

**Sajoo, Amin B. (ed.): *A Companion to Muslim Ethics*,
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5 1/2 x 8 1/4 inches, 256 pages.**

As early as the 17th century, the founding fathers of Enlightenment project assumed the development of science, and the scientific world view had almost persuaded the world and society of the fading of any religious perception. Proponents of this secularization thesis took for granted the idea that “there is a tense relationship between religion and the modern world. Therefore, the modern age is accompanied by diminishing social significance of religion” (Berger, 1990, 107). However, Berger argues strongly that “religions are still with us and popping-up everywhere in the public and private lives.” Moreover, at the dawn of the 21st century the world was as “‘furiously religious’ as ever” (Berger, 1999: 2-3).

For Muslims in a “furiously religious” world, the role of Islam in their lives has also been complicated in recent centuries due to several factors, the major one being the impact of colonial powers on the minds of Muslim generations. They began to see the text, the Qur’an, as a manifesto of liberation theology and neglected its ethical and metaphysical dimensions. Although a lot of references to support such a position can be found on a textual basis, the heart of the Qur’an and Islam reflects an ethical sense of obligation, a new pattern of relations with God and the rest of creation on this basis. We can call this new pattern the Qur’anic Weltanschauung (Izutus, 1964).

The late Fazlur Rahman (1985) underlined this fact and emphasised the ethical dimension of the Qur’an and how this has disappeared or at least been undermined. He argues that Muslim “jurists came to regard the Quran as a legal document with specific rules and regulations. Legal formulas overshadowed the ethical aspects of the Qur’an” (italics mine). The Qur’an became the prisoner of its interpreters rather than their source and guide. Rahman reaches the sad conclusion that “a Qur’anic ethics was never worked out by Muslims” (Rahman, 1985, 1).

We should approach and read *A Companion to the Muslim World* with these remarks in mind. In spite of information technologies and the age of information, there are still misunderstandings and stereotypes among Muslims and non-Muslims regarding the core values of Islam. In fact, in his book, Dr. Sajoo also examines the fallacy of such a narrow and ignorant view of Islam and Muslims. Moreover, he underlines “the deep-rooted historical

relationships between Muslim, Western, and other major civilizations.” Dr. Sajoo tries to touch the heart of Islam, the ethical values Islam introduced not only to Muslim societies but also to humanity. He tries “to range beyond sources and contexts that usually receive attention in such studies; hence, the canvas includes references to cultural expressions such as novels, the cinema and art in which ethical conceptions are embedded.” In fact, according to the Qur’an itself, these values are common to Abrahamic religions. So, the present work also points out new horizons of understanding and dialogue among religions in general and Abrahamic religions in particular. As a result, in recent decades, we have observed an increasing interest in viewing Abraham as a symbol of living together in peaceful co-existence.

In order to do this, Dr. Sajoo argues in the introductory chapter, “we must inquire about the way that it is lived, both in terms of what Muslims do and their disposition or ethos. An inquiry that attends to civilisations and cultures tells us what Islam has actually meant in history, in its plural interpretations and realities, and what heritage means today.”

Subsequently, he attempts to explore the roots and branches of Islamic ethical theory in the intellectual history of Islam. However, as in any genuine study of the subject, he bases his argumentation on the text, i.e., the Qur’an and the Sunna (sayings of the Prophet). It seems that the author agrees with the late Rahman when arguing that “Islamic ethical theory is not merely an abstract theology but a pragmatic attempt to realize an achievable polity and a civilized society, mostly communitarian in nature; its focus is the welfare of the Umma, the Islamic kingdom across nationalities and boundaries.”

It seems that Sajoo tries to formulate the ethical doctrine of the Qur’an in the footsteps of Izutus on the major concepts of the Qur’an, i.e. the sense of Divine presence (taqwa), the sense of kindness (ihsan), the sense of justice (adl) and lastly, the sense of reasoned intuitions. The word akhlaq (character) is widely used in the context of the Islamic scripture as the categorical imperative and as a fundamental part of the ethical doctrine. To support his argument the author consults the major Muslim philosophers.

In the second essay, Charles Butterworth discusses classical Islam’s perception of the human being as “political by nature” and its implications for ethical theory. In doing this, he consults major philosophers such as Ibn Khaldun (c. 1332-1406), Al-Farabi (872-950), and Al-Razi (865-925). However, as expected, he discusses Ibn Sina’s theory of reason and revelation in some detail. By comparing and contrasting the ideas of these great philosophers of Muslim intellectual history, he has provided a broad perspective on the subject to any student of Islam. This essay can be used as a concise summary of Muslim ethical theory and how it is

understood by major Muslim philosophers; therefore, it should be required reading for all students of Islam.

The third essay, by Eric Ormsby, is on the literature of ethics and its role in ethical education. It once more underlines the role and impact of stories in the ethical understanding of the Orient in general, and Muslims in particular. It seems Muslim ethicists borrowed this method from the rich didactic traditions of Persia and India. When one reads this essay, the characters of Kalilah and Dimnah from Attar immediately come to mind.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr deals with the ethical and metaphysical dimensions of nature in a way that once more reminds us of a different concept of nature, one that is alive, holistic, purposeful, and meaningful. As a result, when many modern environmentalists, especially deep-ecologists, criticize the modern concept of nature as “a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless: merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly,” Nasr masterfully tries to re-connect us with nature, reminding us of the rich perennial philosophy in general and Islamic Sûfi tradition in particular. Reading Nasr, one can see the possibility of Muslim environmental ethics for our time and how these ethics can be helpful in raising environmental awareness.

Fahmida Suleman deals with another interesting and important aspect of Muslim intellectual history, the role of art and how Muslims produced their masterpieces of creative art. Although there are differing views on the place of art in Muslim culture, we cannot deny the role and contribution of Muslims to art history. I just visited India last month and I was overwhelmed with the beauty and majesty of the Islamic art in India. When reading this chapter, we should keep in mind that the arts flourished and developed during the Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, Mongol, and Ottoman eras. How can one dismiss the beauty of architecture and calligraphy when visiting the Taj Mahal in Agra, India?

Zayn Kassam in his essay tries to shed light on the bases of the textual analysis and contemporary interpretation that the Islamic ethical vision is egalitarian, including with regard to the sexes. However, he is aware of the gender issues in Muslim societies and argues that economic, cultural, and ideological factors have much to do with this phenomenon.

Abdullah Daar and Al Khitamny analyse and discuss another lesser-known aspect of Muslim ethics, that of medical ethics. In order to make the subject more understandable, they begin with the Oath of Hippocrates and then focus on the great Muslim physicians during the medieval age. Accordingly, they show that the central teaching and practice of health care in major Eastern and Western traditions have much in common.

The global economic crisis has led us to understand what alternative economic systems can offer to modern day humanity for a better future. In this respect, the Islamic economic system, especially in the areas of banking and finance, comes up in many scholarly and popular discussions. Consequently, Rodney Wilson's essay re-examines the major themes and issues of the Islamic economic system within a historical context. Moreover, Wilson tries to outline the major challenges faced by Muslim countries around the globe. As a result, he argues that “economists and finance specialists are as engaged with religious scholars as with the latest global trends in seeking effective ways of putting principles into practice” to overcome the present global challenges.

Mohammed Keshvajee deals with “dispute resolution” in the ninth essay and argues that “the just resolution of disputes” became, in Islam, an ethical virtue by the very ethical teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad. Re-inventing these principles, Muslims can play a major role in settling disputes among Muslim communities as well as among other nations and communities in the 21st century. Reza Shah Kazemi addresses the issue of “tolerance” in the tenth essay and argues that tolerance cannot be regarded as the outcome of secular “rationality” per se. Interestingly, he claims that “religious traditions in general and Islam in particular offer rich layers of ethical teachings requiring a positive disposition toward the Other.”

Ramin Jahanbegloo deals with issues of “non-violence” in the eleventh essay. I remember very well when I was teaching in the USA that the Muslims who live in the West had to discover the non-violent aspects and interpretations of Islam in the post-9/11 world. Although Islam is “salaam” and basically means “peace” and the resolution of conflicts with positive win-win negotiations, the examples around the Muslim world were not helpful to support any claim of “non-violence” in Islam. Therefore, Jahanbegloo's treatment of the subject is very meaningful and helpful.

To conclude, the book is about “the roots of Islam's ethical framework and how its teachings have branched out in the social and religious lives of Muslims past and present”. The book tells us not to judge Islam and Muslims with our perception of contemporary Muslims and Muslim movements alone, but by the core values of Islam which have made Muslims what they are and shaped Islamic civilization. Therefore, the book is timely and will be a major contribution towards understanding the heart of Islam for both students and scholars in their respective fields. Resolving misunderstandings and countering stereotypes is not easy, although I am very hopeful that scholarly works will provide students of Islam with a better

picture and understanding of Islam and Muslims and may root out Islamophobia in Western societies.

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