# BOOK REVIEW

*The Qur'an and the Just Society*
By RAMON HARVEY. Foreword by M. A. S. ABDEL HALEEM (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), x + 276 pp. Price HB £80.00. EAN 978–1474403290.

In this book Ramon Harvey undertakes a thematic reading, focused on discovering in the Qurʾān an underlying theory of societal justice. He promises a fresh return to the text, aiming to reveal the rationale underlying 'legal details'—the *ḥikma* underlying the *ḥukm*. However, he does not make the mistake of ignoring the history of Islamic thought in the misguided (nevertheless, common) expectation that by 'bracketing out' the exegetical, theological, juristic tradition he can recover the 'pure' message of the text.

The book consists of four parts. In the first part, on 'Qurʾanic Ethics', Harvey surveys the scripture's moral narrative. Sections on theology, hermeneutics, and historical context follow, where Harvey deals thoroughly with the meta-ethical and theological implications of asserting a *ḥikma* behind the *ḥukm*, and the proper methodology for discovering it. After introducing the reader to the Māturīdī school of classical Islamic theology, he proposes a neo-Māturīdī framework to underwrite the theological possibility of interpreting the Qurʾān through a natural law theory of ethics. He then lays out the hermeneutic principles he will deploy (*niẓām* or 'textual structure', *naẓm* or 'syntax-pragmatics', semantics, and socio-historical context), and the role they will play in his hermeneutic model. This model involves first collecting scriptural texts on a theme and reading them in light of the scripture itself before applying the other principles to derive the *ḥikma*, or natural law to which they give expression, all in light of the historical context of the revelatory event itself, which Harvey vividly describes in the last section.

The next three parts each provide a detailed examination of the Qurʾānic text on three categories of societal justice: political (politics, peace, and war), distributive (trade, alms, marriage, and inheritance), and corrective (public and private crimes). The result is a rich thematic sourcebook on the text, aside from whether one agrees with Harvey's refreshingly honest and carefully argued interpretation. Harvey deals directly with the Qurʾānic position on pressing topics like political legitimacy and relations (war, peace, and alliances) with non-Muslims; fair trade, interest, and wealth redistribution; marriage, inheritance, and gender equity, and the controversial punishments for theft and adultery. On each theme, he makes a case that the pertinent Qurʾānic text expresses a universal ethical rationale, appreciable independently of religious conviction, and potentially applicable differently in different circumstances.

Harvey explicitly disavows any claim to perfect objectivity, acknowledging the inevitable influence of the reader's interpretive 'horizon'. Equally, he resists relativism, adopting instead what Rae Langton called 'epistemic humility': this means distinguishing the perfect understanding of the Qurʾānic text known only to God from the necessarily partial understandings available to its human recipients. This raises the concern that the rationale behind divine commands is in every case beyond the reach of human understanding. We can visualize this concern in the familiar Qurʾānic image of the two seas (fresh and salt) that meet but do not mix, which many exegetes interpret as two abutting spheres of knowledge. According to the Qurʾān (18: 59–82), Moses was searching for the place where the seas meet, in order to find a man (in Islamic tradition called Khiḍr) who has received special knowledge from God. Moses accompanies Khiḍr and finds that he does things that, to Moses, make no sense morally or rationally. After Moses' repeated questioning, Khiḍr declares it is time to part ways. He explains that his actions followed orders from God to realize future outcomes known only to Him.

For Harvey, knowledge of both the positive legal rulings and their moral rationale belongs to the same epistemic 'sea' of Moses (knowledge accessible through prophecy or reflection thereon) though the degree of human effort, and therefore fallibility, involved in understanding that rationale is greater than understanding the rulings themselves. The Qurʾān itself alludes in places to the rationale of certain commands. Epistemic humility allows us to accept a limit to the depth to which any such rationale is accessible to us. For rationales have a way of reproducing their own demand to sufficiently inquiring minds. We can accept that teaching rationales that go 'all the way down' may take us to the point where the seas meet (but not mix), without abandoning the search altogether.

We need not shrink from the historic fact of multiple understandings of the Qurʾānic text. If we do not expect God-like infallibility from ourselves, then we can accommodate the possibility of apparently different understandings converging somewhere in the other 'sea'. This opens the way to a measure of pluralism.

In the spirit of epistemic humility, Harvey brings a wide range of scholarly resources to bear, from both traditional and contemporary scholarship in exegesis, theology, hermeneutics, and history. Given that a narrowing of focus is inescapable, Harvey makes the work of al-Māturīdī central to his project. He sketches a 'neo-Maturidi natural law theory', as a meta-ethical framework for his reading of the Scripture. His motivation for doing so is most clearly expressed in the conclusion: 'Understanding the scripture as affirming real moral values within the world means [that] a vision of justice based on natural law can be held in common between those who believe in its message and those who do not' (Harvey 2018, p. 192).

The neo-Māturīdī framework is meant to provide a 'moral realism' robust enough to allow basic moral norms to be accessible to 'reflection on experience', i.e., natural reason. This entails that 'belief in God and natural justice' are incumbent on all, regardless of whether they accept or reject the Qurʾānic

message. But then why is a theoretical framework required when, as Harvey effectively shows, the verses of the Qurʾān clearly and directly indicate that moral values are real and apply to all?

The answer lies in the context of the historical controversy between the Muʿtazilī and Ashʿarī schools. For the former, moral facts exist independently of God's will and are knowable, independently of revelation, by all rational persons. God's being just is then subject to an independent moral standard, which He does not establish, but merely informs us of through revelation (though we are already privy to it by reason alone). For the Ashʿarī, God is not thus subject; rather, He establishes the standard for humanity through revelation. Many modern scholars, such as George Hourani, have construed this as a clash between 'moral realist rationalism' and 'anti-realist theistic subjectivism' that renders God's commands 'arbitrary'. For Harvey, though, the neo-Māturīdī meta-ethical framework can provide the moral realism and moderate moral rationalism required to accommodate the presence of ḥikma behind the aḥkām but without rendering God irrelevant to their reality and revelation irrelevant to their discovery (as the Muʿtazilī theory appears to do).

Harvey's approach, like Māturīdī's, involves recognizing wisdom as a divine attribute distinct from those of knowledge, will and power, as recognized by the Ashʿarī. This is supposed to provide a way out of the 'anti-realism' of the Ashʿarī position, while avoiding the Muʿtazilī implication that God is subject to a higher moral authority. Moral principles are discoverable in the nature of things, because God put that ḥikma into them. Yet if we ask what makes them wise, we face the same Euthyphro dilemma: either we hold an independent standard of wisdom and say that God is wise in that He creates and commands in accordance with that standard; or we say that God's acts are wise because He is eternally wise and they are His acts. Māturīdī takes the latter course, as Harvey explains, precisely to avoid the limitations on God entailed in the former.

The Māturīdī meta-ethic is thus liable to the charge of 'anti-realism' that Hourani leveled against the Ashʿarī theory. It too presupposes that realism about the good requires acknowledging that it has a nature and definition independent of God. In the same way, denying that wisdom has a nature or definition independent of God should entail anti-realism about wisdom, and about any moral norms based upon it. If we accept the validity of the charge of anti-realism leveled against the Ashʿarī theory, then the neo-Māturīdī framework that Harvey favours will not serve the moral 'realism' that he thinks underwrites the possibility of natural moral knowledge. Instead, we would have to adopt (as the Muʿtazilīs do) a framework wherein the good is knowable independently of God. Since this makes God and revelation irrelevant to the question of societal justice, it threatens Harvey's whole project.

But there is a sound reason for discarding the supposition that moral realism requires a morality independent of God. For, if there is not, we must also suppose that a form of realism compatible with natural knowledge of the cosmos itself requires that it exist independently from God. Thus, Harvey's motivation for adopting a neo-Māturīdī meta-ethic in this context is misplaced. Though there may be other, unrelated reasons in its favour (with respect to explaining natural

moral knowledge), an alternative meta-ethical frameworks may do so more plausibly.

Harvey suggests an interpretation of Māturīdī meta-ethics nested within a wider 'trope bundle theory' ontology, whereby things are not understood as substances bearing accidents, but simply as 'bundles' of properties conceived as tropes. A trope, in this theory, has both an intrinsic, definitive nature, as well as extrinsic aspects deriving from the specific context of its actualization: truthfulness may be good in itself, yet evil due to the specific circumstances of a truthful act. This makes room for both the moral realism allegedly lacked by the Ashʿarī theory, as well as the sensitivity to context apparently precluded by the Muʿtazilī deontological approach.

Later Ashʿarī theories, as Harvey mentions, explain moral properties in relation to human nature, which drives us to pursue benefits and avoid harms. He labels this (as do contemporary critics) 'emotivism'. That seems to me a hasty step. If human nature is indeed an objective reality, there is no reason to deny that there are objective facts about what is beneficial or harmful, which do not reduce to subjective feelings. There is a basis for distinguishing what really is beneficial from what one merely feels good about. We can be misled by our feelings.

The position that human nature is what it is entirely through God's creative will, one might argue, undermines its objective reality. Yet it is not clear how the notion that, for example, truthfulness is good (when it is) entirely through God's wisdom fares any better on that standard of 'realism'. Then if we accept that something can depend on God and nevertheless be real, a teleological meta-ethics rooted in human nature may seem more elegant and plausible than a deontological one requiring the postulation of *sui generis* moral properties. In this case, at least, we can understand God's wisdom in terms of the internal teleological structure of the features of nature on which moral properties supervene, the latter being no less real in that case.

As Harvey shows, by reference to the primordial covenant (*mithāq*) wherein humanity recognized the unity of God, the 'scale' (*mīzān*) divinely established in the order of nature, and the original human predisposition (*fiṭra*) conformed to that order, the Qurʾān strongly indicates the existence of something we would call 'natural' moral knowledge.

That indicates the *possibility*, in principle, of a universally shared notion of justice; it does *not* indicate its actuality. Take, for instance, Harvey's reading of the Qurʾān as affirming a notion of economic justice whereby wealth is held as a divine trust conditional on its flowing back, from those holding positive rights on it, to benefit the community as a whole. To the most powerful, influential section of humanity today, this proposition is a most threatening form of injustice. To support the claim that it is an object of natural moral knowledge, one must demonstrate its validity through natural reason and explain differences of opinion about it. It is not enough to reference a Qurʾānic verse indicating so.

Harvey, like other contemporary Muslim scholars, spends much effort arguing through theology and Qurʾān exegesis that a shared moral understanding based on natural reason is possible between Muslims and non-Muslims, and little effort on arriving at such an understanding. The disproportionate attention to

contemporary ethical theory based on natural reasoning, and not the classical theological controversies between schools of *kalām* gives the impression that, if only Muslims got their theology right, all disagreement on issues of justice would be resolved. This, in turn, gives the impression that the only significant disagreement is between Muslims and the rest of the world, the latter being all contentedly on the same page in their natural understanding of justice, with the Muslims the oddballs left behind because of the supposed moral 'anti-realism' that the Ashʿarīs foisted on them. That is simply not the case.

If we accept that all humans are endowed with a natural moral compass in the *fiṭra*, the proper starting point would be the question: Why all the moral disagreement? A traditional answer, also based on the Qurʾān, is that the 'rust' our hearts have accumulated 'blinds' our moral vision. This raises another question. If our vision of justice were clear enough to be in conformity with the universal *fiṭra*, would any of us *not* accept message of the Qurʾān?

If the answer is yes, then it follows that no case can be made, based on justice, for accepting rather than not accepting the Qurʾān's message. This effectively reduces Islam to a kind of non-rational or (worse) irrational fetish. How can one believe in it while also believing that a wholly just person might reject it? If, on the other hand the answer is no, then, contrary to Harvey's hope, the same concept of justice cannot be completely shared between those who do and those who do not accept the Qurʾān's message. For everyone whose epistemic access to natural justice was completely clear would *ipso facto* accept the Qurʾān. We could only conclude that any who reject it are not wholly just.

For anyone who accepts the Qurʾānic message, and its relevance to questions of justice, a reasonable conclusion is as follows: While, *in principle*, natural law is universally applicable, and *potentially* accessible to all independent of the historical Qurʾānic text, the matter is quite different *in practice*—contingencies of life in the world obstruct our moral vision, requiring divine assistance to clarify it. This assistance comes via specific historic prophetic events, persons, and texts prescribing conventions of worship and social life that both reflect natural, universal moral realities, and, if properly practised, clarify our consciousness of them.

Obviously, a person can identify as Muslim, claim to believe in the Qurʾān, even practise acts of worship diligently, and yet fall short in respect of many aspects of justice compared to a non-Muslim. We not only acknowledge this as a possibility, but as an observed actuality. The question, then, is not whether the acceptance of the Qurʾān's message is a sufficient condition for justice (it is not), but whether it is a necessary condition of complete justice. If not, then it follows that the Qurʾān is irrelevant to justice, and there is no point in writing a book on justice in the Qurʾān. Conversely, if the Qurʾān is relevant to justice (the assumption of Harvey's project), then acceptance of the Qurʾān's message must be a necessary condition for complete justice.

In this case, it is simply not possible that a universal concept of justice be shared, completely, between those who accept and those who reject the Qurʾān. At best, there can be overlapping areas on various aspects of justice, and it is certainly worth the effort to close the gaps. Harvey has done part of this

admirably, that is, by carefully elucidating the underlying moral rationale of relevant verses of the Qurʾān, with the aim of bringing them (and their ramifications in contemporary life) into greater clarity. The other part, however, is to engage critically, via natural reason, with the wide range of divergent theories of justice that hold sway, with a view to closing the gaps as much as possible. For all its merits, Harvey's project would have been better had he focused on this rather than the problem posed by the supposed 'moral anti-realism' of classical Islamic theology.

*Edward Moad*
*Qatar University*
E-mail: edwardrm@qu.edu.qa