

Brief Notices

The Niche of Lights, by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, trans. David Buchman (Brigham Young University Press, 1998)

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (A.D. 1058–1111) is a pivotal figure in the history of Islamic thought, whether his work is seen as having a negative impact or, as is far more common, a positive one. He was famous in his time as a master of Islamic jurisprudence (which defined correct practice) and doctrine (which defined orthodox belief). But his own spiritual quest convinced him that salvation was not to be obtained merely by slavish adherence to a code of conduct or intellectual assent to a creed but rather in the firsthand experience of the divine, toward which the beliefs and practices of Islam were oriented but often went unrealized. Al-Ghazali's quest for a fully actualized spiritual life led him to the disciplines of meditation on the divine essence and reflection upon the inner meanings of the Islamic revelations as contained in both the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. *The Niche of Lights*, written in the latter part of his career, is a luminous example of al-Ghazali's personal effort to understand certain of those revelations in their richest sense.

The focus of attention in the first two chapters of *The Niche of Lights* is a Qur'anic passage widely known as the Light Verse:

God is the light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star kindled from a blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil well-high would shine, even if no fire touched it; light upon light; God guides to His light whom He

will. And God strikes similitudes for men, and God has knowledge of everything.¹

In the first chapters, al-Ghazali develops "a metaphysics of light" (xxxii) founded upon the cardinal doctrine of Islam that God is one. Along the way, al-Ghazali discusses the process by which one achieves nearness to God—and thereby, greater comprehension of His essence as the one true light. It is a process that involves inner purification and "meditating on the qualities of things in the visible world" (xxxiii) as a means to comprehend the nature of unseen realms. A methodology for interpreting the imagery or "similitudes" of the Qur'an is thus elaborated, with specific images and vignettes from that book serving as examples. In the third and final chapter, al-Ghazali explains the so-called Veils Hadith, a saying by the Prophet Muhammad that employs both the imagery of light to describe God and the imagery of veils to indicate the various levels of insight required to comprehend God fully.

The Niche of Lights is a relatively short book that can be read in one or two sittings (the translation itself is just 53 pages). It is an excellent example of a text in the Islamic Sufi (or mystical) tradition and will be read with interest by those who wish to learn more about this aspect of Islamic faith and practice. Professor Buchman has produced a translation that is not wooden yet is literal and employs technical terms consistently. Thus, the translation, paired with the Arabic text on facing pages, provides an opportunity for students of Arabic to hone their reading skills while exploring an engaging text from medieval Islam. Finally, *The Niche of Lights* affords an opportunity to view a Muslim spiritual master at work—not merely expounding a theory of worship

informed by imagination and oriented toward “becoming,” but actually carrying it out in the very act of writing these meditations.

—Morgan Davis

1. A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 24:25.

Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East, edited by Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early, 2d ed. (Indiana University Press, 2001)

In the second edition of *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*, Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early have reintroduced this often confusing region in a clear and concise manner. Rather than seeking to describe every aspect of every country in the Middle East, Bowen and Early have included essays that focus on the everyday activities of the Muslim people of the region. This approach works well in introducing the reader to the struggles, feelings, and daily routine of the inhabitants of this area.

The book is presented in much the same way as the first edition, divided into five sections: generations and life passages; gender relations; home, community, and work; popular expression of religion; and performance and entertainment. While the book retains the successful format of the first edition, it introduces twenty-three new narratives, stories, and studies. Each essay and section contributes to the weaving of a tapestry that reflects the realities of Middle Eastern societies. To complement the articles and to give relevant background, Bowen and Early have written an informative introduction to each section as well as comments that precede each individual piece.

Given the size and disparities of the Middle East, the authors have done well

in choosing articles that have salience in countries outside of the essays’ immediate subject matter. Although all but three of the articles deal with specific countries and not the region as a whole, the ideas and insights that they present are often applicable to other areas of the Middle East. For example, the essay by Diane Singerman, “Networks, Jobs, and Everyday Life in Cairo,” highlights the important role played by formal and informal networks in gaining employment in the face of a large bureaucracy and a dearth of jobs. While the article deals exclusively with Egypt, family, social, and political networks also have a significant role in much of the rest of the Middle East.

Among my favorite articles are Brian Barber’s “Politics, Politics, and More Politics: Youth Life Experiences in the Gaza Strip,” Jon W. Anderson’s “Internet Islam: New Media of the Islamic Reformation,” and an article that was included in the first edition, Michael E. Jansen’s “An American Woman on the Hajj.” Each of these essays deals with issues that are important yet often overlooked or misunderstood by the Western reader.

Barber’s article describes the intense politicalization that has occurred in Gaza and its impact on the Palestinian youth’s perceived realities and hopes for the future. Anderson looks at the way in which a new technology, the Internet, has been effectively used to further Islamic discourse and what effect this might have on Islam. Jansen’s piece is a personal narrative of the pilgrimage to Mecca.

As indicated in the title of the book, the essays are about the *Muslim* Middle East. Perhaps one of the most unique attributes of the Middle East is the impact religion has on the culture, identity, and politics of the region. The book contains many articles that effectively describe the extent that Islam influences and permeates the everyday life of the modern Middle Easterner. “Young Women’s Sexuality in Tunisia: The Health Consequences of Misinformation among University Stu-