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A Season in Mecca: Narrative of a Pilgrimage

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Book Review

A Season in Mecca: Narrative of a Pilgrimage

**Abdellah Hammoudi
(translated by P. Ghazaleh)**

Polity Press, 2006

Pb, 293pp. ISBN 0809076098

Reviewed by Miguel Farias

This is a vivid and elegantly written account of the *hajj* by an accomplished anthropologist. However, we must not miss the central motivation of the book. It is the struggle of a man in search of his own religious identity, torn between an intellectual allegiance to academic and Western secular ideals and the desire to feel at home in Islam, the religion of his native Morocco. Although one can detect, from the beginning of the book, the general state of anxiety and tension felt by its author, it is only halfway through that Hammoudi fully discloses why he feels so out of place. As he explains, "I was being unethical for not publicly announcing my research intentions, and I therefore felt my moral and personal aspirations were somewhat degraded" (p. 135); but perhaps more importantly, he experienced inner conflict for lacking the faith and "that immediate presence of the invisible many pilgrims obviously rejoiced in" (p. 137), which left him feeling as if he did not quite belong with his fellow pilgrims and countrymen.

Although Hammoudi generally has an easy style marked by occasional irony, this book mostly reads like a diary of a stressful journey. The author continually emphasizes the sense of physical and emotional exertion involved in the pilgrimage, starting with the complicated bureaucratic procedures in Morocco, and developing into the experience of sleep deprivation, aggravated by the poor accommodation and travel arrangements in Saudi Arabia, then the sheer volume

of the crowds at all sacred sites and, nearing the end of the trip, the emotional horror of facing “the giant concentration camp for animals” to be slaughtered in order to “save our own lives” (p. 222). But, as he also makes clear time and time again, it is not the physical journey itself that was so difficult, but his own inner struggle: “Islam was my home—I said and ritually repeated—but I inhabited it as a homeless man” (p. 249).

Amid his personal unresolved quest, Hammoudi offers us delightful glimpses of the places and pilgrims he meets, some of the latter blatantly materialist, others inspiringly pious, and many others insecure or fanatical about the fulfillment of ritual obligations. For the non-Muslim reader the profusion of ritual prescriptions to follow is certainly bewildering and difficult to understand, and Hammoudi himself, though dutifully practicing the rites, offers little insight into their theological grounding. Though it may reflect his experience as a pilgrim, his way of approaching his own religion betrays a bias toward the “experiential.” He overemphasizes the unusually strong feelings of awe and terror that religious practice may evoke, and tries to tie in these experiences with what lies behind or beyond all religious rules and ideas. It is true that a pilgrimage often brings out the most experiential or ritualistic aspects of a religious tradition; still, if the deeper doctrinal or theological beliefs are not brought into play, we are left in an uncomfortable limbo where the general feelings and experiences described seem to lack direction and purpose. The reader who is not an expert in Islam, but who would like to grasp the particularity of the *hajj* as an Islamic—and not just any other—sacred journey, may finish this book

wishing to learn more about the historical and theological background of Islam, in order to contextualize this narrative of pilgrimage. Many others, however, will be left with the author’s own hesitant, oversensitive, and—at times—ludicrous depictions of his pilgrimage experiences; something which may too easily confirm a Western tendency to regard Islamic beliefs and practices as crude and irrational.

On the more positive side, the book offers us a very lively description of the social interactions and tensions which occur in a multicultural space, where people of various backgrounds come together to share their faith. It is notable how—despite all the physical constraints to which people are subjected in such overcrowded conditions—religious worship, commerce, and daily life go on, apparently without or with very little violence or the need for overzealous control by the authorities. Social control and peer pressure, as well as the program of preparation which pilgrims undergo before their journey, work together to make people more tolerant and patient than they would be in everyday circumstances. In this respect, the segregation of sexes during the *hajj*—something which Hammoudi is unusually straightforward in condemning—is an interesting social psychological strategy to control possible “transgressions” that could very easily lead to distress and violence. His criticism of this segregation is based upon behavior of certain ultratraditionalist fellow pilgrims, but it would have been worthwhile to investigate the less puritanical, pragmatic reasons underlying such a regulation.

This book was undoubtedly written for a non-Muslim readership. It would be interesting to have a similar account written

by a practicing Muslim, as it would to have an impression of the same journey by some of Hammoudi's fellow pilgrims. One is left with the impression that to have spent a considerable part of the *hajj* writing about it may have distracted the author from fully participating in it. In the end, his intention to write a book about his experiences as a pilgrim inevitably distorted his own pilgrimage impressions—something of which the author is only too well aware. Toward the end of the book, Hammoudi, in conversation with another pilgrim, explains

that his aim for the pilgrimage is to perform the rites, to reflect on his beliefs, and to write his book. His fellow pilgrim reacted with astonishment and replied: "To reflect ... But don't you have the same faith as us?" and then adds: "Anyway, each to his own intention." (p. 227) This last sentence by the anonymous pilgrim unmask the erudite anthropologist, at the same time allowing a way for his double intentions and existential struggles to exist within the pilgrimage. If only Hammoudi had heard it earlier.