BOOK REVIEW

THE THEOLOGUS AUTODIDACTUS OF IBN AL NAFIS. Edited with an Introduction, Translation, and Notes by the late Max Meyerhof and Joseph Schacht. (Oxford 1968), 83 pages English and 53 pages Arabic text.

The year 1969 saw the passing away of Joseph Schacht. Wherever research on Islam is conducted on the lines of impartial investigation, the demise of this truly outstanding orientalist will be lamented with grief. There are probably not many scholars whose death is felt by the students of Islam as great a loss as that of the author of An Introduction to Islamic Law and Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence. One of his last publications was the book under review. It is the result of his exemplary cooperation with the late Max Meyerhof who was the leading authority of his day on Arab medicine. An earlier outcome of the two scholar’s collaboration was the publication of The Medico-Philosophical Controversy between Ibn Buṭlān of Baghdaḏ and Ibn Riḍwān of Cairo in 1937 (The Egyptian University, The Faculty of Arts, Publication No. 13). The feeling of sadness is deepened when today, after the departure of Joseph Schacht, we read in the Preface to The Theologus Autodidactus the words: “It remains for me to call a last ame atque vale to the memory of my friend, Max Meyerhof.” All too soon he followed his friend. However, before passing away he completed the manuscript of their joint publication, revised it and brought it up to date with his usual accuracy and love for clarity. Although we may disagree with the opinion that The Theologus Autodidactus of Ibn al-Nafis “is, perhaps, the most original work in Arabic literature”, we certainly think that orientalist posterity owes the two editors a great deal of gratitude for this highly important contribution of theirs to the resuscitation of medieval Muslim thought.

The book presents an English translation of the theological novel Al-Risāla al-Kāmilyya fi l-Sira al-Nabawīyya by ‘Alī al-Dīn ‘Alī Ibn Abī l-Ḥaram al-Qarābī, called for short Ibn al-Nafis. The author was a famous medical man of the thirteenth century. As a private physician to the Mamlūk Sultān Baybars he discovered the lesser circulation of blood long before Harvey. The book is also known as Kitāb Fāḍil Ibn Nāfiq. It has been translated into English under the title The Treatise relating to Khilfa on the Life-History of the Prophet.

The introduction to the translation acquaints the reader with the (I) political and (II) scientific background. In Part III are listed biographies of Ibn al-Nafis several pages of which are reproduced in the original as well as in translation. The editors conclude with the following remark:

“This uninterrupted series of biographical or obituary notices of Ibn al-Nafis shows the high regard in which he has always been held in the tradition of medieval Islamic scholarship.” (p. 22).

Part IV provides us with a useful description of The Literary Output of Ibn al-Nafis. The last one in this list of 22 books is Al-Risāla al-Kāmilyya to which a special introduction has been dedicated in Part V. Mention is made of only two precedents, namely, the Risālat Ḥāyy Ibn Taqūẓ by Ibn Sīnā and by Ibn Ṭufayl. There is, however, a third version by al-Suhrawardy. All the three were edited by Ṭabīṣu’d-Dīn Aḥmad Aḥmad Amin in 1952. Ibn al-Nafis has added the figure of a transmitter of the tale and called him Fāḍil Ibn
Nāṭiq. This narrator is not only superfluous, as the editors rightly say, but also rather confusing because Fāḍil Ibn Nāṭiq, though being a similarly original naming as Ḥayy Ibn Taqzān, is, however, not his counterpart. The Ḥayy Ibn Taqzān of Ibn Nafis is called Kāmil.

Like the hero of the Spanish philosopher Ibn Ṭufayl, this Kāmil grows up on an uninhabited island and discovers, through observation and logical deduction, the whole body of essential human knowledge. Schacht thinks that it is quite out of question that Ibn al-Nafis should have written his book in opposition to the treatise of Ḥayy Ibn Taqzān by Ibn Sinā (as Najm al-dīn al-Ṣafadī asserted) because there is a much closer relationship with the book by Ibn Ṭufayl. But the reader will find it difficult to consider the significant divergences between the two works as proof of “the originality of the thought of Ibn al-Nafis.” (p. 30).

It seems obvious that Ibn al-Nafis wrote his novel in opposition to not only Ibn Sinā but to the whole trend of thought of the philosophers as expressed in the different existing versions of the treatise. The philosophic theme of Ḥayy Ibn Taqzān is integrated by Ibn al-Nafis into traditional (ist) lore; it is, so to say, Ashʿarīzed. This is most evident in the allegorical explanation of the contents of revelation. Whereas Ibn Ṭufayl allegorizes the religious duties, Ibn al-Nafis did the same in relation to points of theology and the description of the Hereafter. Ibn Ṭufayl did not speak about the Last Things, with Ibn al-Nafis they form a prominent part of his treatise. While Ibn Ṭufayl concentrates on the philosophical reflections of his hero about mysticism and his aspiration to get himself assimilated to the Supreme Being, Ibn al-Nafis concerns himself with the positive rules of Religious Law concerning ritual and social life. Thus, notwithstanding the outward similarity of the two novels the resemblance of contents is a very faint one. The reasoning of Ḥayy Ibn Taqzān is reduced to a comparatively insignificant prelude to Kāmil’s discovery for himself of the periodical development of prophecy, the life history of the last Prophet, the subsequent fate of the community of this Prophet, and the end of this world with the signs preceding it. Here Schacht has very accurately summarized:

“This brings us to the fundamental difference to the tendency of both works: Ibn Ṭufayl wants to establish the fundamental accord between traditional religion, fit for the masses, and philosophical mysticism, reserved for the élite, at the same time claiming pre-eminence for this last; Ibn al-Nafis, writing here as an Islamic theologian, intends to prove not only, in the first place, the reasonableness of the main tenets of Islamic religious sciences, but also the appropriateness of the historical incidents in the life of the Prophet, and of the history and the actual situation of the Muhammadan community.” (p. 32).

Again, that the treatise is not a mere retrogression from the rationalist theologians’ stand is evident in the first chapter of part three (second section) the summary of which is given as follows:

“The prophet must necessarily mention the life to come and explain it in detail, because this is the most difficult part of a prophet’s teaching which cannot be omitted from the doctrine of this Last Prophet. He cannot have represented the life to come as spiritual because the intellects of most people fall short of appreciating spiritual pleasures and pains.” (p. 57).

Here we find a confirmation of the point raised by Shibli Nuʿmānī in his Al-Kalām awr ‘Ibn al-Kalām, viz., that several Muʿtazilite teachings were reintegrated into the Ashʿarī version of Islam in a way that makes them appear to be an inalienable part of the Sunni doctrine.
Nevertheless, in the second part the obscurantist conservatism of Ibn al-Nafis gets into full swing. The democratic element of Islamic revolutionism is exchanged for an obtrusive notion of aristocracy. In this way the author probably sought to support the fake ‘Abbâsi khilâfa in the Mamlûk reign by perpetuating the disputable tradition of Qurâghiya as a condition for the Caliphate. His deductive reasoning is at times quite dismaying:

“On the other hand this prophet ought not to die in his birthplace, as the visit to his tomb contributes to maintaining interest in his doctrine, especially as he is the last of the prophets. Now had he died in Mecca, the visit to his tomb would be considered a simple appendix to the visit to the Ka'ba (and not an independent religious ceremony), the tomb and the prophet himself would be forgotten, and his religious law would come to nothing. Therefore his tomb ought to be situated in another place.” (pp. 49-50).

No less disenchanting are his contradictions: Thus he writes:

“As this prophet has to be the most excellent and learned prophet, he cannot come from the desert, as the intellect of its inhabitants is not well developed.” (p. 49).

But in the third section he writes: referring to the Prophet’s Beduin nurse:

“Furthermore, his first upbringing should be outside Mecca, so that the different climate should act as a balancing factor.” (p. 51).

Such instances demonstrate how much the author fell prey to the prevailing notions of his time. This endows the book with a documentary value for researchers on his period and the reader may fully subscribe to the view that it is not only an important document of Islamic thought but an unexpected source for the history of the thirteenth century. The section dealing with “the condition of the sultan of the country who protects this community” is almost a Furstenspiegel of Baybars. The author being a physician there is frequent emphasis on revealing details:

“His temperament must incline to heat, otherwise he could not be very courageous. His complexion must be brownish-red, and his hair not very scarce but, on the contrary, thick. He cannot be bald unless he uses a medicine which causes this, because he comes from a very cold country.” (p. 69).

One of the most salient features of this thirteenth century treatise is the dismal evolution of what has been called the “fatalistic Islamic view of history” and the Magian spirit of Messianism that percolated into the Islamic civilisation. Speaking about the negative results of the prohibition of drinking wine and the appearance of women in public Ibn al-Nafis draws the conclusion that it was inevitable that those sins should be punished.

“so that men should not think lightly of transgressing the prescriptions of this prophet nor omit to repent. This punishment could not be a catastrophe, such as being swallowed up by the earth or being destroyed by a deluge, as this would provide the violent wrath of Allah against this community and be in contradiction with the dignity of his prophet. Therefore this punishment could only be by bloodshed, and this had to be done by way of attack from infidels, as internal political strife within the community would not have provoked penitence and reform.” (p. 65-6)

The real originality of the treatise is Ibn al-Nafis’ effort to show that the events in Muslim history, including the incursion of the Mongols in his own lifetime and the
ensuing usurpation of Muslim power by the oppressive Mamluk Sultan were the best things that could possibly have happened. The merit of the book under review lies definitely not in a contribution to the concept of the "Perfect Man", as the deceptive title seems to suggest. Ibn al-Nafis has not only failed to enrich the thème de base of Arab humanism, he has rather produced a parody of it.

"By adopting for his hero the name of Kamil, 'The Perfect One', Ibn al-Nafis does homage to the Islamic idea of the Perfect Man, although the only individual features which may be traced back to that concept are the hero's abnormal bodily size and his outstanding intelligence." (p. 32-3)

On page 60 note 2, the commentators write:

"The author has emphasized the spiritual significance of salat above, p. 52; it is therefore surprising that he should define salat here as mere movements of the body. Individual prayer (du'ah) does not figure among the official main duties of the religious law of Islam."

In spite of all the inadequacies in Ibn al-Nafis' line of argument and style many readers may not share this surprise. Ibn al-Nafis was, after all, enough of a writer so as to become conscious of repetitions, at least occasionally. Since he had already explained one aspect of prayer he could here very well dispense with a restatement and stick to the second aspect.

The translation is richly annotated and in addition to the footnotes further explanations are given in "Excursus" A—H. The book is very well produced and the few printing mistakes in the Arabic text are not of a serious type.

DETLEV KHĀLID

Afzal Iqbal, CULTURE OF ISLAM, Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore 1967, pp. xx+303, Rs. 20.00.

A welcome addition to the fast growing popular literature on Islam—as a religion and as a way of life—is this latest book by Afzal Iqbal, a member of the Pakistan Foreign Service and the author of Diplomacy in Islam (Lahore, 1962, 1966). Finding time for literary activities amidst heavy official duties which are pretty exacting—as has been the fate of the reviewer—is a phenomenon which is not fully appreciated in both official and academic circles and is an achievement whose significance has not been properly underlined. Seen in this perspective the efforts of Afzal Iqbal in presenting a readable account of the evolution and development of Islamic culture should be gratefully acknowledged. The author in one sweep has tried, and, one may say, with a fair amount of success, to survey and deal with the grass roots of Islamic culture such as the philosophical movement, the growth of jurisprudence and Islam's contact with the highly developed Greek culture. To the reviewer the term 'culture' has always proved baffling, as it is a relative term signifying the sum total of the evolution and development of a people's intellectual, moral, spiritual and sociological concepts, in fact their entire national life is covered by the word 'culture'. To make one people fully understand the culture of the other is, therefore, a task which requires a very high calibre, sophistication and philosophical outlook apart from a thorough grounding in typology.

Judged from this angle the average reader will find the book useful though a specialist may not be fully satisfied and may have to differ from the author at places. For instance,