

Gavin Picken. *Spiritual Purification in Islam: The Life and Work of al-Muḥāsibī*. London & New York: Routledge, 2011. Pp. xii + 248. ISBN 978-0-203-83504-3 (e-book).

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Since Margaret Smith's study entitled *Al-Muḥāsibī: An Early Mystic of Baghdad* was published almost a century ago, in 1935, there has not been any comprehensive work at least in English language, except for a few articles or encyclopedic entries, dealing with this eminent scholar in early Islam until the publication of Gavin Picken's *Spiritual Purification in Islam: The Life and Work of al-Muḥāsibī*. In this outstanding contribution to the field of Islamic spirituality in European languages, Picken explored the formative period of intellectual tradition in Islam with special attention to its spiritual dimension which, throughout the centuries during the classical period played the most essential role in almost all fields of Islamic science. However, due to socio-political upheavals during the past few centuries, the spiritual constituent of Islam has been substantially reduced in various branches of Islamic science, a fact that adds the value to the significance of Picken's much needed monograph.

The book is divided into five chapters in addition to introduction and conclusion. In the introduction, the author provided a brief review of recent studies directly related to al-Muḥāsibī. Here we are presented besides abovementioned Smith's important contribution to the subject, with works in several languages from 'Abdul Halim Mahmoud's doctoral thesis on al-Muḥāsibī entitled *Al-Moḥāsibī – Un Mystique Musulman Religieux Et Moraliste*, (Librarie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner: Paris, 1940), to Josef van Ess' *Die Gedankenwelt des Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī* (Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität Bonn, 1961), and several other studies in Arabic and English. The introduction is followed by an overview of historical background to 'Abbasid period in which al-Muḥāsibī was lived. The author discussed in this opening chapter all the political affairs associated with the time and the intellectual and scientific developments of various schools of thought related to several learning centers, especially those of Basra and Baghdad.

The second chapter is dedicated to al-Muḥāsibī's life and his intellectual and spiritual development. Since the biographical accounts on al-Muḥāsibī are scarce and scattered over different sources, the author still believes that in spite of that, it is enough to construct a proper and authentic scholarly profile of this highly influential figure in numerous fields of Islamic scholarship. Some glimpses and anecdotes were discussed, depicting his early life wherein the reader is already able to recognize a unique spiritual character evolving during his youth. The author then turned his focus to al-Muḥāsibī's teachers in a number of disciplines, identifying some prominent personalities of that period. Furthermore, the discussion included his scholarly sources, students and additional records related to his spiritual and scholarly ranks portrayed by his students and followers. At this point the reader of the book is assured that al-Muḥāsibī has evolved into a reputable scholarly authority whose influence will be felt by many generations of Muslim scholars, spreading its spiritual fragrances to this very day.

In the third chapter of the study, Picken has delved into al-Muḥāsibī's academic achievements. Despite the historical records suggesting that al-Muḥāsibī has composed nearly two hundred works, the vast majority of it is yet to be re-discovered, a process that has already been started by contemporary scholars and researchers. Out of the alleged works, the author has listed 18 published titles, providing a fair description of each work. In addition to that, two titles are mentioned as al-Muḥāsibī's probable compositions, eleven known titles in the manuscript form and seven seemingly lost works that are attributed to him. The author concluded this chapter with the chronological sequences of al-Muḥāsibī's scholarly opus proposed by two historians, namely, Maḥmūd and al-Quwwatī in their respective studies.

The fourth chapter entitled "Purification of the soul: The concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs* in Islam" presents a comprehensive analysis of this subject for which the author deserves much of credit. In this chapter, Picken examined all relevant terminology in this field, starting with its meaning and usage in Arabic language, followed by its understanding in different contexts within Islamic studies and finally relating it to the relevant evidences contained in the Qur'anic revelation and Sunnatic interpretation. With much detailed scrutiny, the author has dealt with a variety of concepts associated with the soul/*nafs*, from cognitive faculties such as mind (*'aql*), heart (*qalb*), spirit (*rūḥ*) to numerous other qualities and attributes related to it. Here the reader begins to associate the importance of human soul and its impact within oneself and the rest of environment, either through its virtuous or vicious manifestation that depends on the prevalent nature of the given soul. Furthermore, the author studied hierarchical degrees of the soul, namely its well-defined spiritual stages and stations from that of the lowest rank known as *al-nafs al-ammārah* (the evil soul) to *al-nafs al-muṭma'innah* (the tranquil soul) as the highest state of the soul. The final part of the chapters examines the concepts of *tazkiyah* and *nafs* in view of relevant Muslim authorities in this domain of study. Numerous perspectives were brought into this context, meticulously examined and compared by the author in order to paint the best possible picture of this essential subject of Islamic spirituality.

Finally, in the fifth and last chapter of this study, the author brings the audience into the central theme of the book, namely, al-Muḥāsibī's own understanding of *tazkiyat al-nafs* and his significant contribution to the subject by virtue of his extensive contemplation and enunciation of it recorded in his many writings. After introducing the concept of the purification of the soul and its various facets as perceived by al-Muḥāsibī, the author provided a thorough discussion of the notion of *al-nafs* in al-Muḥāsibī's work with all its qualities, states and stations before embarking on the last and most crucial part of the chapter dealing with al-Muḥāsibī's methodology of *tazkiyah*. Here, the key methods of *tazkiyah* are described and placed in proper order. The first and perhaps most significant task in this regard is to know one's soul (*ma'rifat al-nafs*) and its nature to determine best possible approach to its refinement. This process is followed by the practice of *al-muraqabah* or the observance of God. This method is described as "the constant cognisance of divine observance of every thought, word and deed and therefore, both the external (*al-zāhir*) and internal (*al-bāṭin*) actions, which in turn causes the devotee to act in his every

circumstance as if God is ‘watching’ his every move.”¹ The next method is identified in the concept of *al-mujāhadah*, or combating the soul. This technique requires a continuous battling the soul’s malicious inclinations and preventing their manifestation by carefully imposing on it opposite dispositions and qualities. Thus, to struggle against one’s impatience is best by practicing patience as Picken explains: “impatience with an event that befalls one is tantamount to rejecting the predestination of God and may consequently incur His wrath. Conversely, if one were to be patient when afflicted, then one would have gained God’s pleasure and satisfaction (*al-riḍā*’), a quality that, it will be remembered, was closely associated with the tranquil soul (*al-naḥs al-muṭma’inna*).”² The last method of the cleansing the soul is described through the process of self/soul ‘introspective examination’ (*muḥāsabat al-naḥs*). This method is defined as “an in-depth, insightful, precise and exact examination of the soul and its qualities.”³

In relation to the conflict resolution for which this review is primarily written, it is possible to say that Picken’s important study offers well-defined answers to numerous questions related directly or indirectly to human soul and its essential role in human life in all its conditions. Both happiness and sufferings are results of the inner tendencies of the soul, the prevailing character of which usually determine the final outcome. As the soul is capable to bring about the most noble and enlightened virtues of human nature to the fore by manifesting it through endless possibilities, inwardly and outwardly, within different facets of human life, it is also capable of exhibiting the most horrific and endarkened vices of human nature by countless means, likewise, internally or externally, felt and seen through all sorts of violence and sufferings across the globe. This study clearly provides well-developed methodology by al-Muḥāsibī to be used not only in psychological realm to where it essentially belongs, but also in ethno-religious and socio-political domains, with an attempt to resolve any apparent or imagined conflict that usually appear first inwardly in one’s soul then extends externally to various aspects human behavior and interactions with others. The concepts of ignorance, hypocrisy, hate, cruelty to name but a few are all internal attributes of the self, the reflection of which is vividly detectable in any form of conflict regardless of its nature. Thus, if for only this reason, the present book is highly recommended for the proper understanding of the nature of conflict and the ways to arrive to its successful and lasting resolution.

¹ Gavin Picken, *Spiritual Purification in Islam: The Life and Work of al-Muḥāsibī* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 191.

² Gavin Picken, *Ibid*, pp. 195.

³ Gavin Picken, *Ibid*, pp. 199.