

The Spirituality of Shi'ī Islam: Beliefs and Practices, by Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (London & New York: I. B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2011), xxii + 585 pp., ISBN: 978-1-84511-738-2, £39.50 (hb)

The Spirituality of Shi'ī Islam: Beliefs and Practices is an indispensable book written by one of the most knowledgeable scholars on Shī'ī Islam. This monumental work illuminates the specifics and details of the Shī'ī tradition in general and Shī'ī mysticism in particular. Although several works have been written on Shī'ism in English, Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi's book stands out as one of the most valuable works on this topic. *The Spirituality of Shi'ī Islam* is divided into four sections and fourteen chapters, with a bibliography and an index section. In the first section, the author discusses the emergence of Shī'ism and the ancient Iranian conversion to the new tradition. Chapter One presents the origins of the Shī'ī faith and reflects on the expression *dīn 'Alī* (the religion of 'Alī). The author discusses the works of historiographers in which the expression *dīn 'Alī* appears. He then highlights the uniqueness of 'Alī, arguing that the imām was the "only personality from early Islam [apart from Muḥammad] with whom the term *dīn* is associated" (p. 8). The establishment of the "religion of 'Alī" results in part from two aspects of 'Alī's relationship to Muḥammad: the first through blood ties (*nasab*) and the second through a marriage alliance (*muṣābāra*). The author also provides a lengthy discussion on how 'Alī legitimized his claim to lead the community using the text of the Qur'ān. Notably, the author dedicates a section to examining the pre-Islamic basis of authority to show the continuity between the pre-Islamic era and early Islam in institutions, beliefs, and rituals. The author's purpose in this section is to show the legitimacy of 'Alī's succession to the Prophet by showing that the Arabs "regularly elected their leaders from specific families" (p. 23) and that customs continued in early Islam and were even practiced by Muḥammad himself. 'Alī's relationship to Muḥammad, which legitimized his political claim to the succession, prompted some early Muslims to be followers of *dīn 'Alī*.

At the beginning of the book, the author demonstrates the link between pre-Islamic Sasanian Iran and Imāmī Shī'ism and shows how

the origin and development of Imāmī Shīʿism are centered on the figure of Shahrbānū, a Sasanian princess and the mother of the imāms. The author turns our attention to *Kitāb al-akhbār al-ṭiwāl* by Abū Ḥanīfa al-Dīnawārī (d. ca. 282/894-895) and *al-Kāmil fī l-lughba* by Muḥammad ibn Yazīd al-Mubarrad (d. 286/900) to demonstrate the connection between Sasanian Iran and Imāmī Shīʿism. Al-Dīnawārī, for instance, narrates a report about a princess from a noble Iranian bloodline who is captured during a battle against the Muslims and given to ʿAlī, who in turn asks her whether she wishes to marry his son al-Ḥasan. Al-Mubarrad, however, was the earliest author in the ninth century to mention a Sasanian wife of the Imām al-Ḥusayn. *Itbbāt al-waṣiyya*, attributed to al-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956-957), reports that two daughters of a Persian king were captured, forced into slavery, and then freed and given in marriage to ʿAlī's two sons. Thus, Amir-Moezzi documents the historical link between pre-Islamic Iran and Imāmī Shīʿism. The author notes that "links of a doctrinal and religious nature" between ancient Iran and Imāmism are yet to be explored.

The author also discusses the divinity of the Imām and the role he plays as a mediator between the believers and God. The Imām of whom the author speaks here is the "ontological, cosmic, archetypal Imām" (with an upper case 'i'). This Imām is the Vehicle for the attributes and organs of God. For instance, he is the Eye, the Hand, the Face, the Side, the Heart, the Tongue, and the Ear of God. The Imām holds the most beautiful names of God; those who know the Imām know their God, and those who deny the Imām deny their God. The author refers to the third imām, al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī, who said: "Oh Mankind! God created His servants in order that they may know Him, for when they know Him, they worship Him and free themselves from the worship of all else except for Him" (p. 113). The author demonstrates that the role of the Imām as a vehicle for God's attributes and organs not only is narrated by Imāmī Shīʿī tradition but also was confirmed by the Prophet Muḥammad himself, who said: "Without ʿAlī, truth would not be distinguished from falsehood, nor believer from non-believer; without ʿAlī, it would not have been possible to worship God ..." (p. 118).

After discussing the divinity of the Imām, the author turns his attention to the creation and the pre-existence of the Imām. The first section discusses the creation of Muḥammad and ʿAlī from light two

thousand years before creation. According to the traditions of the imāms, Muḥammad himself frequently mentioned that he and ʿAlī were created from the same light before creation. According to Shīʿī tradition, God created five creatures from the light of His glory and gave them names derived from His own names: being the Praised One, He called the first light Muḥammad; being the Praised One He named the second light ʿAlī; being the Creator of heaven and earth, He gave the third light the name Fāṭima; and possessing the most beautiful names, He created the names al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn. God created these creatures so that they would worship Him, praise His glory, and bear witness to His Unicity even before creation. The next chapter discusses Muḥammad's ascension (*miʿrāj*) to the seventh heaven and his encounters with holy figures. According to the author, the "angels of each heaven ask Muḥammad to convey their greetings to ʿAlī ... Jesus, Moses, and Abraham, encountered in the seventh heaven, sing the praises of ʿAlī and call him legatee (*waṣī*) and vicegerent (*khalīfa*) of Muḥammad" (p. 173). Not only is the *walāya* of ʿAlī mentioned in Muḥammad's ascension; the other imāms and their *walāya* are also present in the accounts of *miʿrāj*. For instance, when Muḥammad was left alone with God, he glanced at the feet of the Throne and saw twelve lights, with each containing the name of his legatees, from the first, ʿAlī, to the last, the Mahdī. Moreover, in the Imāmī accounts of *miʿrāj*, when the prophet was raised up to heaven, "not a single journey went without God entrusting the Prophet with the *walāya* of ʿAlī and the imāms ... after him..." (p. 189).

The author also gives an account of the interpretations and implications of the miracle in early Imāmism. Amir-Moezzi demonstrates how miracles are an "essential aspect of the Shīʿī concept of the prophet's continuity through *walāya*." The author also presents the "phenomenon of the miracle" and its development during the formative period of Twelver Shīʿism. The author presents us with a two-part account of the phenomenon of the miracle: 1) miracles in the circles of the imāms and 2) miracles among the imāms' associates and in Shīʿī milieus (pp. 193-194). Moreover, Amir-Moezzi examines the content of *walāya* to foster a greater understanding of the very substance of Imāmī Shīʿism. In the section on *walāya* and the Qurʾān, the author lists some quotations from what early Shīʿī sources consider a "complete" Qurʾān. These quotations contain words, expressions, and parts of sentences concerning ʿAlī, the imāms, and their *walāya*, and these quotations differ significantly from the official Qurʾān. Ac-

According to the author, the *walāya* is not only an important concept in the Qurʾān but also one of the Pillars, if not *the* Pillar, of Islam.

Amir-Moezzi also discusses theology and mystical anthropology according to early Imāmī sources. Here, the author tells us that at the heart of these sources is a series of traditions that divide humans into three categories: the Impeccable Ones (i.e., Muḥammad, his daughter Fāṭima, and the twelve imāms), the faithful supporters of the imāms, and finally, the others. Another tradition provides similar accounts but is more specific: “There are three types of men: the noble of pure descent, the protected ally, and the vile man of base descent” (p. 278). The author emphasizes that these “anthropological criteria” are understood as metaphors for the three categories that comprise mankind: the spiritual guides, their supporters, and their adversaries. The author also dedicates a chapter to a poem written by the Persian philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640) that illustrates some of the philosopher’s theological, philosophical, and eschatological thoughts. This poetry about ‘Alī celebrates the Figure and the *walāya* of the Imām and emphasizes two of his qualities: He is both the friend of God, the *walī*, and the warrior for the faith. Amir-Moezzi argues that, for Ṣadrā, these two qualities are intertwined and together form the basis of a “spiritual interpretation (*taʿwīl*)” of the figure of ‘Alī.

The author also explores the visions of the imāms in modern and contemporary Twelver Mysticism, particularly in non-institutional mysticism and in mystical brotherhoods. In the former, the imām becomes visible to the faithful in the physical world. The author notes that this type of mysticism is dominant in popular beliefs. The mystical brotherhoods or mystical schools, however, envision an “internalized conception of the imām.” They maintain that the Imām, who is visible to the heart, is “exoterically manifested in our times by the hidden imām ... and esoterically by the imām in the follower’s heart” (pp. 372-373).

In the final chapters, the author examines prayer as a fundamental practice in Imāmī Shīʿism. Amir-Moezzi does not discuss it from an Islamic perspective in general, as he claims, but rather focuses on some “little-known elements about the literature and some aspects of the superogatory prayer (*duʿāʾ*)” (p. 375). He starts the chapter by discussing the concept of prayer in Henry Corbin’s *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabī*. In that monumental work, Corbin dedicates a section in the third chapter to prayer, entitled “Prayer of

Man, Prayer of God.” Amir-Moezzi focuses on Corbin’s discussion of the “reciprocity” of prayer and argues that “reciprocity,” perhaps the most fundamental aspect of prayer, transforms prayer from a flat monologue into a “vibrant and intense dialogue with the Person addressed” (p. 377). Amir-Moezzi then explores this dimension in Imāmī prayer and illustrates how prayer – in its different forms – is the most widespread illustration of Imāmī devotion.

Amir-Moezzi also examines the relation between two significant concepts in Shī'ī tradition: the End of Time (*ākhir al-zamān*) and the Return to the Origin (*ma'ād*). In one section, he defines the End of Time as being a period of violence, injustice, and ignorance. In the Return to the Origin, the author divides the accounts of the Origins into two groups. The first is the exoteric cosmogony: the *ex nihilo* creation, the cosmos of the seven heavens, the age of the universe, etc. The second group is the esoteric cosmogony. The latter, according to the author, is specifically Shī'ī because it concerns the doctrine of the imāms. The author also discusses the theme of occultation. Here, he attempts to “establish a typology of accounts of encounters with the hidden imām during the Occultation” (p. 433). The author attempts to shed new light on the development and evolution of the Imāmī doctrine of Occultation as well as the role of the occulted imām in the spiritual dimension of Imāmism. Amir-Moezzi concludes his work with an examination of certain hermeneutics of the Occultation.

Amir-Moezzi’s monumental work – with its great detail on Shī'ī Imāmism doctrine – is a significant contribution to the fields of religious, Islamic, and spiritual studies as well as an indispensable reference work for students of spiritual Shī'ism.

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