

Book Reviews

The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam: Beliefs and Practices.

Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011.

ISBN: 9781845117382. Pp. xi + 585.

Reviewed by Adam Asgarali, University of Toronto

Only in recent decades has the study of Shi'i Islam become a significant field of inquiry within academic discourse. So observes Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi in the preface of his book, *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam*, which, in contrast to the abundance of scholarly literature on Sunni Islam available in European languages, is one of only a handful of detailed expositions of Shi'i doctrine and practice available in English. As the author notes, Shi'i thought was viewed throughout Islamic history as suspicious at best, and as heresy or "extremism" (*ghuluww*) at worst, contributing to the censorship and loss of many works considered Shi'i in nature (xii). These circumstances combined with the highly esoteric and "secretive" quality of much of Shi'i belief serve to explain the historical shortage of critical engagements with the Shi'i tradition and highlights the timely nature of Moezzi's study.

The first section of the work opens with an exploration of the origins of Shi'i Islam. Examining the concept of *dīn* 'Alī (lit. "religion of 'Alī") in early historiographical works, Moezzi argues that 'Alī ibn Abi Talib was the only early Muslim figure, aside from Muhammad himself, to be so frequently associated with the term *dīn* (8). Used by his enemies to differentiate his cause from their conception of Islam, 'Alī's supporters equated this term with *dīn Muḥammad* or Islam proper. Highlighting the Qur'anic depiction of the hereditary transference of worldly and spiritual authority amongst the Israelite prophets, Moezzi notes the use of this concept by the family of 'Alī as evidence of their rightful custodianship of Islam after Muhammad. Following this is a discussion of pre-Islamic Arab notions of lineage and kinship as well as how existing concepts such as *ahl al-bayt* (lit. "people of the house") were reinterpreted within Shi'i thought to denote the exalted station of 'Alī and his descendents within the Muslim community. Finally, Moezzi analyzes the influence of pre-Islamic Iranian religions on Shi'i belief through the figure of the Sasanian princess Shahr-bānū, traditionally held to be the mother of the fourth Imam, 'Alī Zayn al-'Abidin. The combination of the royal lineage of ancient Persia and Muhammad's spiritual authority within the figure of the fourth Imam was an

important factor, Moezzi argues, in garnering legitimacy for Shi‘ism, particularly in Iranian lands.

The second section deals with the metaphysical nature of the Shi‘i Imams and delves deeply into questions of ontology and epistemology. The author begins with a discussion of the sayings of the early Shi‘i Imams in which they are depicted as possessing the divine attributes. Here, Moezzi highlights the esoteric notion of the “Perfect Man” (*al-insān al-kāmil*) and its embodiment in the Imams, rendering them the only knowable source through which the ineffable God can be accessed (104-105). This is followed by an exploration of the Imams’ pre-eternal nature, in which Moezzi pays particular attention to the notion of the pure and immaterial “light” of the prophetic family. Here, Moezzi highlights the belief in the role of the pre-eternal Imams as the spiritual guides or “initiators” of the primordial believers, that is, those beings who swear fealty to the Imams prior to materiality in the physical world. As well, the author touches upon the depiction of the Imams’ precognition of all states and affairs prior to creation of the worldly domain. After this, Moezzi turns to questions of the heavenly ascension and presence of the first Shi‘i Imam, ‘Alī, within the paradisiacal realms, followed by an analysis of the Imams’ charismatic and supernatural abilities as illustrated within Shi‘i *hadith* literature. The section ends with a discussion of the complex and notoriously difficult-to-translate concept of *walāya*, particularly as it applies to ‘Alī and his descendants, and an examination of the spiritual divisions of humankind according to Shi‘i exegetical thought.

In the third section, the author begins with an exploration of the pivotal role of the first Imam, ‘Alī, as the ultimate source of esoteric interpretation (*ta’wīl*) of the Qur’ān, looking at a poetic piece by the famous seventeenth-century Iranian philosopher and theologian Mulla Sadra. This is followed by an examination of modern-day accounts of mystical encounters with the Imams, traditionally thought to constitute a means of “accessing” the otherwise inaccessible and incomprehensible divine reality. Moezzi notes that it is through the spiritual organ known as the “heart” (*qalb*) that the devotee can experience the Imam’s metaphysical reality (340). The section closes with a brief analysis of supplication (*du‘ā’*) in Twelver Shi‘i thought, drawing largely on the writings of the French scholar of Islam, Henry Corbin (d. 1978).

The fourth and final section of the work provides a survey of Shi‘i conceptions of eschatology. Moezzi begins with a discussion of the messianic role of the Hidden Imam in Twelver Shi‘i doctrine, whose re-appearance within temporal history serves a two-fold purpose: first, to bring about the “end of time” (*ākhir al-zamān*), leading the forces of “intellect” (*aql*) to victory against those of “ignorance” (*jahl*), ending the primordial battle between light and darkness and returning the universe to its original state (*ma‘ād*); second, to guide the faithful to the fulfillment of their pre-eternal covenant with the celestial Imam (429). The author continues by forwarding

a classification of encounters with the Hidden Imam as recorded in Twelver Shi'i sources and touching upon their soteriological implications. Lastly, Moezzi briefly looks at esoteric interpretations of the Occultation of the Hidden Imam within the writings of the Shaykhiyya school of Shi'i thought.

Although the majority of Shi'i primary sources consulted by the author were penned by figures in the Twelver tradition, many of the narrations quoted from these works are attributed to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, extending their significance to Zaydis, Ismailis and other Shi'i groups. Additionally, narrations from figures such as 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin, Muhammad al-Baqir, and Jafar al-Sadiq within these sources, take on religious and spiritual significance within a broader conceptualization of the Shi'i faith than the author implies. Nevertheless, it is to Moezzi's credit that he states (albeit in a later footnote) that most of the traditions attributed to early Imams such as Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq are common to both Twelver and Isma'ili Shi'ism (245).

The strength of Moezzi's work lies in its ability to not only bring together a spectrum of secondary sources on Shi'i thought in various European languages, but also to critically engage with Arabic and Persian primary texts, many of which may be previously unknown to non-specialists. Further, discussion of the censorship of well-known beliefs and practices by non-Shi'i authors, such as pre-Islamic kinship rituals between Muhammad, 'Ali, and Muhammad's grandsons Hasan and Husayn, highlights the need to critically re-assess existing understandings of Shi'ism within the discourse of Islamic history. To this end, *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam: Beliefs and Practices* is a perfect starting-point.

Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction.

John Witte, Jr. and M. Christian Green (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780199733446. Pp. 416.

Reviewed by Richard Greydanus, McGill University

A downside to the present proliferation of edited collections, purportedly organized around single topics, is the loss of inter-textual coherence. But the reality of academic specialization seems to mean that no one author will any longer dare attempt to tackle the multiple problematics arising out of any given issue. This impressive volume, introducing historical, theoretical, and contemporary considerations of the relationship between religious beliefs and the legal rights accruing to human beings *qua* human being, compiled by John Witte, Jr. and M. Christian Green, manages to accomplish the sort of integral purpose that typically requires a single author. Guided by the considerations, more obviously, that human rights are indispensable