political propaganda, broadening the base of political participation are some of its modes of action. The issue of social justice is discussed as an integral part of the Society’s ideology. This became manifest from a programme of political, social and economic reforms based on the interest of the lower classes. In his analysis, the author rejects Mitchell’s view of the movement as permeated with the spirit of “violence inspired by a social and religious exclusiveness (p. 279).” Lia interprets political violence “as in the main acts of disobedience on the radical fringes rather than a sponsored policy in the Society as a whole.” He characterise the Society as a new element in the Egyptian religious landscape. It was not associated with religious conservatism and it faced opposition from the traditional religious élite who felt that the Society threatened their authority. The author considers the Society as relatively more open to Western innovations and influences. Religion, for them, is related to the modern age, and to all aspects of modern life (pp. 285–286).

In its main arguments, the work of Brynjar Lia is a sort of clear criticism of the earlier works on the Society of Muslim Brothers especially of the well-known work by Richard Mitchell. As Jamal al-Banna has stated in his foreword, the author’s work is distinguished in two respects. It is more comprehensive and original than the other works on the subject because it deals with new material and information about the Society which was not available to previous authors. The second distinction is the author’s impartiality and his full dependence on facts and events drawn form a wealth of recent documents (see, p. xi). Surely the work of Lia sheds new light on the Society of Muslim Brothers and enables a better understanding of the movement and its place in the modern history of Islamic thought.

Muhammad Khalifa Hasan Ahmad


Gleaned from heterogeneous Islamic sources, gems of wisdom in this well-produced book are spread over four chapters: (i) The Self (pp. 1–25); (ii) The Self and God (pp. 27–55); (iii) The Self and Mankind (pp. 57–81); and (iv) The Self and the World (pp. 83–112). This thematic arrangement provides a certain
degree of unity to the material gathered from various sources and facilitates an understanding of the personal journey of the author which led her to the idea of compiling this book while she was “at a crossroads” (p. vii). There are no details of this personal journey, nor of the crossroads at which the idea of the book under review “jumped out at [her]” (p. vii), but these details are not really essential, for the book is not about the person who compiled it. What is important about the person behind the book is, however, her frankly stated realization that though she consciously lived the life of a Muslimah, she never really allowed the teachings of Islam to penetrate the inner core of her being (see p. vii). It is this candid admission that links the author and her inner spiritual journey to the unknown readers of the book, who might find in it resources to help them in their own journeys.

The spiritual journey, which the author has not described in this book, is something that many believers do not undertake now, although in previous centuries, this quest was a norm. This current lack of integration of Islamic beliefs in the inner core of believers has become one of the most prevalent diseases of our times. Partly a result of secular education that most believers now receive and partly due to the secular external world that surrounds the believers even in the traditional lands of Islam. This crisis of the Muslim mind and heart has reached alarming proportions, to the extent that most believers are not even aware of its existence. The Islamic space, which used to protect individual believers from the profane currents of dunyâ, has been shrinking over the last three centuries, leaving a very large number of Muslims at the mercy of opposing currents that flow through their lives, tearing apart the inner fabric. The result is a schizophrenia that envelopes all realms of existence—from spiritual to emotional, and from intellectual to cultural.

In spite of the depth of this fissure, the split personality yearns to be united. It can only find a unified existence in rediscovering the locus of its existence in its relationship with the Creator. In this process of rediscovery, one needs guidance and help. In the traditional Islamic lands such guidance and help used to be sought in living human beings and this traditional mode still exists. But in the diasporas, the first available source is books rather than living men and women; this is especially true for second generation immigrants whose links with traditional Islamic lands are considerably weaker than their parents’. Books are where the author of The Path to Wisdom found gems of wisdom that she has now collected and published. Yet, one cannot really learn wisdom from books, even though they are compiled by those who have found them helpful in their own journey, as Shaykh Sa‘d i’s parable in the book tells us:

A devout personage had bowed his head on the breast of contemplation and was immersed in the ocean of the divine presence.
When he came back to himself from that state one of his companions sportily asked him, “From that flower garden where you were, what miraculous gift have you brought for us?”

He replied, “I intended to fill my lap as soon as I should reach the rose trees and bring presents for you, my companions. When I arrived there the fragrance of the roses so intoxicated me that the skirt of my robe slipped from my hands (p. 5).

Books can, nonetheless, guide one to stored treasures, and, depending on one’s spiritual quest, one may find a certain degree of solace, light, and hope in them. They can also be shared with others, though they cannot be a substitute for living guides, for what one receives from a living guide is not quotable wisdom, but practical training and assistance for the journey. An essential aspect of this training is adab, which one cannot learn from books.

The arrangement of the four chapters indicates a somewhat problematic understanding of the hierarchy of existence. In Western thought, it is the “Self,” the knowing subject, that comes first: “I think therefore I am.” In this scheme, all relationships proceed from the premise that it is the subject who has a primal position in his or her relations with others, including God. In traditional Islamic view, it is God who holds the central position in the hierarchy of existence and relations. Thus, one begins with Him and one’s relationship with Him, rather than with oneself as Rouass does. In the traditional view, one exists because of, for, and through Him Whose existence is the only real existence, for all else owes its existence to Him. In this view, the human self and its characteristics (reflection, knowledge, self-awareness, whims and desires, sincerity, and patience) are all considered as reflections of one’s relationship with the Creator. So, perhaps the second chapter of the book, “The Self and God” should have been the first, for therein one finds the true light which can be used by the knowing subject for self-awareness. A hadith of the Prophet (peace be on him) quoted in the book states:

‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ (may Allah be well pleased with him) narrated that he heard Allāh’s Messenger (peace be upon him) say: “Verily, the hearts of all the sons of Adam are between the two fingers of the Compassionate Lord, as one heart. He turns it in any (direction) He likes.”

Then Allāh’s Messenger (peace be upon him) said: “O Allāh, the Turner of the hearts, turn our hearts to obedience to You.” (p. 28).

As already mentioned, the material collected by the author in her journey comes from heterogeneous Islamic sources and as such does not provide a unified and unifying guiding light. The abādīth of the Prophet, upon whom be peace, are present side by side with rationalistic thoughts of philologists and
philosophers, one finds al-Ghazālī, Ibn Sinā, and Ibn Rushd sharing the same space. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah sits next to Imām Shāfi‘ī. This vast divergence somewhat shadows the journey and dulls the benefits of the book for serious travellers. The differences in the personalities and spiritual and intellectual preferences of the quoted persona is so immense that if one were to place some of them in the same room, there would be great tumult and counter currents.

The “Profiles of those quoted” (113–154) could have been much improved by further research and reflection. At present, some have been described with only one or two lines, others have a page or two, but the narratives are rather problematic for most seem to have been taken from secular sources and put together without much personal reflection on the actual thought and contributions of these illustrious individuals. An index would have been useful as well. The designs on the cover and inside the book are, likewise, stereotypical, a collection of flowers bearing little connection with the profound aphorisms and words of wisdom that the author has collected.

Muzaffar Iqbal


This book reveals the thirst to find solutions that would lead to the establishment of a Unified Islamic Calendar among the Muslims of the world. The book brings a summary of monumental work performed on the subject within a short time-span of twenty-five years (1974–2000). To some people, twenty-five years may not seem a short period of time, but to implement changes in calendrical practices usually takes a long time (even centuries) as evidenced by the delay in the acceptance of the Gregorian Calendar by different countries. This book basically highlights the efforts of the International Islamic Calendar Programme (IICP) based at the University of Science Malaysia.

The chapter on ‘Accomplishments’ highlights the seminars and conferences on the subject that took place between 1974 and 2000 in many countries like Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei,