
Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibi (d. 243/857) has not been the subject of a comprehensive study for half a century; the present book therefore arouses high expectations. The question of where to situate al-Muḥāsibi in the intellectual history of the third/ninth century is anything but settled; a new approach might be in order. But the reader is ultimately disappointed. The author has delved deeply into al-Muḥāsibi’s works, but he presents the results of his investigation in a rather apodictic way and largely omits engaging in a dialogue with previous research.

In principle, the double title correctly describes what the author wants to accomplish. He treats the life and works of al-Muḥāsibi in chapters 2 and 3, and he deals with “spiritual purification” in chapters 4 and 5. However, he does not tell us how al-Muḥāsibi practiced this purification and why he became so famous for the technique he used, the ṭuḥāsaba, after which he was named. The author misses al-Muḥāsibi’s individuality completely, and he is not interested in putting him into a historical context. In chapters 4 and 5, “spiritual purification” turns out to be the translation for ṭazkiyat al-nafs; this is the Arabic term on the author’s mind. However, this word did not belong to al-Muḥāsibi’s vocabulary. Ṭazkiyat al-nafs is a modern expression derived from the Qurʾān (Q 91:7 ff.) that dominates contemporary parenetic literature published in Egypt and elsewhere. It is true that, in a separate chapter (pp. 186 ff.), the author enumerates the expressions used by al-Muḥāsibi himself (i.e., ṭuḥāsaba, mujābadat al-nafs, dbamm al-nafs, maʿrifat al-nafs), but he does not analyze these expressions with sufficient philological discipline. Their discussion remains merely a verbal exercise; we do not hear a word about their application, al-Muḥāsibi’s dialogical style or his “Socratic” way of penetrating the depth of the human soul. Phenomena such as hypocrisy or “eye-service” (riyāʾ), self-complacency (ʿujb), haughtiness (kibr) and envy (ḥasad), all those hidden vices that became the object of subtle case-studies in al-Muḥāsibi’s al-Riʿāya li-ḥuqūq Al-
\( \text{lāh} \), are more or less eliminated from the picture. Not only is the author insensible to history, but he also shuns any contact with psychology.

Why did he write this book at all? He obviously wants the reader to believe that al-Muḥāṣibī was in complete agreement with a kind of conservative Islam that is well known in our own time. Al-Muḥāṣibī’s thinking was, he suggests, firmly based in the “two revelatory sources” of Islam, namely the Qurʾān and ḥadīth (p. 149, 183 etc.) – ḥadīth, of course, only insofar as it is “rigorously authenticated” (p. 143, with regard to a prophetic tradition found in Muslim’s \( \text{al-Ṣaḥīḥ} \)). Calling al-Muḥāṣibī a “mystic” would therefore not be appropriate because this would make him a Sufi, a person who deviated from the general line. Rather, the framework for al-Muḥāṣibī’s mental state should be “spirituality” (p. 216 ff.). In the bibliography the author refers to two previous articles of his one of which is also briefly quoted in the text (p. 167, n. 132): “Tazkiyat al-nafs: The Qurʾanic Paradigm” (in Journal of Qurʾanic Studies VII/2 [2005], 101-127) and “Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Muḥāṣibī: A Study of Early Conflicting Scholarly Methodologies” (in Arabica LV/3-4 [2008], 337-361). This gives us a clue. In the present book, the Qurʾān receives high priority because the triad of \( \text{al-nafs al-ammāra bi-l-sūrī} \), \( \text{al-nafs al-lawwāma} \), and \( \text{al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinna} \) is supposed to have been behind al-Muḥāṣibī’s thinking (p. 179 ff.), in spite of the fact that combining these three Qurʾānic expressions into an independent literary scheme is a later phenomenon, and al-Muḥāṣibī only used the first of them (cf. p. 104, n. 73d, where \( \text{amrāta} \) must be read instead of \( \text{amūra} \)). Consequently, Ibn Ḥanbal, who is known for having criticized al-Muḥāṣibī (and whose correct understanding of the Qurʾān is taken for granted), cannot really have wanted to attack or persecute him, as suggested by the Ḥanbalī sources, but simply followed a different “method.” Ultimately, the author’s intention is irenic, but in pursuing it, he ends up completely flattening al-Muḥāṣibī’s personality. The conflict with Ibn Ḥanbal arose from al-Muḥāṣibī’s meddling with \( \text{ʿilm al-kalām} \), but this aspect is only touched upon in the Arabica article and not in the present book. Nor do the \( \text{aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth} \) enter the scene here. In principle, al-Muḥāṣibī had nothing against ḥadīth; he quotes prophetic traditions all the time. However, he was not concerned with \( \text{al-jarḥ wa-l-taḍīl} \), and he did not apply the criteria of authenticity
used later in the “canonical” collections (and neglected by Ibn Ḥanbal as well). Al-Muḥāṣibī’s profile should be seen against the position of the earlier zubbād, the “renunciants,” as Christopher Melchert has called them. However, the author does not use zubād as a term, and he is not interested in determining its scope (cf., for instance, Melchert, “Aḥmād Ibn Ḥanbal’s Book of Renunciation,” Der Islam LXXXV/2 [2011], 345-359). Instead, he speaks of the “first” and the “second ascetic school in Baṣra” (p. 24 ff.). He does not raise the question of whether his “spirituality” included some aspects of asceticism or whether al-Muḥāṣibī took his own stand with regard to it. In a famous passage quoted by al-Ghazzālī and Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Muḥāṣibī treats the problem of how certain companions of the Prophet who owned great wealth (ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Afw being the main example) nevertheless retained the purity of their heart (al-qalb) and their disdain for the “world” (al-dunyā). This has a personal flavor; al-Muḥāṣibī seems to have been wealthy himself. This would mean that his concept of zubād was “inner-worldly,” as Max Weber used to say. For the author, however, he seems simply to have been a “good Muslim.”

So much for the main part of the book. In contrast, the first chapters (1-3) are concerned with preliminaries. Chapter 1, on the “historical background to al-Muḥāṣibī’s life” and the “ʿAbbāsid crucible” (p. 14 ff.), is the kind of general introduction that is meant to help the non-specialized reader. The ʿAbbāsids enter the scene one by one, from al-Manṣūr to al-Mutawakkil, without an overall characterization of their reign, and Charlemagne comes in as a “French king” (p. 16). Baṣra and Baghdād receive special attention as the two towns where al-Muḥāṣibī grew up and spent most of his life. Kūfa, however, where, according to some reports, he withdrew after the clash with Ibn Ḥanbal, does not play a part of its own. In chapter 2 ("The life of al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāṣibī"), the author struggles with the scarcity and unevenness of the biographical material. To fill the gaps, he constantly mixes statements found in medieval sources with those made by modern (especially Arab) researchers. Strangely enough, he ignores the autobiographical passages in al-Muḥāṣibī’s Kitāb al-naṣāʾīḥ and in Kitāb al-khalwa, although they are the oldest specimens of this literary genre in Islam. He tries to find something positive even in the latest account (see, for instance, p. 103 n. 72, where he draws
biographical conclusions from a story told in al-Shaʿrānī’s al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā, in the sixteenth century – 700 years after al-Muḥāṣibī’s death). In disregarding the chronology of the sources, he forgets to explain who is speaking and sometimes even gets the names wrong. “Ibn Ṣafir al-Saqli,” for instance (p. 47), must be read as Ibn Ṣafir al-Siqillī. This man, who was born in Sicily and who died in 565/1170 (cf. “Ibn Ṣafar,” Encyclopaedia of Islam Second Edition, III, 970), mentions in his Anbā’ (i.e., Anbā’ nujabā’ al-abnā’) two reports of certain precocious remarks allegedly made by al-Muḥāṣibī when he was a child. In contrast to what the author derives from them, they do not tell us anything about al-Muḥāṣibī’s real life; rather, they give us an idea of al-Muḥāṣibī’s high reputation in the Maghrib during Ibn Ṣafar’s time, a phenomenon that can be documented by other testimonies from the same period (cf. my Theologie und Gesellschaft, IV, 198).

Chapter 3 contains a list of al-Muḥāṣibī’s published and unpublished works (p. 67 ff.), which must be read together with the account of the secondary literature in the introduction (pp. 2-13). The author has done his best to collect everything, but the material has not been sufficiently digested. The secondary literature is more or less complete, and only Hüseyin Aydı’n’s Muhasibi’nin Tasavvuf Felsefesi (Ankara, 1976) seems to be lacking. But what is ultimately put to use from this material in the author’s argumentation is restricted to studies produced in Arabic or English. Even ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd’s PhD thesis, which was submitted in Paris (under Massignon) when French was still the language spoken by cultivated people in the Near East (1940), is quoted in a later Arabic adaptation (Ustādh al-sāʿirīn, Cairo, 1973; incidentally, a title that seems to have become the model for “Master of the wayfarers” in the main heading of chapters 2 and 3).

As for al-Muḥāṣibī’s own works, the presentation is rather clumsy. For a first glimpse, it might be safer to have recourse to Sezgin, GAS, I, 640-642 (which is quoted by the author only in its Arabic translation). When the author comes to the text on ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAwf’s richness, he subsumes it under the “works surviving in manuscript” (p. 87, nr. 8) and refers to two copies “located in al-Istāna, Istanbul under numbers 3706/20 and 701/1.” However, only after consulting Sezgin, from where he seems to have obtained this infor-
mation, does one realize that the first manuscript is part of the Laleli collection (now in Süleymaniye Library, a majmūʿa numbered 3706, part 20 of which is the text in question) and that the second one is not found in Istanbul at all, but in Çorum. Moreover, “al-Istāna, Istanbul” is a tautology; al-Istāna or al-Āsitāna, the Persian word for “the threshold,” is not the name of a library but simply means the “Sublime Porte” = Constantinople = Istanbul. The lengthy quotations in al-Ghazzālī (Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn) and Ibn al-Jawzī (Taḥbīs Iblīs) are not mentioned at all. In fact, the Laleli manuscript is only an extract from al-Ghazzālī.

In addition to such inaccuracies, the way the author organizes his material is not altogether reader-friendly. In a first step, the books and treatises are simply described (p. 67 ff.); then we are offered, in the endnotes, the bibliographical details (p. 94 ff.), with no distinction between manuscripts (or the catalogues where these are mentioned) and editions (or any remarks made in their introduction). Therefore, it is rather difficult to determine when we are simply dealing with duplicates. Finally, the editions are addressed again in the bibliography (pp. 226-228), but under the letter A (because the author does not disregard the Arabic article and places Muḥāsibī under “Al-Muhāsibī,” like all other authors whose main name is a nisba), and in chronological rather than alphabetical order. Texts are sometimes referred to in different ways. Al-Riʿāya, for instance, is normally quoted according to the edition of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Barr (Maṣūra, 1999), but on p. 213 (n. 197), it is quoted according to the Beirut edition of ʿAbd al-Qādir Aḥmad ʿAṭāʾ, and never according to Margaret Smith’s original edition (London, 1940), (the deficiencies of which were pointed out for posterity in Hellmut Ritter’s review, Oriens 1/2 [1948], 352-353). Kitāb al-ghayba (p. 88, nr. 4) must be read Kitāb al-ghibha; it is a collection of aḥādīth about slandering or “evil speech” and not a “book of the unseen” (whatever that means; in any case, the “unseen” would have to be al-ghayb and not al-ghayba). Nor is the book lost, as the author pretends; it is preserved in the manuscript Princeton, Garrett Collection, majmūʿa no. 2053, fols. 155b-162b (cf. my Theologie und Gesellschaft, VI, 420, nr. 28). It has merely never been printed.

Questions of authenticity are not given much attention. The discussions found in older secondary literature are generally not fol-
lowed up. Under the heading of “works attributed to al-Muḥāsibī” (p. 85), the author mentions only two cases, which are not of the same kind. Nr. 1, the Kitāb al-baʿth wa-l-nushūr, has been printed (not only by Muḥammad ʿĪsā Riḍwān, 1986, as is said on p. 116 n. 154, but also by Ḥusayn Quwwatūlī in al-Fikr al-islāmī IV/3 [1393], p. 87 ff.). Concerning its authenticity, the author mainly repeats the doubts formulated by ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, supplementing them with a few additional remarks (p. 116 n. 156). This is not sufficient. What we need for such a far-reaching conclusion is a thorough stylistic comparison. Al-Muḥāsibī treated the same topic in his Kitāb al-tawwabhun, and there (p. 72 ff.) the author has no misgivings, in spite of the fact that this text also exhibits a rather individual style that differs from al-Muḥāsibī’s other works. Moreover, al-Ghazzālī quotes Kitāb al-baʿth in his al-Durra al-fākhira (cf. Sezgin, GAŞ, I, 641, nr. 16), and the book is counted among al-Muḥāsibī’s works by Ibn Khayr al-Ishbīlī (d. 575/1179) in his Fabrasa.

In contrast to this, nr. 2, the Kitāb dawāʾ dāʾ al-qulūb, can no longer be verified. The book was attributed to al-Muḥāsibī by Aloys Sprenger when he examined the unique manuscript in 1856, but this was a mere hypothesis; in the text itself, Ḥammad ibn ʿĀṣim al-Anṭākī, an elder contemporary of al-Muḥāsibī, appears as the author. Unfortunately, the manuscript has disappeared, so the problem can no longer be solved. However, al-Anṭākī has become a serious alternative since then; in the meantime, two excerpts from another book attributed to al-Muḥāsibī, namely Kitāb al-khalwa wa-l-tanawqul fi l-ʿibāda, have shown up in al-Anṭākī’s biography in Abū Nuʿaym’s Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ. I noted this fact more than half a century ago (“Muhāsibī”, İslâm Ansiklopedisi, VIII, 510a). In the present book, Kitāb al-khalwa is considered, without any further ado, as authentic (p. 83 ff.), and al-Anṭākī only enters the scene in a different context, namely in connection with al-Muḥāsibī’s Kitāb al-ḥubb li-llāh (p. 120 n. 214). This text is listed under “lost works” (p. 90, nr. 7), and the complete version of Kitāb al-ḥubb has not been found. However, a few fragments are preserved in Abū Nuʿaym’s biography of al-Muḥāsibī (Ḥilya, X, 76 ff.). The author now suggests that these fragments should be credited to al-Anṭākī. He pretends that “many researchers” preceded him in this opinion, but he does not mention any names. The hypothesis is not entirely improbable, but it should be proven first in a more satisfactory way; otherwise, the author cannot
be acquitted from the suspicion of having advanced it only because, without discarding Kitāb al-ḥubb, he would not be able to maintain that al-Muḥāsibī had only a “spirituality” and was not a “mystic” (like al-Ḥallāj or Ibn ʿArabī, as he says with a certain horror, p. 218). For the moment, we are not yet beyond circular reasoning. Ibn Khayr mentions Kitāb al-ḥubb among al-Muḥāsibī’s works, as he does with the Kitāb al-baʿth wa-l-nushūr.

More professional experience would have helped to avoid this confusion. The book is obviously the reproduction of the author’s PhD thesis, which he submitted at Leeds in 2005 under the title of The Concept of Tazkiyat al-Nafs in Islam in the Light of the Works of al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī. The text seems not to have undergone much polishing since (less, at least, than the article in Arabica). He is now teaching at the American University of Sharja, and he certainly has a sufficient knowledge of Arabic but the way he reproduces Arabic text in Latin transcription is somewhat erratic. He writes Kitāb al-mustarshadīn instead of Kitāb al-mustarsbidīn and yataqarrub instead of yataqarrurub (p. 110, n. 108.2), Riḥlat al-insān ilā ʿālim (instead of ʿālam) al-ākhira (p. 99, n. 48; p. 100, n. 49.7; also in the bibliography, p. 228), rajjāʾ instead of rajāʾ (p. 187), thīqqa instead of thīqa (p. 192), zakī instead of zāki, zakkat instead of zakat (p. 169), Tamūz instead of Tammūz (everywhere in the references to Kitāb al-khalwa), mujāniba instead of mujānaba (p. 176) and so on. And what should one do with murāqabatīka rabbika, muḥāsabatīka nafsika, and mudbākaratikā dhanbikā (p. 191, instead of murāqabatīka rabbakā, muḥāsabatīka nafsakā, and mudbākaratikā dhanbakā)? P. 113, n. 131 read wa-rḥāmanni instead of wārḥāmanni and ib., n. 132.2b “Edirne” instead of “Erdine.” Carl Brockelmann appears as “Brockleman” and as “Brocklemann” (p. 225 and 233, both times in the bibliography, but once under the “Arabic sources” and once under the “Non-Arabic sources”). The fifteen meanings of the word nafs (p. 114 ff.) are mere fancies of Arab lexicographers; they do not help in explaining what al-Muḥāsibī meant by this word. The author evidently lacks philological training, and his argumentation makes sense only before the horizon of a specific audience. The book is not entirely without merits, but it should not be consulted without caution.

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