Book Review

Sabine Schmidtke, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 815 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-969670-3. Price: $175 (cloth).

John Renard
Saint Louis University

(renardgj@slu.edu)

Not so long ago, the notion that the Islamic faith (not unlike the Jewish) is more a matter of orthopraxy than orthodoxy had attained the stature of a bromide. In recent years that view has begun to face substantial challenges. It has been for too long a given, even among educated Muslims, that Muslims "don't do theology," but that characterization is arguably no more applicable to "all" Muslims than it is to "all" Christians. The amply proportioned *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* offers a virtually encyclopedic overview of solid evidence for the overdue demise of such misperceptions.

Editor Sabine Schmidtke's densely packed "Introduction" maps out the broad terrain of the volume with admirable concision and clarity. Defining "theology" in a gratifyingly expansive way, thereby including a rich plurality of perspectives, the collection does the great service of portraying this large, complex intellectual tradition in all its rich diversity. Overall, virtually every important theme and methodology with clear theological resonance merits consideration from one or more points of view and/or in multiple historical-geographic contexts, with welcome acknowledgment of inter-Abrahamic theological concerns as well. Contributors from across two full generations include specialists in a remarkable array of related topics.

In the market niche of one-volume reference tools in Islamic Religious Studies, the nearest approximation of the present *Handbook* is Cambridge University's *Companion to Islamic Theology*. But the two are about as different in structure and coverage as one might imagine. At just under half the size of the Oxford volume, the Cambridge Companion divides its fifteen entries into five "historical perspectives"—Qurʾan and early creedal formulation, *falsafa*, "developed" *kalām*, and the "social construction of orthodoxy—and ten thematic essays dealing with God's essence and attributes, divine existence, creation, revelation, ethics, religious law

and theology, worship, epistemology, eschatology, and Sufism. Oxford's *Handbook*, by contrast, organizes its 41 essays in a set of three historical categories (formative/early medieval, later medieval/early modern, and end of early modern/modern), punctuated by two sets of four case-studies each that explore a variety of themes (such as occasionalism, ethics, and logic) and historical phenomena (such as two Islamic variations on the theme of 'inquisition,' and other theological implications of administrative policy). The historical sweep and inclusiveness of the *Handbook* is remarkable, as is the range of thematic and institutional coverage.

An especially welcome aspect of the volume's historical coverage is the organic treatment of major schools, from their precursors to their more "formal" foundational origins, through their survival and continuations across the centuries. A cluster of substantial discussions of early-medieval developments (Chs. 12, 13, 21, 22) anchor the Ashʿarite school's story historically. Another four chapters (28–31) provide excellent overviews of the later medieval and early modern history of Ashʿarism. In addition, portions of still more chapters (e.g., 23, 25, 39) offer further detail on major themes and figures.

On an initial cursory glance at the table of contents, one might get the impression that the Ashʿarite wing got the lion's share of coverage among major schools, perhaps at the expense of its too-little studied and under-appreciated opposite number, the Māturīdīya. Fortunately, the contributors of several regional studies in which the Māturīdīya has been a major presence balance things off nicely. Though the name may be absent in the titles, apart from an excellent broader overview in relation to the Ḥanafī *madhhab* (Ch. 17), the Māturīdī tradition's role and impact in regions such as Central and South Asia under several major dynasties, and in its far-flung partnering with the Ḥanafī *madhhab*, is well accounted for. One entry—a "case study" (Ch. 39) describing the generally irenic interaction of Ashʿarism and Māturīdism under both Mamluk and Ottoman rule, is particularly helpful, given the methodological similarities of the two schools. Here a brief summary listing of points of agreement/disagreement on major themes would have been pedagogically useful. Index entries on both "schools" and their eponyms suggest roughly equal attention in all, though major individual intellectual descendants of Ashʿarī figures (Bāqillānī, Juwaynī, Ghazālī, in particular) receive more explicit coverage than their lesser known Māturīdī counterparts, with Pazdāwī (d. 1100) a notable exception in this regard.

Muʿtazilism merits a breadth of coverage roughly equal to that of the Ashʿarīya. Three full chapters (Chs. 7–9) explore Muʿtazilism's origins, early major figures, and "scholastic phase." Two additional chapters (10–11) follow up with specific attention to the school's considerable influence on both Zaydī and Twelver Shīʿī thought. All or significant portions of at least five studies (Chs. 22, 23, 25, 36, and 40) explore further aspects of the history of Muʿtazilism, including its impact on several modern thinkers.

By contrast, "Traditionalist" (esp. Ḥanbalī) thought receives noticeably less explicit attention than one might expect, with only one (albeit very substantial) dedicated chapter (35). Further detail on the Ḥanbalī persuasion appears in discussions of the Muʿtazilī "inquisition"

(Ch. 36) and of major twelfth-century Ḥanbalī theologians (Ch. 37).

As a contribution to broadening the interested reader's further education in matters theological—including here even the occasional jaded Islamicist—the rich collective coverage of Ashʿarī, Māturīdī, Muʿtazilī, and (though to a significantly lesser degree) Ḥanbalī thought and history is perhaps the volume's single greatest achievement.

In addition to treatments of these four most widely influential theological collectives, the volume's inclusion of lesser-known individuals and "religio-theological strands" (Schmidtke, 16) of thought is noteworthy. These include most prominently pioneers of systematic thinking (*kalām*) and "strands of thought" that were precursors of developments that would gain much broader influence in subsequent centuries, especially the Qadarīya, Jahmīya, early Shīʿī thought (Chs. 1–4), connections to Late Ancient Christian theology (5), Ismāʿīlī and Sufi theologies (19, 20) and a variety of theologically marginal approaches including the likes of the "free-thinkers." Other such strands include also less influential stand-alones such as early Ibāḍī off-shoot of the Khawārij and the early medieval Persian Karrāmīya (Chs. 14, 15), the latter related in interesting ways to the Jahmīya and *solā fidē* "murjiʾa" (postponers).

Particularly gratifying for readers who wonder whether vestiges of genuine Islamic theology have managed to escape medieval captivity and made themselves evident in more recent times, the final two chapters (40, 41) offer brief but judicious assessments of a number of major twentieth-century thinkers from a variety of ethnic and cultural settings. Among the more intriguing are the Egyptian Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd and the Iranian ʿAbd al-Karīm Surūsh.

As for ancillary devices, the combined bibliographic entries appended to each essay add up to an enormously rich sampling of major scholarship on theological history and themes, and the 24-page index is adequate to its primary task. Should the volume ever appear in a paperback edition, the addition of a global timeline and glossary of technical terms would markedly enhance its pedagogical utility. In its current configuration, the *Handbook* is a most welcome contribution to broadening the theological literacy of specialists in Islamic studies more generally and comparative religious studies alike.