

Spiritual Purification in Islam: The Life and Works of al-Muḥāsibī, by Gavin Picken, (Routledge Sufi Series, 11), (Abingdon, Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2011), xii + 248 pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-54822-9, £75.00 (hardback)

Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) has not been the subject of a comprehensive study for half a century; the present book therefore arouses high expectations. The question of where to situate al-Muḥāsibī in the intellectual history of the third/ninth century is anything but settled; a new approach might be in order. But the reader is ultimately disappointed. The author has delved deeply into al-Muḥāsibī's works, but he presents the results of his investigation in a rather apodictic way and largely omits engaging in a dialogue with previous research.

In principle, the double title correctly describes what the author wants to accomplish. He treats the life and works of al-Muḥāsibī in chapters 2 and 3, and he deals with "spiritual purification" in chapters 4 and 5. However, he does not tell us how al-Muḥāsibī practiced this purification and why he became so famous for the technique he used, the *muḥāsaba*, after which he was named. The author misses al-Muḥāsibī's individuality completely, and he is not interested in putting him into a historical context. In chapters 4 and 5, "spiritual purification" turns out to be the translation for *tazkiyat al-naḥs*, this is the Arabic term on the author's mind. However, this word did not belong to al-Muḥāsibī's vocabulary. *Tazkiyat al-naḥs* is a modern expression derived from the Qur'ān (Q 91:7 ff.) that dominates contemporary parenetic literature published in Egypt and elsewhere. It is true that, in a separate chapter (pp. 186 ff.), the author enumerates the expressions used by al-Muḥāsibī himself (i.e., *muḥāsaba*, *mujābadat al-naḥs*, *dhamm al-naḥs*, *ma'rifat al-naḥs*), but he does not analyze these expressions with sufficient philological discipline. Their discussion remains merely a verbal exercise; we do not hear a word about their application, al-Muḥāsibī's dialogical style or his "Socratic" way of penetrating the depth of the human soul. Phenomena such as hypocrisy or "eye-service" (*riyā'*), self-complacency (*'ujb*), haughtiness (*kibr*) and envy (*ḥasad*), all those hidden vices that became the object of subtle case-studies in al-Muḥāsibī's *al-Ri'āya li-ḥuqūq Al-*

lāb, are more or less eliminated from the picture. Not only is the author insensible to history, but he also shuns any contact with psychology.

Why did he write this book at all? He obviously wants the reader to believe that al-Muḥāsibī was in complete agreement with a kind of conservative Islam that is well known in our own time. Al-Muḥāsibī's thinking was, he suggests, firmly based in the "two revelatory sources" of Islam, namely the Qurʾān and ḥadīth (p. 149, 183 etc.) – ḥadīth, of course, only insofar as it is "rigorously authenticated" (p. 143, with regard to a prophetic tradition found in Muslim's *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*). Calling al-Muḥāsibī a "mystic" would therefore not be appropriate because this would make him a Sufi, a person who deviated from the general line. Rather, the framework for al-Muḥāsibī's mental state should be "spirituality" (p. 216 ff.). In the bibliography the author refers to two previous articles of his one of which is also briefly quoted in the text (p. 167, n. 132): "Tazkiyat al-naḥs: The Qurʾanic Paradigm" (in *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* VII/2 [2005], 101-127) and "Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Muḥāsibī: A Study of Early Conflicting Scholarly Methodologies" (in *Arabica* LV/3-4 [2008], 337-361). This gives us a clue. In the present book, the Qurʾān receives high priority because the triad of *al-naḥs al-ammāra bi-l-sūʾ*, *al-naḥs al-lawwāma*, and *al-naḥs al-muṭmaʾinna* is supposed to have been behind al-Muḥāsibī's thinking (p. 179 ff.), in spite of the fact that combining these three Qurʾānic expressions into an independent literary scheme is a later phenomenon, and al-Muḥāsibī only used the first of them (cf. p. 104, n. 73d, where *ammāra* must be read instead of *amāra*). Consequently, Ibn Ḥanbal, who is known for having criticized al-Muḥāsibī (and whose correct understanding of the Qurʾān is taken for granted), cannot really have wanted to attack or persecute him, as suggested by the Ḥanbalī sources, but simply followed a different "method." Ultimately, the author's intention is irenic, but in pursuing it, he ends up completely flattening al-Muḥāsibī's personality. The conflict with Ibn Ḥanbal arose from al-Muḥāsibī's meddling with *ʿilm al-kalām*, but this aspect is only touched upon in the *Arabica* article and not in the present book. Nor do the *aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth* enter the scene here. In principle, al-Muḥāsibī had nothing against ḥadīth; he quotes prophetic traditions all the time. However, he was not concerned with *al-jarḥ wa-l-taʿdīl*, and he did not apply the criteria of authenticity

used later in the “canonical” collections (and neglected by Ibn Ḥanbal as well). Al-Muḥāsibī’s profile should be seen against the position of the earlier *zubbād*, the “renunciants,” as Christopher Melchert has called them. However, the author does not use *zubbād* as a term, and he is not interested in determining its scope (cf., for instance, Melchert, “Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal’s Book of Renunciation,” *Der Islam* LXXXV/2 [2011], 345-359). Instead, he speaks of the “first” and the “second ascetic school in Baṣra” (p. 24 ff.). He does not raise the question of whether his “spirituality” included some aspects of asceticism or whether al-Muḥāsibī took his own stand with regard to it. In a famous passage quoted by al-Ghazzālī and Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Muḥāsibī treats the problem of how certain companions of the Prophet who owned great wealth (ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAwf being the main example) nevertheless retained the purity of their heart (*al-qalb*) and their disdain for the “world” (*al-dunyā*). This has a personal flavor; al-Muḥāsibī seems to have been wealthy himself. This would mean that his concept of *zubbād* was “inner-worldly,” as Max Weber used to say. For the author, however, he seems simply to have been a “good Muslim.”

So much for the main part of the book. In contrast, the first chapters (1-3) are concerned with preliminaries. Chapter 1, on the “historical background to al-Muḥāsibī’s life” and the “ʿAbbāsīd crucible” (p. 14 ff.), is the kind of general introduction that is meant to help the non-specialized reader. The ʿAbbāsīds enter the scene one by one, from al-Manṣūr to al-Mutawakkil, without an overall characterization of their reign, and Charlemagne comes in as a “French king” (p. 16). Baṣra and Baghdād receive special attention as the two towns where al-Muḥāsibī grew up and spent most of his life. Kūfa, however, where, according to some reports, he withdrew after the clash with Ibn Ḥanbal, does not play a part of its own. In chapter 2 (“The life of al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī”), the author struggles with the scarcity and unevenness of the biographical material. To fill the gaps, he constantly mixes statements found in medieval sources with those made by modern (especially Arab) researchers. Strangely enough, he ignores the autobiographical passages in al-Muḥāsibī’s *Kitāb al-naṣāʾih* and in *Kitāb al-khalwa*, although they are the oldest specimens of this literary genre in Islam. He tries to find something positive even in the latest account (see, for instance, p. 103 n. 72, where he draws

biographical conclusions from a story told in al-Shaʿrānī's *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, in the sixteenth century – 700 years after al-Muḥāsibī's death). In disregarding the chronology of the sources, he forgets to explain who is speaking and sometimes even gets the names wrong. "Ibn Ṣaḥr al-Saqlī," for instance (p. 47), must be read as Ibn Ṣaḥr al-Siqillī. This man, who was born in Sicily and who died in 565/1170 (cf. "Ibn Ṣaḥr," *Encyclopaedia of Islam Second Edition*, III, 970), mentions in his *Anbāʾ* (i.e., *Anbāʾ nujabāʾ al-abnāʾ*) two reports of certain precocious remarks allegedly made by al-Muḥāsibī when he was a child. In contrast to what the author derives from them, they do not tell us anything about al-Muḥāsibī's real life; rather, they give us an idea of al-Muḥāsibī's high reputation in the Maghrib during Ibn Ṣaḥr's time, a phenomenon that can be documented by other testimonies from the same period (cf. my *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, IV, 198).

Chapter 3 contains a list of al-Muḥāsibī's published and unpublished works (p. 67 ff.), which must be read together with the account of the secondary literature in the introduction (pp. 2-13). The author has done his best to collect everything, but the material has not been sufficiently digested. The secondary literature is more or less complete, and only Hüseyin Aydın's *Muḥāsibī'nin Tasavvuf Felsefesi* (Ankara, 1976) seems to be lacking. But what is ultimately put to use from this material in the author's argumentation is restricted to studies produced in Arabic or English. Even ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd's PhD thesis, which was submitted in Paris (under Massignon) when French was still the language spoken by cultivated people in the Near East (1940), is quoted in a later Arabic adaptation (*Ustādh al-sāʾirīn*, Cairo, 1973; incidentally, a title that seems to have become the model for "Master of the wayfarers" in the main heading of chapters 2 and 3).

As for al-Muḥāsibī's own works, the presentation is rather clumsy. For a first glimpse, it might be safer to have recourse to Sezgin, *GAS*, I, 640-642 (which is quoted by the author only in its Arabic translation). When the author comes to the text on ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAwf's richness, he subsumes it under the "works surviving in manuscript" (p. 87, nr. 8) and refers to two copies "located in al-Istāna, Istanbul under numbers 3706/20 and 701/1." However, only after consulting Sezgin, from where he seems to have obtained this infor-

mation, does one realize that the first manuscript is part of the Laleli collection (now in Süleymaniye Library, a *majmūʿa* numbered 3706, part 20 of which is the text in question) and that the second one is not found in Istanbul at all, but in Çorum. Moreover, “al-Istāna, Istanbul” is a tautology; al-Istāna or al-Āsitāna, the Persian word for “the threshold,” is not the name of a library but simply means the “Sublime Porte” = Constantinople = Istanbul. The lengthy quotations in al-Ghazzālī (*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*) and Ibn al-Jawzī (*Talbīs Iblīs*) are not mentioned at all. In fact, the Laleli manuscript is only an extract from al-Ghazzālī.

In addition to such inaccuracies, the way the author organizes his material is not altogether reader-friendly. In a first step, the books and treatises are simply described (p. 67 ff.); then we are offered, in the endnotes, the bibliographical details (p. 94 ff.), with no distinction between manuscripts (or the catalogues where these are mentioned) and editions (or any remarks made in their introduction). Therefore, it is rather difficult to determine when we are simply dealing with duplicates. Finally, the editions are addressed again in the bibliography (pp. 226-228), but under the letter A (because the author does not disregard the Arabic article and places Muḥāsibī under “Al-Muḥāsibī,” like all other authors whose main name is a *nisba*), and in chronological rather than alphabetical order. Texts are sometimes referred to in different ways. *Al-Riʿāya*, for instance, is normally quoted according to the edition of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Barr (Maṣṣūra, 1999), but on p. 213 (n. 197), it is quoted according to the Beirut edition of ʿAbd al-Qādir Aḥmad ʿAṭā, and never according to Margaret Smith’s original edition (London, 1940), (the deficiencies of which were pointed out for posterity in Hellmut Ritter’s review, *Oriens* I/2 [1948], 352-353). *Kitāb al-ghayba* (p. 88, nr. 4) must be read *Kitāb al-ghība*; it is a collection of *aḥādīth* about slandering or “evil speech” and not a “book of the unseen” (whatever that means; in any case, the “unseen” would have to be *al-ghayb* and not *al-ghayba*). Nor is the book lost, as the author pretends; it is preserved in the manuscript Princeton, Garrett Collection, *majmūʿ* no. 2053, fols. 155^b-162^b (cf. my *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, VI, 420, nr. 28). It has merely never been printed.

Questions of authenticity are not given much attention. The discussions found in older secondary literature are generally not fol-

lowed up. Under the heading of “works attributed to al-Muḥāsibī” (p. 85), the author mentions only two cases, which are not of the same kind. Nr. 1, the *Kitāb al-ba‘th wa-l-nushūr*, has been printed (not only by Muḥammad ‘Īsā Riḍwān, 1986, as is said on p. 116 n. 154, but also by Ḥusayn Quwwatī in *al-Fikr al-islāmī* IV/3 [1393], p. 87 ff.). Concerning its authenticity, the author mainly repeats the doubts formulated by ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, supplementing them with a few additional remarks (p. 116 n. 156). This is not sufficient. What we need for such a far-reaching conclusion is a thorough stylistic comparison. Al-Muḥāsibī treated the same topic in his *Kitāb al-tawabbuh*, and there (p. 72 ff.) the author has no misgivings, in spite of the fact that this text also exhibits a rather individual style that differs from al-Muḥāsibī’s other works. Moreover, al-Ghazzālī quotes *Kitāb al-ba‘th* in his *al-Durra al-fākhira* (cf. Sezgin, *GAS*, I, 641, nr. 16), and the book is counted among al-Muḥāsibī’s works by Ibn Khayr al-Ishbīlī (d. 575/1179) in his *Fabrasa*.

In contrast to this, nr. 2, the *Kitāb dawā’ dā’ al-qulūb*, can no longer be verified. The book was attributed to al-Muḥāsibī by Aloys Sprenger when he examined the unique manuscript in 1856, but this was a mere hypothesis; in the text itself, Aḥmad ibn ‘Aṣim al-Anṭākī, an elder contemporary of al-Muḥāsibī, appears as the author. Unfortunately, the manuscript has disappeared, so the problem can no longer be solved. However, al-Anṭākī has become a serious alternative since then; in the meantime, two excerpts from another book attributed to al-Muḥāsibī, namely *Kitāb al-khalwa wa-l-tanaqqul fī l-‘ibāda*, have shown up in al-Anṭākī’s biography in Abū Nu‘aym’s *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*. I noted this fact more than half a century ago (“Muḥāsibī”, *İslām Ansiklopedisi*, VIII, 510a). In the present book, *Kitāb al-khalwa* is considered, without any further ado, as authentic (p. 83 ff.), and al-Anṭākī only enters the scene in a different context, namely in connection with al-Muḥāsibī’s *Kitāb al-ḥubb li-llāh* (p. 120 n. 214). This text is listed under “lost works” (p. 90, nr. 7), and the complete version of *Kitāb al-ḥubb* has not been found. However, a few fragments are preserved in Abū Nu‘aym’s biography of al-Muḥāsibī (*Ḥilya*, X, 76 ff.). The author now suggests that these fragments should be credited to al-Anṭākī. He pretends that “many researchers” preceded him in this opinion, but he does not mention any names. The hypothesis is not entirely improbable, but it should be proven first in a more satisfactory way; otherwise, the author cannot

be acquitted from the suspicion of having advanced it only because, without discarding *Kitāb al-ḥubb*, he would not be able to maintain that al-Muḥāsibī had only a “spirituality” and was not a “mystic” (like al-Hallāj or Ibn ‘Arabī, as he says with a certain horror, p. 218). For the moment, we are not yet beyond circular reasoning. Ibn Khayr mentions *Kitāb al-ḥubb* among al-Muḥāsibī’s works, as he does with the *Kitāb al-ba‘th wa-l-nushūr*.

More professional experience would have helped to avoid this confusion. The book is obviously the reproduction of the author’s PhD thesis, which he submitted at Leeds in 2005 under the title of *The Concept of Tazkiyat al-Nafs in Islam in the Light of the Works of al-Hārith al-Muḥāsibī*. The text seems not to have undergone much polishing since (less, at least, than the article in *Arabica*). He is now teaching at the American University of Sharja, and he certainly has a sufficient knowledge of Arabic but the way he reproduces Arabic text in Latin transcription is somewhat erratic. He writes *Kitāb al-mustarshadīn* instead of *Kitāb al-mustarshidīn* and *yataqarrub* instead of *yataqarrab* (p. 110, n. 108.2), *Riḥlat al-insān ilā ‘ālim* (instead of *‘ālam*) *al-ākhiba* (p. 99, n. 48; p. 100, n. 49.7; also in the bibliography, p. 228), *rajjā’* instead of *rajā’* (p. 187), *thiqqa* instead of *thiqa* (p. 192), *zakkī* instead of *zakī*, *zakkat* instead of *zakat* (p. 169), *Tamūz* instead of *Tammūz* (everywhere in the references to *Kitāb al-khalwā*), *mujāniba* instead of *mujānaba* (p. 176) and so on. And what should one do with *murāqabatika rabbika*, *muḥāsabatika nafsika*, and *mudhākaratika dhanbika* (p. 191, instead of *murāqabatika rabbaka*, *muḥāsabatika nafsaka*, and *mudhākaratika dhanbaka*)? P. 113, n. 131 read *wa-rḥamnī* instead of *warḥamani* and ib., n. 132.2b “Edirne” instead of “Erdine.” Carl Brockelmann appears as “Brockleman” and as “Brocklemann” (p. 225 and 233, both times in the bibliography, but once under the “Arabic sources” and once under the “Non-Arabic sources”). The fifteen meanings of the word *nafs* (p. 114 ff.) are mere fancies of Arab lexicographers; they do not help in explaining what al-Muḥāsibī meant by this word. The author evidently lacks philological training, and his argumentation makes sense only before the horizon of a specific audience. The book is not entirely without merits, but it should not be consulted without caution.

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