

William C. Chittick

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The Vision of Islam, Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, Paragon House, 370 Lexington Avenue, New York City, N.Y. 10017, 1994, pp. 368, Pbk. \$ 17.95.

This book is the ripe fruit of more than a decade of teaching a basic course in Islam as part of the program of Religious Studies at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, Long Island. It is first and foremost directed to their American students coming from diverse backgrounds. Although primarily intended for young undergraduate students with little or no prior knowledge of Islam, this work throughout maintains its mature sophisticated intellectual standards.

It refutes once and for all the general idea widely held in the West that Islam consists of harsh legalism and outward formalism with little or no inward spirituality or beauty. This erroneous conception has been much enhanced these days by the militant activities of certain political groups loosely labeled as "fundamentalists" with whom the authors of this book share no sympathies. On the contrary, they show why indiscriminate violence for political ends is forbidden by the *Shar'iat*.

In contrast to so many other western publications preoccupied with current political events of this or that Muslim country. This work concentrates its exposition exclusively on the inner spiritual life of the practicing Muslim from within its own ethos - a perspective very sorely needed in the West.

The first part of this work discusses the exterior dimensions of the Five Pillars of Islam, emphasizing *Salat* or the obligatory five times daily ritual prayers, the *Shar'iat*, Holy Qur'an and the Islamic concept of revealed scriptures, the Sunnah or practice of the Holy Prophet upon whom be peace, the *Madhhabs* or schools of Islamic jurisprudence. The second part takes up the subject of *Diniyat* on all its aspects the Islamic creed or *Shahadah*, *Tawhid* and *Shirk*, the Divine Names or attributes of God, why Divine mercy takes precedence over Divine wrath and the necessity for a delicate balance between *tanzih* or Divine Majesty and *Tashbih* or Divine beauty, the Angels and their necessary role, Satan and the *jinn*,

predestination verses free-will and the uniqueness of the human state and the purpose of human life. Also included are the relation of Islam to other major world religions followed by the Islamic concept of death and Hereafter. Part II ends with a brief commentary of Islamic theology, philosophy and sufism. The third and last part of this book describes *Ihsan* or the interior dimensions of Islam, including sincerity in attitudes, motivations and intentions, character-building, manners and the necessity in Islam for doing everything beautifully. Eloquent explanations are given why authentic Muslim arts and crafts exemplified in correct Qur'anic recitation, calligraphy and mosque architecture are essential and exalted expressions of Islam.

The viewpoint throughout this book is traditional and orthodox, from beginning to end hostile to modernity and above all "progress" and "development" expressed in ever-intensifying mechanization and indoctrination, their rampant growth spreading the most degrading ugliness all over the Muslim world. Although classical Islamic civilization included the natural sciences, perfection of human character and *Din* not technical progress - was its ultimate goal.

The value of this book lies in its emphasis on the necessity of beauty in Islam. Current political, economic and social activities in Muslim countries today have little if any concern with beauty. Activism in the Muslim world today expresses the very negation of beauty. With irrefutable evidence, Murata and Chittick convincingly argue why unless and until the Muslims give beauty its full expression in their everyday lives, the regeneration of Islamic civilization cannot possibly take place.

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