

Der Eine und das Andere : Beobachtungen an islamischen häresiographischen Texten, by Josef van Ess (Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients: 23) (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2011), 2 vols, xxviii + xvi + 1510 pp., ISBN: 978-3-11-021577-9 €209 / \$293 (hb)

Josef van Ess's latest work is a monumental study of the Islamic heresiographic tradition in Arabic and in Persian literatures. In the style of his colossal history of early Islamic theology, the six-volume *Theologie und Gesellschaft* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991-1997), van Ess surveys in this book writings about religious divisions within Islam. We have come to call these works heresiographies, although that word, which has its origins in Christian literature, does not fully apply. There are not in Islam heresies like there are in Christianity. Where there is no center of orthodoxy there can be no heresies, van Ess argues, and in Islam orthodoxy has always been in the eye of the beholder, meaning the author of whatever heresiography one is looking at (II, 1298-1308).

In Islam, this genre of literature develops out of the famous *ḥadīth* of the 70-odd divisions of Islam. In one of his earlier works of 1975, van Ess already dealt with this *ḥadīth* and some of its numerous variants (*Zwischen Ḥadīth and Theologie*, 134-136). In a book of 1971, van Ess had also dealt with Muʿtazilite heresiographic writing. He begins this study with an analysis of the *firqa-ḥadīth*. In its most widespread version, it bemoans the fact that there will be more divisions in Islam than in its two predecessor-religions, Judaism and Christianity. In the tradition of Ignaz Goldziher's *ḥadīth*-criticism, van Ess is able to show that there are developments in *ḥadīth*-literature, which react to one another. The title of his 1975-study already expressed van Ess' conviction that much of *ḥadīth*-literature records the theological thought of the early Muslim community. The *ḥadīth* of the 70-odd divisions in Islam with all its variants is for him a reaction to the trauma of the first civil war. Out of that generates the desire to name the 71 or 72 groups in Islam that will not be saved. Only one, *al-firqa al-nājiya*, will enjoy redemption in the afterlife. This "saved group" (in some versions of the *ḥadīth* identified with the *al-sawād al-aʿzam*, the "broad mass" or even the "silent majority," as van Ess

translates it, I, 40, 43) is the closest one gets to orthodoxy in Islam. Given that almost all groups in Islam engaged in the literary genre of documenting the 70-odd groups, there are as many orthodox views as there are “deviants.” Van Ess is probably right when he argues that the non-centered approach of Islam is far more “normal” and in many ways more original to a religion than Christianity’s search for a center and for heretic peripheries. After all, Islam almost continues – as a monotheist religion – the attitude of ancient polytheism, where there was a broad understanding that all religions worship the same pantheon of gods, albeit by different rites. The pantheon of gods is merely replaced with the understanding that all religions worship the same God.

Van Ess’ more than 1.500 pages of study are divided into three parts. First, there are roughly a hundred pages of analysis of the *firqa-ḥadīḥ* and how it has been understood by later Muslim scholars followed by a historical survey of works that list and explain the various denominations in Islam. This is the bulk of the 2-volume work, stretching through pp. 107-1197. It begins with authors of the early 2nd/8th century and ends with works that were published in the mid-20th. The third part (II, 1201-1369), titled “What do we mean by Islamic heresiographic literature?” brings together observations on the genre, its techniques, the language it created and used, and the institutions where this happened. The book finishes with a set of very detailed indices.

Rather than simply dealing with heresiographies, van Ess also includes the important works of *maqālāt* literature that simply enlist different positions to given theological problems. Al-Ash‘arī’s (d. 324/935) *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn* is, of course, the best known representative but van Ess devotes equal space to the slightly earlier *maqālāt*-book of the Mu‘tazilite al-Ka‘bī (d. 319/931), which is extant in a single manuscript but has, for reasons that may lie in its state of preservation, only partly been edited. Lacking a proper edition, van Ess makes diligent and laudable efforts to reconstruct its shape and content from later quotations (I, 351-362). The three great books of Islamic comparative religion, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī’s *al-Farq bayna l-firaq* (I, 667-711), Ibn Ḥazm’s *al-Fiṣal fī l-milal* (II, 837-856), and al-Shahrastānī’s *al-Milal wa-l-nihal* (II, 860-900) are discussed in great detail as are those of the second and third row of authors in this genre, such as al-Nawbakhtī (d. c. 310/922), al-Malaṭī (d. 377/987), al-

Ḥākīm al-Jishumī (d. 484/1101) and many more. Van Ess does not neglect the “smaller” books of the genre either – sometimes just a few obscure folios in a manuscript. On occasion he masterfully reconstructs a lost work from information he finds in later writings. Since almost every major thinker in Islam contributed to this genre, most are dealt with here. Although simply titled *Beobachtungen*, “observations,” it is clear that van Ess aims at an exhaustive catalogue of heresiographic and doxographic literature in Islam – as long as those *doxa* (Greek for “opinions”) have their roots in Islamic thinking. Philosophical doxographies such as that of pseudo-Ammonius or the *Ṣiwān al-ḥikma* are not a part of this study and are only dealt with as a source material in works like al-Shahrastānī’s *al-Milal wa-l-ṇihāl*.

The philosophers are not considered one of the 73 divisions of Islam because they did not generate in the historical process of Muslim divisions that begins with Abū Bakr’s appointment to the caliphate or, more objectively, with the murder of ‘Uthmān 24 years later. That is why van Ess also does not consider their schools a part of this book’s subject (II, 873). One could ponder, however, how the pattern of the 72 or 73 sects misrepresents the true divisions within Islam, where after the mid-3rd/9th century the Muslim *falāsifa* play an important role in doctrinal debates and will continue to do so until the modern period. Books that do not aim to explain the 70-odd divisions, such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s (d. 606/1210) recently edited *al-Riyāḍ al-mūniqa fī arā’ abl al-‘ilm*, sometimes include the *falāsifa*. Often, however, they simply do not consider them Muslims, like al-Ash‘arī who omits them from his *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn* but is said to have included them in a second, similar book on the teachings held by non-Muslims (*Maqālāt gḥayr al-Islāmiyyīn*), which is lost (I, 456). We do not know whether al-Kindī (d. c. 250/865), for instance, was part of that book or whether it limited itself to the pre-Islamic philosophers. The fact remains that Muslim doxographic and heresiographic literature played an important role in the construction of Islam’s self-understanding as a religion (or even: a culture) that is significantly different from the intellectual traditions of antiquity and late-antiquity in the eastern Mediterranean. Muslim philosophers never fully agreed with this and they often found followers among Western researchers, most recently among those who put early Islamic history in a late-antique context. The fact that the Islamic attitude to heresies continues that of late antiquity (see above) is another piece of evidence for those who argue for continuities rather than drastic

ruptures.

This book is not written for beginners in the field. Van Ess assumes that his readers know a lot about the history of Islamic thought. Like others of his works lately, the book is written in the style of an oral conversation between author and reader (in a German “Plauderton”). Van Ess puts to paper whatever he finds noteworthy about the texts he discusses and their authors. For the accomplished reader of German, this makes a good and often also a quick read (the 1.500 pages can be easily read cover to cover), yet I am not sure what those who have to learn German will say. The chatty tone allows van Ess to fling in some comments about contemporary journalism and tourism (II, 650, 737) as well as his discomfort with the recent reforms at German universities (I, 431). This approach never manages to be particularly systematic and sometimes leads to omissions, as when one misses the death dates of authors such as al-Ḥākīm al-Jishumī, which is simply omitted among all the interesting chitchat about him (II, 761-766). In other publications we would call this frowsy or sloppy. That is, however, the impression one gets about van Ess’ system of bibliographical referencing. Almost in the style of the 19th century, he simply lists the name of an author in a footnote (e.g. “Rudolph”) together with a page reference, assuming that his readers will know which publication is referred to (in this case Ulrich Rudolph’s *Al-Māturīdī und die sunnitische Theologie in Samarkand*). Several quotes (e. g. I, 66 or I, 75-76) are not identified and the book lacks a key of abbreviations. One would need a certain amount of imagination to understand that “Fs.” is the abbreviation for “Festschrift” and a firm grounding in classical studies – as van Ess certainly assumes his readers have – to realize that “apu” stands for the Latin *antepeanultimo*, meaning the third line from the bottom of a page. The more common Latin abbreviation “*ibid.*” does not always refer to the last mentioned bibliographical entry but may point to the most important text that the passage discusses. A good desk editorial would have established a more stringent style, but even de Gruyter publishers, despite its prohibitive price range, seems to think that dispensable.

Van Ess’ “observations” focus on the individual primary text and what it says. It concerns itself much with philology in the sense that it tries to show who read whom in this genre and who copied from whom. While it does engage closely with the teachings of individual

authors it is not a monograph study that aims at systemic overall conclusions (a “thesis”) about the genre of heresiography and doxography in Islam. In its third part, it brings interesting observations on the “art of heresiography” (see e.g. II, 1243), yet although it notes that ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037) was the first to introduce a border between erring and unbelieving groups who both consider themselves Muslims, the book fails to note the significance of this step. “Unbelief” (*kufīr*) becomes a more and more important concept within the development of this genre and it is not really dealt with systematically by van Ess. His most enlightening discussion of this subject is on pp. II, 1287-1295 where he deals with the recently edited *Kitāb al-baḥṭh ‘an adillat al-takfīr wa-l-taṣḍīq* of the Mu‘tazilite Abū l-Qāsim al-Bustī (d. c. 420/1029). Yet every discussion of *takfīr* should start by pointing out that it means very different things to different people. While some authors give it a distinctly legal sense and call for the death penalty of those found to be Muslim *kuffār*, for others, the accusation of *kufīr* bears just the slight stigma of holding wrongful convictions. ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī’s distinction between the *ahl al-ahwā’* (the erring groups) and those “who claim to belong to Islam, yet do not” introduced a new way of thinking about the Muslim community that paved the way first to al-Ghazālī’s (d. 505/1111) and Ibn Taymiyya’s (d. 728/1328) infamous condemnations of their doctrinal opponents and, later, to the often deadly practice of political *takfīr* in the 20th and 21st centuries. While van Ess’ study focuses on the primary texts he presents to his readers, and while he also notes in great detail what relevant secondary literature exists, he rarely engages seriously with the latter and does not discuss the pros and cons of certain interpretations. He misses, for instance, the central importance of the legal tool of the *istitāba* in any Muslim scholars’ assessment of *kufīr* and *takfīr*. No legal harm could be done to unbelievers as long as this “invitation to repent” from one’s assumed unbelief was generally applied. Once the right to repent could be denied (beginning with the persecution of Ismā‘īlī missionaries in the mid-5th/11th century), the thinking about the community of Muslims and its periphery changes.

Yet together with its numerous observations on individual texts, van Ess’ latest book is full of interesting comments on such subjects as “Islam” as a mere construction of out- and insiders (II, 1309) or on Islamic orthodoxy as shaped by “communities of common understanding” (*Verstehensgemeinschaften*, II, 1328). It presents an im-

mense amount of new material and is – plain and simple – an enormously diligent piece of work that brings together decades of careful reading of Islamic texts.

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