

## BOOK REVIEW

IMAM ZAYN AL-'ABIDIN'ALI AL-HUSAYN,  
The Psalms of Islam. Al-Sahifat al-  
Kamilat al-Sajjadiyya. Translated  
with an Introduction and Annotation  
by William C. Chittick. With a  
Foreword by S.H.M. Jafri. London:  
The Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain  
and Northern Ireland, 1988 Pp. xlvi+  
259+301, linen. n.p. (Distributed by  
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Al-Sahifat al-Sajjadiya. 'The Book of Sajjad', is one of the seminal works of Islamic spirituality. It is commonly held to have been composed by the fourth Shi'ite Imam, the Prophet's grandson, 'Ali ibn al-Husayn, known as Zayn al-'Abidin ('the adornment of worshippers'). In Shi'ite tradition this collection of supplicatory prayers ranks behind only the Qur'an and Imam 'Ali's Nahj al-balagha. The extraordinary esteem these prayers have been held in by generations of believers up to this day, is mirrored in the honorific titles it received, such as 'Sister of the Qur'an, 'Gospel of the fold of the House' and 'Psalms of the Household of Muhammad'.

In his comprehensive, helpful introduction, the translator W.C. Chittick, well-known for previous publications in the field of Shi'ite and Sufi studies, explains the nature and role of prayer in Islam in its various forms, e.g. ritual, invocational and supplicatory. Duly referring to and building upon Constance E. Padwick's Classic, Muslim Devotions, Chittick dwells upon some of the salient features of supplications presented in this work, as e.g. their implied view of God's relationship to man, creature and servant, of the preponderance of divine Mercy and of the appropriateness of an Imam asking forgiveness.

Our volume presents the Arabic original, calligraphed in a clear and most readable fashion, and, opposite the original, the translation of the fifty-four supplications which make up the main body of the text as well as the additional supplications which make up the fourteen addenda and the fifteen munajat or 'whispered prayers'. Chittick comments: 'The original fifty-four supplications shown an undeniable freshness and unity of theme, while the latter especially the munajat, add a certain orderliness and self-conscious artistry which may suggest the hand of an editor.' (p.xviii)'

In addition to the supplications of the present work many others have been attributed to Zayn Al-'Abidin. They are collected in what are known as the 'second Sahifa', the 'third Sahifa' and so on. Although right in the beginning of the Introduction Chittick states that the present work was 'composed by the Prophet's grandson', he qualifies this in his discussion of the authorship of the supplications: a few pages further on: '...in the fifth-four basic prayers of the Sahifa we have the Zayn al-'Abidin who has been known to Shi'ites for more than a thousand years and who has helped give to Shi'ism its specific contours down to the present day. Scholars may eventually reach the conclusion that the Zayn al-'Abidin of 'historical fact' differs from the Zayn al-'Abidin of tradition, but this will remain a hypothesis, since at this distance 'historical facts' are impossible to verify and as open to interpretation as literature. Whether or not historians accept the text as completely authentic will not change the actual influence which Zayn al-'Abidin and the Sahifa have exercised upon Islam over the centuries, nor is it likely to change the way they continue to influence practising Muslims. The 'real' Zayn al-'Abidin is the figure enshrined by the text as it now stands. '(p.xx) In the light of this apposite statement the somewhat tortuous argument trying to establish that the frequent statements of the supplicant regarding his own sinfulness and need for divine forgiveness, in no way militate against the Shi'ite dogma of the 'inerrancy' and 'sinlessness' of the Imams, may well be superfluous. It is also well established that the Shi'ite dogma of 'isma originated only in the course of the eighth century AD (cr.art. 'isma, EL, 2nd. ed., IV, 182-184).

The translation is excellent: close to the original, fluent and dignified as befits a text of this kind that may well be used at times in the context of ecumenical prayer services. The Annotations offer mainly Quranic references and allusions and basic information. They, as well as the detailed Index should prove most helpful. The Appendix offers, in English translation, Imam Zayn al-'Abidin's 'Treatise on Rights' (Risalat al-huquq), the only work attributed to him other than supplications or relatively short saying and letters. As Chittick states in his special introduction to his translation of this treatise, the theme of it is in short: 'Human actions can only be correct if the rights of all of God's creatures are observed' and this is 'a theme which is reinforced by many of the supplications of the Sahifa, number 24 being a prime example. ('p.281')

William C. Chittick and the publishers are to be thanked and congratulated for placing into our hands this precious jewel of early Islamic spirituality which continues to mean so much to million of believers. These supplications will be cherished by men and women intent upon praising and serving God, whatever their institutional affiliation may be.

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