

**Abu Salif Ahmad Ali al-Adani** (tr.): *The Secrets of Asceticism*

Bristol: Amal Press, 2008, Pb, 143 pp, ISBN: 978-0-9552359-6-2

This is a partial translation of the celebrated Andalusian Qurʾān commentator Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Qurṭubī’s (d. 671/1273) manual on simple living entitled “The subduing of greed through abstinence and contentment and the repelling of the humiliation of beggary through handwritten requests and intercession” (*Qamʿ al-Hirṣi bil-Zuhdi wal-Qanāʿa wa-Raddu Dhulli al-Suʿālī bil-Kutbi wal-Shafāʿa*), which Mālikī-trained South Africa lawyer Ahmad Ali al-Adani renders as “The curbing of covetousness by doing-without and contentment, and repelling the abasement of asking by books and intercession” (p. 3) and which has received several editions in Egypt and Lebanon since the eighties.

The subject brings back memorable reminders into our materialistic world-picture. “It does not befit a person endowed with intellect to be deceived by the World” (p. 32). Imām al-Qurṭubī’s clarion call reads as fresh today as the verse from the Psalms: “The Fool has said in his heart: “There is no God.” Of note, “doing-without” begins with sin. Asked about *zuhd*, Ibn ʿUyayna replied: “To do without what Allāh has proscribed” (p. 26). In this sense it is noteworthy that *zuhd* is a categorical personal obligation. Moreover, “*zuhd* is one of the actions of the heart” (p. 28), which puts it ultimately among the “invisible” good deeds, like fasting. Finally, it is not a formal object but requires constant questioning of one’s spiritual state and applies to outwardly *ḥalāl* pursuits and possessions. “Whatever wealth or family connection distracts you away from Allāh is ill-omened for you” (p. 61).

Adani is on the whole meticulous in his transliteration of Arabic names and terms and shows an inquisitive approach to the documentation of ḥadīth. His text is lively. His biographical notes similarly show flair and concision (although lacking sourcing). The style is sometimes turgid (“This format, pellucidly reflected in this work, is the pearlescent construction of the book...” “...too obvious to the percipient reader to spend further elucidatory words thereon” p. 2-3 and the whole of p. 69), even

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pedantic, such as the claim that the correct title of the Arabic lexicon *Mukhtār al-Ṣiḥāḥ* is *Mukhtār al-Ṣaḥḥa* (p. 20, 99), and the lack of translation for certain Arabic terms (such as *dunyā*) can be irritating. Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī (“The Cleft-Lipped”), Abū Aswad al-Du‘alī and Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya are persistently misspelled “al-Salafī” (15-16), al-Du‘alī (p. 38, 92) and “b. al-Ḥanīfah” (p. 100-101). Some readers will rightly take exception to the endnote citing an assessment that the rightly-guided caliph ‘Umar (Allah be well-pleased with him) “loved [the world] and was loved by it in return, as attested by the length of his rule and the great expansion it witnessed” (p. 127). We are told al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī’s “most controversial opus is *Khatm al-Wilāyah wa-‘Ilal al-Sharī‘ah*” (p. 103) but there are two distinct works here, *Khatm al-Wilāyah* on the hierarchy of saints and *‘Ilal al-Sharī‘ah* on the spiritual *fiqh* of ritual purity, worship and transactions. A long ḥadīth narrated by him through ‘Uthmān ibn Maz‘ūn (p. 76) bears the marks of forgery and is not merely “*mursal*” (p. 137) as another endnote would have it.

The choice of the catchword “Secrets” in the English title betrays both author and reader in two respects: it bears no resemblance to the original title and it touts something which the book nowhere claims to discuss. Al-Qurṭubī wrote mostly in the *atharī* tradition of his eminent predecessors such as Ibn al-Mubārak, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and al-Bayhaqī, at times briefly discussing *fiqh*. He adduced reports that cover the themes headlined in the chapters of his book, of which the translator selected thirteen including “*Zuhd* and its explanation,” “States of Those who Practiced *Zuhd* in this World,” “The Prophet’s *Zuhd*,” “The *Zuhd* of the Companions,” etc. without the Ghazālīan slant. Although extensive enough, the bio-bibliographical introduction in fact lacks a much-needed acknowledgment of the love-and-hate tension with Sufism that pervades al-Qurṭubī’s works, his *Tafsīr* in particular.

Yet the benefits of this work speak for themselves. Reservations aside, the cover is handsome and the overall treatment delivers, for which both author and publisher deserve congratulations. This is al-Adani’s debut to my knowledge but I look forward to seeing more, including his forthcoming—hopefully complete—translation of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Zarrūq’s “The Loftiest Goal in the Elucidation of the Beautiful Names” (*al-Maqṣad al-Asmā fī Sharḥ Asmā‘ Allāh al-Ḥusnā*), also at Amal Press.

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