

they mobilized both their fiercest polemic and the instruments of ecclesiastical and political repression, the dunking stool, the pillory and the stocks, and finally, the gallows.

## Reviews

**MUSLIM NEOPLATONISTS: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity** by I. R. Netton. *George Allen & Unwin, London, 1982. pp xii + 146 £12.50.*

The *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafā* or Epistles of the Brethren of Purity, an Arabic philosophical encyclopaedia in fifty-two epistles, have been the subject of much study and speculation among modern scholars. Yet there is still wide disagreement on some of the most basic issues raised by them, their date, authorship, and their religious background and purpose. The author of the present book proposes to take a new approach to their study. Setting aside the question of the identity of the authors and their date, he concentrates on their thought and its relation to its apparent sources. Here he is primarily concerned with the ultimate sources and only secondarily with the channels and immediate sources through which their ideas may have reached the authors. Thus a chapter deals with "the legacy of Greece" as represented by Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle. In another chapter the influence of Neoplatonism is analysed. This is, as indicated by the author in the title of his book, the predominant philosophical influence on the Brethren. It is, however, as he rightly stresses (p 33), a Neoplatonised Aristotelianism, characteristic of much of Islamic philosophy, rather than the Neoplatonism known to medieval Europe. The next chapter deals with the attitude of the Brethren to Christianity and Judaism. Their views were here to some extent independent from Qurʾanic and orthodox Islamic doctrine. They frequently quote the Gospel and, at least in one passage, accept the crucifixion, death and resurrec-

tion of Jesus, though this is contradicted elsewhere; they also display markedly more appreciation of Christian asceticism and monasticism than Muslim orthodoxy in general. Their attitude to Judaism is more reserved and negative. A further chapter deals with "the uses of literature" in the Epistles. In particular, the use of the Qurʾan, where the Brethren often looked for an esoteric (*bāṭin*) meaning behind its exoteric (*ẓāhir*), literal aspect, and their portrait of the major prophets based on it, are examined; this is followed by a discussion of their use of Indian literature, represented by the legend of Bilawhar and Yūdāsaf, known in medieval Europe as Barlaam and Josaphat, and by the fables of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. These chapters offer an instructive and balanced, if not exhaustive, analysis of the thought of the Brethren and some of its ambiguities.

In the final chapter, on "the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā and the Ismāʿīlīs", the author takes up the question of the religious background of the Epistle. Here his conclusions will probably prove most controversial. He affirms that the authors "were not Ismāʿīlīs; this is far too narrow a definition, besides being inaccurate. They were, however, influenced by Ismāʿīlī thought" (p 107). Although opposed to the prevalent view, this opinion is not entirely isolated. It is usually based on a comparison between the Epistles and Fatimid Ismāʿīlī doctrine as represented, for instance, by the works of Qādī al-Nuʿmān. The differences are so obvious that Fatimid Ismāʿīlī origin of the

Epistles can safely be excluded. Those scholars who hold that they represent mainstream *Ismāʿīlism* view them, in agreement with later *Ismāʿīlī* tradition, as, at least in part, pre-Fatimid. Dr Netton also refers to Qādī al-Nuʿmān's doctrine and bases his judgment on a specific definition of *Ismāʿīlism* and its "extreme doctrine of the Imamate". He quotes then two passages from the Epistle on the Nature of the Divine Law which imply unambiguously that an Imam may not always be needed if good and wise men co-operate in upholding the Law. This affirmation, however, is not motivated by a desire to undermine the Shiʿite doctrine of the imamate which is taken for granted in the same epistle. Rather it is described as agreeing with the teaching of the rightly-guided Imams. The "good and wise men who co-operate are, it is clearly implied, the Brethren themselves; and they speak in the next epistle unequivocally as the Imam addressing "our Shiʿa" and speaking of the descendants of Ali as "those who ascribe their genealogy to us". On the basis of these passages S. M. Stern held that the Epistles were "meant to be read as communications by an Imam to his followers".

It may well be argued that it is the author's definition of the *Ismāʿīlīs* which is "far too narrow, besides being inaccurate". That *Ismāʿīlī* doctrine "placed Ali far above the Prophet" (p 97) does not apply to much of *Ismāʿīlism*, in particular Fatimid *Ismāʿīlism*, though it applies to some Nizārī *Ismāʿīlī* thought of the later Alamūt age. The *Ismāʿīlī* doctrine of the Imamate on the whole has been anything but static. The apparently strange idea of

the Brethren of Purity being or becoming identical with the *Iman* may well be related to the *Ismāʿīlī* discussions about the nature, physical or spiritual, of the return of the Qā'im, Muhammad b. *Ismāʿīl*, - discussions mentioned in one of Qādī al-Nuʿmān's treatises. The *Ismāʿīlī* thought in the Epistles seems too pervasive to be ascribed to mere external influence. They rather give the impression of originating from an *Ismāʿīlī* milieu and to be addressed primarily to *Ismāʿīlism*. Knowledgeable contemporaries like al-Tawhīdī and Qādī Abd al-Jabbar had no doubts that the authors were *Ismāʿīlīs*.

It will be noted that the author translates *Ikhwān al-Safāʿ* as "Brethren of Purity" in preference to "Sincere Brethren" which has often been held to be the correct translation as suggested by I. Goldziher. He quotes a passage where the *safa* of the Brethren is explained as referring to the purity of their souls and points to the general emphasis on the need for purity throughout the Epistles (p 6). It is thus evident that "Brethren of Purity" is a valid translation. His insistence, however, that the real translation of *Ikhwān al-Safāʿ* must be "Brethren of Purity" seems to go too far. The Brethren equally insist on the need for sincere friendship and brotherhood, and *safaʿ* has the derived meaning of sincerity besides purity. They were certainly aware of, and intended, both meanings. It will thus be best not to insist on one translation to the exclusion of the other and to keep the alternative in mind whichever is chosen.

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**THE LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT** by John Climacus. Edited and translated by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, Introduction by Kallistos Ware, Preface by Colm Luibheid. *Classics of Western Spirituality*. SPCK. pp xxviii + 302. £9.50.

*The Ladder of Divine Ascent* is Orthodoxy's equivalent of the *Imitatio Christi* or *Pilgrim's Progress* - its most popular work of spirituality. A comparison with those works would be instructive, though probably misleading. It is much older - sixth or seventh century - instead of fifteenth or seventeenth: suggesting perhaps that Orthodoxy has needed no spiritual

renaissance, but anyway highlighting its claim to be the religion of the Fathers. It is monastic and makes no pretence of being anything else, whereas the Western equivalents directly envisage a lay spirituality. It is monastic in another sense: it is professional, so to speak, and is expressed in terms of, and draws on, the professional terminology of monasticism and asceti-