

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

April 19, 2016

Bruce B. Lawrence, *Who Is Allah?*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2015, xiv + 223 pp., \$25.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781469620039.

The bilingual and slightly irreverent pun that serves as the interrogative title of this welcome addition to the library of introductory books on Islam will be lost on the uninitiated. (“Who is Alláh?” resonates playfully with the standard Arabic religious invocation *huwa alláh*, “He is God.” The difference is, of course, that in the Arabic we have not an interrogative but a declarative nominal sentence.) Nonetheless, the title, even notwithstanding its somewhat arcane allusion, is a catchy and people-friendly gesture in the service of explicating the inherent humanity at play in Muslim religiosity. Obviously, the question is not answered definitively in a formulaic fashion. Lawrence, one of our most lucid and articulate translators of the Islamic data into our native idiom, is far too knowledgeable and experienced to even attempt what in any case is, in the nature of the problem, doomed to failure at best, and offensive “blasphemy” at worst. The strategy employed resembles something of a “lost wax” process, but without an original. What is used as the model is precisely what Marshall Hodgson (d. 1968), in his epoch-making *The Venture of Islam*,¹ so astutely and instructively referred to as “Islamicate styles of piety.” By examining several different “performances” of piety by Muslims, the reader is left to perform the “lost wax” algebra on the problem of “Allah.” Again, nothing permanent, tangible or concrete emerges. Lawrence shows himself a deft artist of ideas and despite, or rather because of, the absence of a final fixed image, succeeds admirably in conveying the role, function and even to some extent essence of, if not Allah “per se” then numerous cross-fertilizing gestures towards the same. It is a daring achievement.

The book has a Preface (xi-xii) and an Introduction (1-24) followed by 5 chapters: 1 Allah Invoked, *Practice of the Tongue* (25-54); 2 Allah Defined, *Practice of the Mind* (55-83); 3 Allah Remembered, *Practice of the Heart* (84-117); 4 Allah Debated, *Practice of the Ear* (118-140); and 5 Allah Online, *Practices in Cyberspace* (141-162). A thoughtful, knowing Conclusion (163-181) ends the main part of the book. A useful *Glossary* (183-186), substantial Notes (187-202), a Bibliography (203-208), generous and intimate Acknowledgements (209-211) and finally an Index (213-223) comprise the remainder of the book’s contents. The book is very well produced with a minimum of typographical errors (e.g. at p. 103: “Ibn Qayim” for Ibn Qayyim; at p. 210 “Torowa” for Toorawa) and rare infelicities (e.g. at p. 145 “Agha Khanis” for Shia Ismailis, the name the group itself prefers).

¹ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 Volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

One or two rhetorical decisions seem not to accomplish their intended purpose. The first is the use of the noun “Thing” (*passim*) as a word to convey the believers’ deep sense of the word Allah. Granted, it frequently appears as the first element of an explanatory trinity: “the Thing, the Absolute, the One” (135) or as a part of the quaternary “the Thing, the Absolute, the Unique, the Eternal” (136). Unfortunately, this attempt to emphasize the Quranic transcendence of God works against itself, from the point of view of English idiom, in which the word “thing” has numerous connotations and denotations none of which can carry the idea of the sublime, the unknowable, the transcendent required by the word Allah. On the contrary, the word incontrovertably focuses our attention on the realm of the created, the tangible, the afore-mentioned concrete. From the point of view of Islamic thought and Arabic, “thingness” translates very well the key Islamo-Arabic technical term *al-shay’iyya* universally held to stand precisely for that vast category of reality which is, by definition, other than Allah. The noun *al-shay’*—“thing”—is never heard or read in “religious” Arabic without silently adding the word “created” as the necessary and understood modifier. Another problem in translation has to do with Lawrence’s decision to render the quite iconic and key Q 2:156 *inná lilláhi wa inná ilayhi ráji’ún*: as “We are to Allah and to Allah we are returning” (30) rather than a more transparent: “Indeed, we all belong to God and unto Him we return,” or even: “We all come from God and to Him we return.” His proposed translation seems to miss the drama of the much-loved and much repeated Quranic gem and even flirts with meaninglessness. Finally, the book would have been made more useful with the addition of an Index of Quran verses.

The value of the book, however, is clear and enduring. It succeeds beautifully in communicating the simultaneously elusive yet rock-solid liturgical, confessional, and devotional reality of Allah. Here, the very tasteful and sensitive use of illustrations, calligraphy, works of art and photographs paradoxically help us center in on that which is beyond the image. Furthermore, the book demonstrates the umbilical connection between what we may call, for lack of a better term, Islamic theology and sociology. The rise of Islam may be usefully seen as the uniting of a quite diverse humanity beneath the simultaneously infinitely flexible yet uncompromising Reality of God, whom the Arabic language calls Alláh. Muslim unity and solidarity grew to reflect the oneness and unicity of God. However, the genius of Islam resides in the manner in which a vastly variegated humanity (*al-nás*) might feel equally close and distant from the source of life they all share and “perform” so distinctively and differently. Lawrence, by leading us through the various styles of Islamic piety, from the pre-literate of invocation, to the literate of theology and philosophy, the supra-literate of Sufism, and finally the meta-literate of the world wide web, limns the timeless power, glory and life of his Subject, without, of course, ever actually answering the question *Who is Alláh?* Such is the author’s skill and knowledge as master teacher and scholar demonstrated; and thus does this recent—remarkably felicitous—venture in broaching the ineffable issue in a most welcome addition to our current, somewhat urgent, attempts to discuss the here and now.

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Citation Information

Lawson, Todd, Review of *Who Is Allah?*, *SCTIW Review*, April 19, 2016.
<http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1083>.

ISSN: 2374-9288