

The Essentials of Ibādī Islam

Valerie J. Hoffman

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When writing about Islamic sectarian diversity, the vast majority of authors pay attention only to Sunni and Shi‘i Islam. Yet there exists a third group drawn from the earliest conflicts that rent the Muslim ummah apart: the Ibadis. If they are mentioned at all, it is usually little more than a footnote remarking that this group is the remnant of the Khariji secession in 657. Yet this third group – today predominant in Oman and Zanzibar, with populations also in Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia – played an important political and theological role in the immediate post-Prophetic period. Due to this word’s negative connotation, however, Ibadis do not refer to themselves as Kharijis, a group historically viewed as religious extremists by other Muslims. Instead, “Ibadi” comes from the enigmatic Abdullah ibn Ibad/Abad who died early in the eighth century, although, as the author notes, it is likely that his successor Jabir ibn Zayd played a more important role in founding the group.

Addressing the dearth of English-language resources on Ibadi beliefs, Valerie J. Hoffman has written *The Essentials of Ibādī Islam* in “an attempt to introduce Ibadi Islamic theology to students and scholars of Islam” (p. 4) – a task in which she succeeds admirably. Her book is primarily a translation of a theological primer and supplementary text, preceded by a short introduction on the origins and history of Ibadi Islam to orient the readers and prepare them

for perspectives that are largely unfamiliar even to those in the world of Islamic studies.

The author has arranged her book in three parts. Part 1, the abovementioned introduction, outlines the book's goal and presents a brief account of the emergence of Ibadi Islam in the context of the proto-Sunni/Shi'i/Khariji split and the crisis surrounding the deaths of caliphs Uthman and Ali. Next, there is a short history of the Ibadi states, the first of which was briefly established in the Hadramawt (Yemen) in 745, as well as in Oman and parts of North and East Africa, and a discussion of important Ibadi figures and their literary output. In its next section, the introduction explains the school's distinctive theological positions – the status of sinning Muslims; religious affiliation and dissociation (the relationship Ibadis have with other Muslims and non-Muslims); the concept of reward and punishment in the afterlife; free will vs. predestination; rejection of anthropomorphism of the deity; the nature of reason and revelation; the unity of God, His essence, and His attributes; the created nature of the Qur'an; and some points of agreement and disagreement in questions of jurisprudence – and how they differ from those of other theological schools. This part concludes with a brief outline of the authors and texts covered in the following two parts.

Part 2, the meat of the book, is Hoffman's translation of Nasir al-Rawahi's (d. 1920) theological primer *Al-'Aqīdah al-Wahbīyah* (The Wahbi Creed), the adjective being drawn from the name Abdallah ibn Wahb al-Rasibi (d. 658), whom Ibadis recognize as their first imam. This is the first translation of an Ibadi primer into English, and Hoffman notes that it is relatively unknown despite its utility as a clear elucidation of Ibadi theology. The primer's format is that of a hypothetical teacher/student exchange of questions and answers, which Hoffman suggests may have been written as an Ibadi counterpart to Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Sanusi's (d. 1490) popular Sunni creed. A type of systematic theology, its seven chapters range, among other topics, from the unity of God, the nature of His essence and attributes, the foundation and principles of right religion, questions about the beatific vision in the hereafter, religious affiliation and dissociation, and interaction with non-Muslims.

Part 3 contains a two-chapter selection of Abd al-Aziz al-Thamini al-Mus'abi's (d. 1808) *Kitāb Ma'ālim al-Dīn* covering the topic of predestination, a lacuna in al-Rawahi's primer that Hoffman suggests was due to his death before the text's completion. Lastly, the author helpfully includes in the back matter a glossary and a biographical dictionary with entries on important historical figures, both Ibadi and other, as well as the requisite references and index.

Readers with a pre-existing knowledge of early Islamic politics and theological debates will recognize why al-Rawahi and al-Thamini chose to address certain questions, even though they were writing many centuries later. They enter into the scholastic discourse by addressing the positions taken by (usually) Ash'ari and Mu'tazili scholars and elucidate where Ibadi theology agrees and where it differs with them. This makes the book useful not only for understanding Ibadi beliefs, but also serves as an example of Islamic textual debate. Given that Ibadi positions on these foundational questions are almost invariably overlooked even in comparative works makes *The Essentials of Ibāḍī Islam* an important contribution.

The book is dense at times, with the introduction's historical account not so much telling a story as providing accessible information about names and dates. Having said that, the translation of the Ibadi texts is well done and easy to read, with useful (but not excessive) footnotes. It would help for readers to come to this book with a prior familiarity concerning the period of leadership crisis in the early Muslim community as well as with the various theological debates, as it is directed toward a more scholarly audience than the novice. Helpfully, Hoffman has interwoven in the text transliteration of key Arabic terms, which are useful for those who understand the technical meanings of certain important words. My one minor quibble is that she has not always included death dates on first introduction of a person. In brief, *The Essentials of Ibāḍī Islam* is a welcome and timely addition to the world of English-language works on Islamic theology.

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