titles appear in English for the first time, such as Vincent Cornell's translation of *The Way of Abū Madyan* (1996), and Tosum Bayrak's interpretation of the eleventh century text *Sirr al-Asrār* by Ḥaḍrat 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlanī (*The Secret of Secrets, 1992*). Other titles include Ibn Taymiyya's

fourteenth century work on the merits of prayer, *The Goodly Word* (2003), and Al-Nawawī's *al-Maqāṣid*, a classic thirteenth century *Manual of Islam* (1996).

Monographs on Spirituality and Sufism

The monographs include titles by Martin Lings, a foremost authority on Islamic mysticism: the bilingual edition *Sufi Poems, a Medieval Anthology* (2003), *What is Sufism?* (1993), *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, *Shaikh Aḥmad al-ʿAlawī* (1993), and *The Book of Certainty, The Sufi Doctrine of Faith, Vision and Gnosis* (1992). Titles on Ibn ʿArabī include *Sufi Metaphysics and Qurʾānic Prophets* (2003), *Quest for the Red Sulphur* (1993), and *The Seal of the Saints* (1993).

General Titles on Islam

It is in the selection of material available in general titles on Islam that ITS shows its exacting standards of quality in content, highlighting the intellectual tradition of Islamic thought alongside modern contemporary works.

The classic eight-volume Arabic language dictionary by E. W. Lane which has been used for one and a half centuries is published by ITS in two compact volumes, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (1984). The whole of Arabic grammar is covered in Alan Jones' *Arabic Through the Qurʾān* (2004). A true work of art in text and illustration is Titus Burckhardt's *Fez, City of Islam* (1992) with forty-one colour plates and 17 monochrome plates.

ITS has reproduced several titles dealing with the Islamic scientific tradition, notably Osman Bakar's two titles *Classification of Knowledge in Islam* (1998) and *The History and Philosophy of Islamic Science* (1998) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *Science and Civilization in Islam* (1987). Other titles by Seyyed Hossein Nasr include updated and revised editions of *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (2001), *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (2002), and his comprehensive exposition *A Guide to the Modern World* (1994). ITS has published three titles by Gai Eaton: *Remembering God, Reflections on Islam* (2000), a newly revised edition of *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (1994), and *King of the Castle, Choice and Responsibility in the Modern World* (1990).

The world-wide distribution of ITS publications through small publishers and individual representatives has made them available in many countries. Egypt, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, India, Pakistan, the Far East, Australia, Scandinavia, Spain/Portugal,

United States, and the United Kingdom each have regional representatives, and in the last several years the ITS website has made everything accessible online.

It is unfortunate that after more than two decades, the Islamic Texts Society has still not become a viable commercial enterprise. With the outstanding books it produces, its market should, and could, surpass that of other commercial publishers. Is it due to a lack of investment in areas of marketing, promotion, and distribution? Although most of the publications of the Society have met commercial success, it remains a small publishing house. In this, it shares perhaps the greatest handicap faced by all Western publishing ventures dealing exclusively with Islam and Muslims; although there is a huge market and an urgent need, small-scale, family owned or cooperative publishing houses can simply not compete in a society designed for mass production. As a result, publishers dealing exclusively with Islam and Muslims have to rely on donations. As a registered charity, the Islamic Texts Society is dependent on fund-raising to achieve its aims and objectives. This financial handicap has not only limited the number of works ITS has been able to produce, it has also deprived the world at large of valuable translations of important books of Islamic thought.

Certainly the aesthetic sensibility of design and high quality content are outstanding features of ITS publications, in many ways being the contemporary glimmerings of traditional Islamic craft and authentic writing. The Islamic Texts Society will never be short of material for publication; so much yet remains to be brought to the printed page. Perhaps generous patronage by wealthy Muslims can solve the financial problems of ITS whose publications are a welcome addition to the books on Islam and Islamic thought. More information about the Society can be obtained from its website (www.its.org.uk) or by writing to info@its.org.uk.

Elma Ruth Harder
Center for Islam and Science
Sherwood Park, AB, Canada