

The Vision of Islam

By Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick. New York: Paragon House, 1994, xii + 368 pp.

The Vision of Islam forms part of a series, entitled *Visions of Reality*, designed to focus on religions as worldviews. According to the statement of the editorial board on the flyleaf, each religion studied in the series will be presented in the context of its own inner dynamic or ethos using a methodology appropriate to itself. Murata and Chittick have succeeded admirably in living up to this commitment by allowing Islam to speak through abundant quotations from the Qur'an and the hadith.

The outgrowth of an introductory course on Islam taught by the authors at the State University of New York at Stony Brook for more than a decade, *Vision* is organized in an innovative manner. After a brief introduction to the Qur'an, its translations, and the life of the Prophet, the authors recount the "hadith of Gabriel" transmitted by both al-Bukhārī and Muslim on the authority of 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb. According to this report, the Prophet was questioned by an unknown stranger about the significance of submission (*islām*), faith (*īmān*), and doing what is beautiful (*ihsān*). After explaining these concepts, the Prophet then identified this mysterious individual as the angel Gabriel, the being through whom God revealed the Qur'an. The remainder of the book is structured around these three elements or dimensions, as the authors term them.

Dealing first with the several senses of submission, acceptance, or commitment, Part I describes the essential practices of Islam: the five pillars. An often misunderstood sixth pillar, jihad or struggle, is also discussed cogently. The authors then explain the historical articulation of these practices in the formation of the Sunni and Shi'i schools (*madhāhib*), the Shari'ah, and Islamic jurisprudence. Here and elsewhere, variations among the schools are noted.

Part II, dealing with *īmān*, accounts for more than two-thirds of the book, an indication of the relative weight the authors give this dimension. The three fundamental principles of faith—divine unity, prophecy, and eschatology—are the major topics of this section. The nature of God's absolute unity and transcendence is explored through a discussion of His signs, attributes, and acts (as manifested in creation), and Islamic angelology. Here, the text is infused with the metaphysics of illuminationist philosophy. Notions such as good and evil, human free will and determinism, are linked convincingly with the concepts of divine unity and the hierarchy of creation. This argument, in turn, leads logically to an account of the role of prophecy and humanity's acceptance of guid-

ance as well as its heedlessness and forgetfulness. The historical struggle of the prophets to remind human beings of the original covenant between God and His creatures provides an opportunity to examine the relation of Islam with other religions and the special significance of the prophethood of Muhammad within this context. After a discussion of Islamic eschatology, Part II concludes with an overview of the expression of faith in rationalistic theology, abstract philosophy, and visionary mysticism

"Doing what is beautiful" is the focus of Part III. In it, the authors emphasize worship, sincerity, devotion, love, and wholesomeness. They further see these qualities embodied in the civilization of Islam through its art, poetry, and what they call "practical mysticism." Part IV is a brief but suggestive look at some of the challenges faced by Muslims in the contemporary world. The book is provided with a useful glossary of the Arabic and Islamic terminology used and an appendix indicating the sources of the hadiths quoted in the text.

In sum, this is a fresh and imaginative introduction to Islam that does not sacrifice comprehensiveness to originality. Ideas that may at first seem difficult and unfamiliar are presented with clarity and grace. Moreover, the sensitivity and caring of the authors toward their subject are apparent on every page of this fine work. While providing an excellent overview of Islam's self-conception for the general reader, *The Vision of Islam* should also be considered seriously as a text at the college level.

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