Concentric Circles has a healthy emphasis on Islamic, educational and psychological theoretical background; still, unlike many other texts on religiously oriented education, this book is not overly theoretical, and it never loses sight of the very concrete realities of young learners. Where some "Islamic" educational materials are uni-dimensional, focusing only on religious education and not on the learner’s characteristics, this book combines knowledge of child development and psychology with religious-and-spiritual-centric pedagogy. Concentric Circles is a delight, spiritually focusing and pedagogically enriching without falling into the trap of being one-dimensional, boring, and excessively didactic on the religious side. According to the author’s aim, religious-spiritual learning emerges from a unified process of learning.

The writing is warm, spiritually alive without being irritatingly opaque and fuzzy. The language is quite accessible, and succeeds in being technical for the trained educator but still readable and accessible for the lay reader.

On my first read, I got a bit lost in the structure of the book and the chapter introductions: the book has a specific culture—a pleasant and edifying one, to be sure—but it can take a bit of time to acclimatize oneself to it, less for some readers than others. For non-native English speaking parents and for parents who are not professionally trained teachers, the challenge may be greater. This is something the writer might consider for future editions or for similar materials, as I hope that the Concentric Circles approach will be available to a wider audience. I recommend it strongly to believing teachers but also to parents who should be centrally involved in their young children’s early learning. It is intended for believers, and while it is primarily designed for a Muslim audience, non-Muslim believers will also benefit from perusal of this book.

Shabana Mir


The delightful book under review was first published in 1912 in London by Constable & Co. It has now come out as a photostatic reprint, alas, without
the original photographs, not even those mentioned in the text, as on pp. 131 and 137. Garnet Publishing must still be congratulated for including it in its series of historic reprints. Their “Folio Archive Library” had already made available two other famous pilgrimage accounts: those by Carsten Niebuhr (1774), a German non-Muslim, and Johann Ludwig Burckhardt (1818), a German Muslim. The publisher must however be faulted for having failed to add an introduction about the author and the fate of his book, and for leaving us without a more detailed index.

The author, Arthur Wavell (1882-1916), during his tragically short life mostly worked as a British soldier and intelligence agent. Appropriately he died fighting, in World War I, against the defenders of German East Africa (Tanganyika) under General von Lettow-Vorbeck. Indeed, the book reveals much more mature thought, breadth of knowledge, sophisticated humour, linguistic abilities, and elegant English style than one dares expect from an adventurous explorer, only in his late twenties and one with only military background. As it is, Wavell’s account is by no means less perceptive (and certainly more emphatic) than the ones by his best known Western predecessors on Mecca [Makkah]: Heinrich von Maltzan (1860) and Sir Richard Burton (1855).

Alas, the author did not leave any bibliography. But his text allows us to conclude that in addition to the Qur’ān, al-Bukhārī’s Sahih and books on ʿArab he must have consulted 1001 Nights, Gibbon’s The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Materia Medica, the pilgrimage accounts by Niebuhr and Burton, as well as Charles Montagu Doughty’s Travels in Arabia (1888), Eduard Glaser’s research on the Yemen (1909), and the studies in social critique by Daniel Halevy (1872-1962). Obviously, he also used the British Royal Geographical Society’s Hints to Travellers and Nautical Almanac.

As indicated by its title the volume contains two altogether separate books, printed under the same cover that deal with:

1. Wavell’s successful pilgrimage to Mecca in 1908, posing as Ali b. Muhammad, a wandering Arab Dervish (pp. 1-179), and

2. his unsuccessful illegal travels, in 1911, in the wartorn Yemen, posing as a British medical doctor, a convert to Islam, out to explore the “empty quarters” of the South Eastern Najd desert (pp. 182-343).

The author has prefaced both parts with a theoretical chapter, very ably describing the geography, history, anthropology, and strategic importance of the regions visited.

This immediately raises the question of what Wavell—who never discusses religion—really believed. True, he takes all necessary precautions
not to be discovered as a fake Arab in al-Madīnah or Makkah. But some disguise would have been advisable, at the time, even for a genuine Anglo-Saxon Muslim. True, he travelled with two Muslim servants: Abdul Wahid [‘Abd al-Wāḥid], a Shī‘ite from Aleppo living in Berlin, and Masaudi [Mas’ūd], a Zayidi [Zaydī] Muslim from Zanzibar. Both at times acted like “lapsed” Muslims, perhaps resentful of the Sunnī world. It is nevertheless quite unlikely that they would have risked giving cover to a mere imposter. True, Wavell — like any Orientalist — might have performed prayers, and fasted, in order to appear like a genuine Muslim. But he also attended prayers when this was not necessary for disguise purposes.

Well, whether Wavell fooled the Muslims around him or his Christian readers, he certainly was astonishingly fair towards Islam. Indeed, whenever he records unfortunate behaviour by Muslims or supposedly critique-worthy Islamic phenomena, he invariably follows this up with a precise description of parallel black spots in the Christian environment. For example, after complaining of the tawdriness of the mosque in Šanfa [ṣan‘], he is quick to add that it was no worse than the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Similarly, he delightfully equates Muslim belief in predetermination with Calvinism, the Abbaside Caliphate with Papal Apostolic Succession, and the Muslim faith in the inerrancy of the Qurān with the views held by the Church of England on the supremacy of the scripture (p. 18).

Also his portrait of Muḥammad (peace be on him) is impeccable: “A man of sound commonsense, personal bravery, and a gentle disposition” “His life was consistent with the ethical code he preached” “He had a great breadth of mind and a sense of humour” (p. 11). In consonance with this assessment rather than haranguing in the Western fashion, Wavell refers to the fate of the Jewish tribes of al-Madīnah matter-of-factly in one short sentence: “A quarrel between him and the Jews led to the expulsion of the latter” (p. 10). Similarly, he defends Islam in the context of women’s rights by saying: “Neither the Koran nor the Prophet can fairly be held responsible for their seclusion” (p. 21).

And who could object to his even-handedness in stating that the history of Islam “is a record of bloodshed and debauchery—but not more so than that of Christendom” (p. 21).

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Wavell’s Pilgrimage to Mecca

In his theoretical introduction the author shows himself remarkably perceptive, telling early Islamic history with dispatch, if not sympathy. He
praises the Qur’an for being free of “sentiment and emotionalism,” and for its “calling a spade a spade” (p. 23). The battle of Badr he rightly assesses as “one of the most decisive battles in world history” (p. 15). He is quick to point out that the hajj rituals are “no more ridiculous than those of Christianity or Judaism” (p. 154).

However, a few of his observations are in fact off the mark. This is true of his belief that half of the Indian Muslims are Shi’ites, that the Islamic schools of law amount to “sects,” and that Sufis invariably engage in grossest superstitions and ridiculous antics (pp. 25). Factually wrong is also his conviction that Muḥammad (peace be on him) was the first— and not the last— of the Meccan [Makkan] Muslims to flee to al-Madīnah. In the moral sphere Wavell was, however, puzzled by Muslim behaviour. Thus, so he said, it was not universally admitted at his time that the use of wine is strictly forbidden. In any case, this law is very badly kept (p. 19). With a critical eye on Near Eastern Muslims, Wavell even wondered why “the moral precepts of the Koran are neglected while the minutiae of its ritual are strictly observed? A devout Turk thinks that as long as he says his prayers regularly, fasts in Ramadan, and avoids pork, it does not matter much what else he does or does not do” (p. 20).

Wavell’s trip from Damascus to al-Madīnah, using the brand-new German-made Hijāz-railway, was an adventure all by itself. The train had only two classes, first and third, and took four days. All pilgrims were armed (carrying their weapons even into the Ḥaram both in al-Madīnah and Makkah) because the train was as likely to be attacked by robbers as the caravans carrying the Maṣāmul from Damascus and Cairo with a continuous string of camels. They were led by camelmen, specialized in extortion, who “never prayed and hardly had any notion of Islam” (p. 104). Insecurity was such that an explorer of Arabia only had the choice of “leaving his instruments at home and come back empty-handed or— if he takes them with him— not come back at all” (p. 105).

One reads Wavell’s report of events in al-Madīnah and Makkah with nostalgia, pride, and relief. Nostalgia one feels when returning to a Makkah and Madīnah that no longer exist because of the fury with which Wahhābī ideologists have since destroyed Islamic memorabilia. The author indeed proves that the Wahhābī movement was already powerful in the Hijāz region long before ‘Abd al-‘Azīz assumed power in Riyadh (pp. 24, 48). In fact, he was already aware of the danger to the Makkan heritage stemming from “fantastique schemes for the improvement of Mecca itself which, if carried out, would quite destroy the unique charm of the plac[e] (p. 148).
In 1908, at any rate, people still believed that Fātimah was buried in the Prophet’s Mosque, next to Umar, in a well decorated tomb (p. 68). Al-Madīnah’s 30,000 people took care of pilgrims for three months but did “nothing for the rest of the year” (p. 64). Shi’ite pilgrims were neither blessed nor cursed but tolerated (p. 70). People seemed to be more personally affected at the Prophet’s tomb than when being awed by the Ka’bah (p. 74). There were no Coke ads yet in Madīnat al-Nabī but Cadbury’s Chocolate posters were already on display (p. 78). The houses in which Muḥammad (peace be on him) and ‘Alī were born could still be visited. Authentic or not, parts of the trenches (al-khandaq) from the Battle of the Trenches in 6/627 continued to be shown, and al-Baqṣa [al-Baqr] cemetery was still replete with shoddy monuments (pp. 61 f.), including those of Khadija [Khadījah] and Abu Talib [Abū Ṭalīb] (pp. 145 f.).

In Makkah one could still visit Abū Bakr’s house next to the Ḥaram (p. 75) and the very recently demolished Turkish Fort overlooking the Ḥaram. Of course, al-Ṣaḥāra and al-Marwah had not yet been incorporated into the Ḥaram area (p. 133); rather, they had remained as de-limited by the famous Turkish architect Sinan in the 16th century. Indeed, the Ka’bah doors were still wooden; the Zamzam well was domed; many constructions still obstructed the ḥawāf; and shops were built right into the outside wall of the Mosque. The number of pilgrims was below 500,000 so that kissing the Black Stone did not pose much of a problem and was still considered an essential element of the ḥaajj ritual (p. 132).

The pride one feels at realizing from Wavell’s report how well the Muslims have succeeded in preserving their ḥaajj rituals, including, though, their annual disputes about correctly seeing the new moon (pp. 151, 159 f.).

One also feels relief at realizing how many abuses, deviations, and even criminal activities surrounding al-ḥaajj in 1908 have been eliminated since.

Just imagine that there still was a slave women’s market right in Makkah where Circassian beauties brought as much as 100 Pounds Sterling. The author, however, remarks that slavery as practiced amounted to legalized concubinage and that slavery in the sense of unpaid hard labour did not exist (as it shouldn’t under Qur’ānic law) (pp. 142 f.). Just imagine that pornographic photographs were sold within a few yards of the Ḥaram and that alcohol was available everywhere in the Ḥaramyn for those who knew where to go for it (p. 150). Zamzam water at that time was brackish, and pilgrims could be seen smoking inside the mosques (p. 51). Women pilgrims, wearing straw masks with eye-holes (!), could go on ḥaajj without a muḥrim (sic) [maḥram] (p. 52).

In 1908 the ḥaajj guides [al-muṭawwifūn] wore costumes whose colour indicated their language abilities. Alas, they were found fighting physically
over pilgrims. People in the Ḥijāz even then were quite “accustomed to making money out of the pilgrims” (p. 54).

The so-called Tomb of Eve in Jiddah while a curiosity not taken very seriously was still a mausoleum complete with dome (p. 121). However, in marked contrast to today, for religious reasons, there was not a single bank to be found in al-Madīnāh and Makkah, even though “usury” only (and not interest in general) was considered forbidden. Hotels in Arabia, if available at all, invariably were vermin infected, dirty, and smelly—a far cry from today’s Mecca Hilton. Indeed, cholera and pestilence were annual occurrences. This was not surprising since most of the animals sacrificed on Ḥaḍād were simply discarded and at best thrown into pits, having no ways at the time for preserving and distributing the meat as is done today.

Against this background the author came to the depressing conclusion that in Muslim countries there was “extreme reverence for the Qur’an itself and utter disregard of its precepts” (p. 139).

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**Wavell’s Travels in the Yemen**

This second part of the book is masterfully introduced and has a geographic, anthropological, historical, and political account of the Yemen and its Zaydi [Zaydi] madhhab, even though he wrongly assumed that they, too, believed in a chain of 12 imāms (pp. 180–206). Only Carsten Niebuhr’s description of the country, as seen by him in 1761, can rival Wavell’s observations.

Wavell’s analysis of Yemenite discontent with the Turk—who had come, in their view, to restore order after anarchy and chaos—is eerily reminiscent of the “Iraqi” reaction today vis-à-vis the Americans: “Men came to attribute every evil to ... foreign occupation.” “They disliked the Turk for his manners, his laws, his religion, his personal appearance: they dislike pretty much everything connected with him.” “Past abuses were forgotten in the presence of actual annoyance” (p. 200). Replace “Turk” by “American” and you will see that Wavell neatly anticipated the contemporary American dilemma in ʿIrāq.

In this context, the author diagnoses the Turkish mistrust—their not only using spies but spies on spies—and their neglecting the obvious for more complicated explanations. (The term “conspiracy theory” had not yet been coined!) Therefore he felt that is was better to lie to a Turkish official even though there be nothing to conceal (p. 191). No wonder that he considered that “the offspring of the first flirtation of Islam with democracy [in Ottoman Turkey] is not a healthy child” (p. 193). In fact, he expected this “superficial
experiment" to fail, illustrating this view with a hilarious over-heard exchange between a Young Turk (a) and an Arab camel driver (b). (a): "Henceforth all are equal in the sight of the law of their common fatherland (waṭan)." (b): "Their what" (a): "The State we both belong to?" (b): "I come from Taif." (p. 195).

Quite remarkably Islamic is the author’s assumption that the miraculous events related in Sīrat al-Fil (Qur’an 105) had taken place exactly as revealed because many Meccan eye-witnesses were still around when the Sīrah came down, and nobody objected or made fun of it (p. 197).

Supposedly in order to reach South-Eastern Arabia the author disembarked at al-Hodeidah, trying first to make his way to Sanā’a [Ṣan‘a‘]. Given that in 1911 a large Yemenite uprising against the Turkish occupation took place, it was not surprising that the Turkish authorities suspected him to be a British spy and formally forbade him to leave the harbour town, no matter how much he (and the British Consul nearby) claimed that under the Capitulations Wavell was outside the Turkish jurisdiction and was a privileged person.

The Turks turned a deaf ear to this type of imperialist argumentation. Wavell attributed this sauciness of theirs to the fact that Britain had already lost much prestige in Turkey because the Kingdom had “allowed the Turks to think we are afraid of Germany. They are a fighting race. They can sympathize with the mailed fist, even when it hits them, much more than with talk of arbitration or limiting armament.” In a true essentialist fashion, Wavell also remarks that “elective institutions will never be successful for long in the East, where the character of the people necessitates a strong ruler, who does not owe his position to their caprice” (p. 49). In harmony with this approach, which smacks of imperialism and colonialism, Wavell saw Britain seized by “political hypochondria, in an atmosphere of pessimism and whining, to a point that the Turks wonder why we don’t start learning German” (p. 194).

Whether they did this or not, the Turks too were offended at the fact that Wavell, still under house arrest, managed to sneak away and reach Sana’a illegally, just before it was put under Yemenite siege lasting for three months (January–April 1911), until it was lifted by fresh Turkish troops under Izzet Pasha.

In Sana’a he found the Muslim and Christian Arab population appallingly ignorant. There was not a single bookshop in town. “It is most difficult to reconcile the decadent state of the present day Arabs with their wonderful achievement in the past” (p. 241). Indeed, the Jews, “the most law abiding of all in Sana’a” (p. 250), were the only people there doing “any real work.” (They were monopolists for the production and sale of alcohol, much of
which was consumed by the Muslims) (p. 248). The latter also wasted much time, as they still do, on kat [qārī] chewing sessions (p. 246). But, to the great credit of all its components, “Sana’a was remarkably peaceful — perhaps because they all went armed” (p. 250).

Wavell’s description of the Turkish defensive equipment and disposition is so professional and detailed that he inadvertently gives one indication of being an intelligence officer, with or without commission. Yet Wavell’s second attempt to escape to the North fails despite his being cunning, daring and re-sourcefulness because his Arab guide, a scoundrel, let him down.

Returning to Britain the author was ill advised to demand the enormous sum of 20,000 Pounds Sterling from the Foreign Office for its having failed to protect him in the Yemen. But both the Foreign Office and the British Embassy in Istanbul remained convinced that Wavell’s losses and fate had been due to his own fault because the Turkish authorities had been entitled to restrict his movement for valid security reasons in a war-torn country. Thus there were no legal grounds for collecting a penalty from the Sublime Porte. Indeed, reading this official correspondance in the Appendix (pp. 332-343) is painful.

Murad Wilfried Hofmann


*Politics of Piety* is an ethnographic description of Muslim revivalism in Egypt, viewed from the vantage point of women of various social strata who routinely attend religious lessons offered by female preachers in the mosques of Cairo. These religious lessons not only emphasize the study of Islamic scriptures, but also focus on social norms, personal orientations and bodily comportments perceived as essential to nurture a pious and virtuous self.

This fascinating analysis of women in the contemporary mosque movement in Egypt clearly presents a bold challenge to the conventional ideas of secular feminists. Saba Mahmood investigates the conceptual challenges that women’s involvement in the Islamist movement poses to feminist theory