

***The Essentials of Ibādī Islam***, by Valeria J. Hoffman (Modern Intellectual and Political History of the Middle East) (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012), xii +344 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8156-3288-7, \$39.95 (hb)

*The Essentials of Ibādī Islam* is a book to be numbered among the literature relating to the theology of a particular branch of Islam, Ibādism, with which the work initiates the reader in its excellent introduction. The author of the book, Professor Valerie Hoffman, is well acquainted with Oman and Ibādism due to her long involvement with the subject matter and her fieldwork for long periods in the Sultanate. She writes for both students with some familiarity with Islam as well as the discerning academic who enjoys a systematic exposition of historical events, with an extensive (51 pp.) and highly explanatory introduction on the place of Ibādism within Islam and the related research (pp. 3-5), the origins and political history of Ibādīyya (pp. 5-7), the development of Ibādism as a distinct sect of Islam (pp. 17-26), and the distinctive teachings of Ibādī Islam (pp. 26-45), with a further elaboration of some very specific Ibādī topics, such as: the status of sinning Muslims, the notions of *walāya* and *barāʿa*, the expectation of reward or punishment in the afterlife, free will versus predestination, the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qurʾān, and the debate between various Muslim schools and in popular piety about whether or not they should be understood metaphorically; the use of reason and God’s revelation through prophethood; God’s unity, essence, and attributes; the debate about the creation of the Qurʾān; the principles of jurisprudence amongst Sunnī, Shīʿī, and Ibādī Islam; and the essence of Islam, which includes “all types of religious knowledge – theological, legal, ethical, and mystical” (p. 44).

For a rich exposition of Ibādī theology, Hoffman chooses the works of two distinguished modern Ibādī theologians, which she translates from Arabic into English, thus making the texts accessible to non-Arabic readers. The two works are: *al-ʿAqida al-Wahbiyya* (“The Creed”) by Nāṣir ibn Sālim ibn ʿUdayyam al-Rawāḥī (d. 1339/1920), known as “the poet of the Arabs,” in the words of Muḥammad b. Yūsuf Aṭfayyish (p. 48); and *Kitāb maʿālim al-dīn*

(“The Characteristics of Religion”) by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Thamīnī (d. 1220/1808).

The author explains the importance of these books for Ibāḍī theology and the impetus for their composition in her introduction (pp. 45-53). For her excellent English translation of *al-‘Aqīda al-Wahbiyya* (“The Creed”) by al-Rawāḥī, Hoffman consulted available manuscripts which she details for the reader, along with its various printed editions (pp. 50-51). We learn that al-Rawāḥī’s goal was to compose a clear text, in the form of questions and answers about Ibāḍism between student and teacher, for the benefit of the many Omanis – including the author’s family – who immigrated to southern Arabia and particularly the island of Zanzibar in eastern Africa at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Al-Rawāḥī, who is known to history as an accomplished poet and judge, was eager to defend Ibāḍī teachings from the surrounding Sunnī theology, and thus systematized the Ibāḍī teachings of the past, which he found scattered in nearly illegible and voluminous works, for easy dissemination to and understanding by the Ibāḍīs. He thus “on the one hand simplifies and elucidates doctrines that must otherwise be gleaned from massive, dense, and often difficult texts; on the other hand, he provides a thorough and fascinating discussion of the doctrines of many other Muslim groups, past and present, on the points at hand, including the differences between the two major schools of Sunnī theology, the Ash‘arites and the Māturīdites.” (pp. 47-48). Thus, al-Rawāḥī’s text, with its outstanding explanation and clarification of concepts, was then – and remains today – an excellent pedagogical tool for introducing Islamic theology in general and particularly Ibāḍī interpretations. In his work, al-Rawāḥī expounds key theological themes such as knowledge of God’s Unity, knowledge of God, God’s essence and attributes, the roots of religion, the impossibility of seeing God, and what is necessary and impossible for God. He analyzes the terms *walāya* and *barā‘a*, which are particularly important for Ibāḍism, inasmuch as they constitute the fundamental legal and theological principles of the Ibāḍī community. Finally, he also examines *How to Deal with People Who are not of Muhammad’s Umma* and *Knowledge and Action*. Al-Rawāḥī develops these thematic units in seven chapters, which are translated by Hoffman, complemented by rich footnotes that illuminate various points in the text and cross-reference Qur’ānic passages. The text ends abruptly in the seventh chapter, which leads Hoffman to conclude that it “may indicate that the author passed

away before completing the text” (p. 237).

This leads Hoffman to her translation of the second work, *Kitāb ma‘ālim al-dīn* (“The Characteristics of Religion”), by al-Thamīnī, who lived nearly a century before al-Rawāḥī, because it covers what she sees as an omission in al-Rawāḥī’s work, namely a discussion of the doctrine of predestination, specifically in his sections on *The Necessity of the Absolute Oneness of God Most High* and *What is Possible Concerning the Most High*. At the end of her introduction (pp. 52-53), Hoffman relays the life of al-Thamīnī, his work and the historical context in which he lived and worked (d. 1808), as a pre-eminent representative of north African Ibāḍism in the Mزاب Valley, “one of the first scholars of the modern Ibāḍī renaissance,” as the author writes at the end of the introduction (pp. 52-53). Hoffman refers the reader to al-Thamīnī’s Arabic edition of the work (1986), noting its typographical errors and other problems, and particularly the tone of the conclusion, which is largely hostile to Ibāḍism and therefore obviously a later addition by another writer. Hoffman continues the method she employed in the first work, translating the third and fourth chapters, with explanations in the footnotes (pp. 240-276).

Valerie Hoffman’s work is complemented by a very informative general glossary (pp. 279 ff.) of Arab-Muslim terms with their definitions, as well as dates where necessary, and a bibliographical dictionary (pp. 291 ff.), in alphabetical order, of historical figures and writers from the beginning of Islam to 1920. The work concludes with a subject-specific bibliography (pp. 313 ff.), as well as a complete and detailed index (pp. 327 ff.).

Until now, research on Ibāḍī theology outside the Arabic world has been limited, although valuable, with essentially only two monographs: that of the Libyan Ibāḍī scholar Ennami, which was published in English in 1971; and that of Cuperly, published in French in 1991. This third work contributes to improving awareness of Ibāḍī theology among the international academic community. The path has thus already been opened, and awaits its completion by other monographs that include more insights into the thought and development of Ibāḍī theology through the centuries. This text is especially important because it sheds light on particular trends and interpretations of Islam, and is imbued with a fresh re-reading and understanding of Islam as something dynamic and ongoing, and not as something static and monolithic. Hoffman, in short, has thoroughly studied and

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written about the evolution of Ibāḍī theology during modern times and the articulation of Ibāḍī identity.

**Abdulrahman al-Salimi**

*Sultanate of Oman, Oman*