

The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture

Volume 2: *The Individual and Society in Islam*

A. Bouhdiba (Chief Editor) and M. Ma'rūf al-Dawālibī (Co-Editor)

Paris: UNESCO 1998, 484 pp, HC

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Volume 4: *Science and Technology in Islam*

Part I: The Exact and Natural Sciences

Part II: Technology and Applied Sciences

Prof. A. Y. al-Hassan (Editor), Prof. Maqbul Ahmed (deceased), and

Prof. A. Z. Iskandar (Co-Editors)

Part I: Paris: UNESCO 2001, 527 pp, HC

ISBN 92-3-103830-3

Part II: Paris: UNESCO 2001, 726 pp, HC

ISBN 92-3-103831-1

Volume 5: *Culture and Learning in Islam*

Ekmeleddine Ihsanoğlu (Chief Editor)

Paris: UNESCO 2003, 926 pp, HC

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It was at its nineteenth session, held in Nairobi from 26 October to 30 November 1976, that the General Conference of UNESCO authorized the Director-General to “take the necessary measures to prepare and publish a work on the different aspects of Islamic culture” (5). Almost twenty years later, we have three out of the six planned volumes and, judging by the quality of work, the long wait has been worthwhile.

The project is rather modest, if one takes into consideration the extensive resources available to UNESCO and the financial help provided by **World Islamic Call Society, a Libyan organization, for the six-volume project** which aims “to show these various aspects [of Islamic culture] both from a historical standpoint and with reference to the present relevance

of a civilization whose role and brilliance in the future are expected to equal what they were in the past” (5). This optimism about Islamic civilization was a characteristic feature of the mid-1970s, when freshly found financial resources from oil exports were coupled with a general wave of “renaissance thinking” throughout the Muslim world, spurred in part by the advent of the fifteenth century of Islam. Thirty-six years later, that promise of renaissance having been squandered, geopolitical situation of the world drastically changed, and a general Islamophobia reigning supreme, these volumes are just the right antidote to despair: the sheer breadth of the accomplishments of Islamic civilization in learning, in arts, crafts, science, and technology, its lofty idealism and supreme goal of elevating individual lives beyond the mundane, are all coupled with an immutable anchorage in Revelation, just as they have over the last fourteen centuries. What these volumes present is, indeed, an intellectual feast for the general readership.

Federico Mayor rightly observes in his preface to the work that “for the peoples who, from the China Sea to the Atlantic coast of Africa, embraced Islam, [Islamic civilization provided] a set of cultural references and values that served to fashion their unity while preserving their own specific characteristics. What is more, this civilization, which aspired to universality from its beginnings, exercised an undeniable influence on neighbouring peoples in several fields” (5). The six volumes have been organized along thematic rather than chronological lines and they intend to “acquaint the widest possible readership with the different aspects of this living culture” (6):

- Volume 1: The Foundations of Islam
- Volume 2: The Individual and Society in Islam
- Volume 3: The Spread of Islam Throughout the World
- Volume 4: Part I: The Exact and Natural Sciences
- Volume 4: Part II: Science and Technology in Islam
- Volume 5: Culture and Learning in Islam
- Volume 6: Islam in the World Today

Each of these volumes covers a specific aspect of Islamic culture:

- (1) the pillars of faith and the foundations on which Islam rests,
- (2) the status of the individual and society in Islam, (3) the spread of Islam since the Revelation: the Arab, Asian, African and European areas opened up before the new profession

of faith and the way in which the rights of the converted peoples were preserved, (4) the fundamental contribution, in the scientific and technical fields, of Islamic civilization to the adventure of human knowledge, (5) the educational and cultural environments—in literature, art and architecture—, and (6) Islam today, between fidelity to its past and the necessary conquest of modernity. Neither a learned compilation nor an attempt at popularization, these volumes are none the less written to the most exacting standards with contributions by scholars from all over the world. (6)

The quality of articles varies in the three volumes so far published, but in general the work displays an excellent level of scholarship. The project has attracted some of the most respected contemporary scholars of Islam. Volume 2 was the first to appear (1998); this was followed by the two parts of Volume 4 (2001); the last to appear was Volume 4 (2003). Considering the intended readership, each volume provides a panoramic view of the field, is rich in breadth, and brings to attention numerous strands of thought in the limited space available.

While a short review of these volumes cannot give details of each volume, one cannot resist mentioning the conceptual richness of the three published volumes. For instance, Volume 2 (*The Individual and Society*) begins with a chapter entitled “Norms and values” and ends with “Everyday life in the cities of Islam” (ch. 16), covering between them such interconnected topics as the “Rights, responsibilities, and freedom of the individual” (ch. 2); “Moral thought” (ch. 3); “Social thought” (ch. 4); “The family basis of the Islamic city” (ch. 5); and “Islamic education” (ch. 6). The full description of the entire project as well as of each volume can be found on UNESCO’s website, which now has a separate portal devoted to this project.

The voluminous Volume 5 (*Culture and Learning*), consisting of 926 pages, is divided into six sections: The Languages of Islam; Literature; Philosophy in Islam; Muslim Mysticism; Human Science; and Artistic Creations. Each section contains several chapters, each devoted to a special subfield within the general topic covered by the section. Thus arranged, the volume presents a panorama of culture and learning in Islam—ranging from characteristic features of various Islamic languages to the intricate designs of carpets and metalwork. Given the importance of visual images for this volume, the poor quality of illustrations is unfortunate.

Divided into two parts (“The Exact and Natural Sciences” and

“Technology and Applied Sciences”), Volume 4 (*Science and Technology in Islam*) has been the result of the efforts of some of the most respected historians and philosophers of Islamic science and presents fruits of life-long reflections and research. Contributions by George Saliba, Ahmad Y. al-Hasan, Roshdi Rashed, Julio Samsó, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Donald R. Hill, among others, make these two volumes (consisting of 1250 pages) one of the most important secondary works now available to general readers.

These volumes need the largest circulation possible, especially in the Muslim world, where most books published in the West remain out of reach for interested readers due to their prohibitive price. UNESCO’s website for the project indicates the preparation of electronic versions of these volumes. This is an excellent decision, especially if they are made available at no or a minimum cost.

Taken together, the three volumes already published fulfill the aim of the project. Their planned translations into French and Arabic will make them more widely accessible. The project does not envision translations in other languages, but perhaps UNESCO can establish a mechanism with the help of regional publishers or private organizations interested in local editions and produce translations of these volumes into various Islamic languages. Readers of these volumes will eagerly wait for the rest.



Muhammad Ali Khalidi (ed.): *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 186 pp, PB

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The aim of this anthology is to provide “a representative sample of the Arabic-Islamic philosophical tradition in a manner that is accessible to beginning students of philosophy, as well as to more seasoned philosophers with little or no exposure to this tradition” (xii). As such, the main challenge of the editor was of selection procedures; Khalidi chose to include “extracts from longer philosophical works rather than entire texts or a large number of brief passages from a variety of text” (xii). The result is an admirable volume containing five selections from five most influential authors: al-Fārābī (ca. 878-950), Ibn Sīnā (980-1037), al-Ghazālī (1058-1111), Ibn Ṭufayl (ca. 1109-1186), and Ibn Rushd (1126-1198).

The selection immediately raises a question, preemptively answered