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Book Review

**Oliver Leaman, *Islam and Morality: A Philosophical Introduction*.
London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 205 pp.
ISBN: HB: 978-1-35000-6318-1**

Reviewer: Amilah binti Awang Abd Rahman, Department of Usul al-Din and Comparative Religion, International Islamic University Malaysia.
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Oliver Leaman, one of the most current and active orientalist writers on Islam, has offered another book on fundamental themes of Islam after his *The Qur'an: A Philosophical Guide* and his initial works had addressed the development of Islam's history and philosophy. Islamic morality is the area of choice which is pivotal not only to accommodate the problematic human behaviours in the world, but to also participate in the increasing attention to the praxis and core aspect of humanities in postmodern research including philosophy and religion. From the Muslim side, the subject matter has also been dealt with lately by several philosophers, namely, Abdullah Draz and Taha Abd al-Rahman, in revisiting the role and relevance of Islam in solving problems of human affairs and the resurgence of a global Islamic civilization.

Leaman begins his book by highlighting the need of the philosophical study of religion as a vital area of study. He asserts that the main problem suffered by the approach of Muslims to morality is the lack of an analytical approach which is vital to face the changes in human society, especially in the age of disruption. The traditional approach which he refers to as *khutbaization* (sermon) of ethical discourse including in academic research is not meaningful and lacks objectivity and thoroughness. He refers to it as a serious dearth that requires remedy by our experts because "These principles are what the Qur'an is arguing for and they express the moral essence in Islam" (p. viii), which is being underestimated by the Muslims themselves.

Leaman's book challenges Muslims on two fronts. Intellectually, he indicates that the analytical methodology is not completely appreciated in our approach to morality, but also the Qur'an is not sufficiently explored despite it actually having a "sophisticated account of moral behaviour" (p. x). Other references namely the Sunnah of the Prophet and interpretive principles established by the traditional schools of law in fact, enjoy more privilege. He also criticizes hermeneutics, which only serve to obscure the main message of the Qur'an. As a result, he opines that the Muslim masses are a community without clear and applied principles of Islamic morality. On the aspect of practice, he observes the weakness of the moral performance of the Muslims where Muslims struggle to the challenge of producing a moral society that truly exemplifies the Qur'anic miracle.

With such sweeping statements, the author's position suffers several glaring weaknesses. Though his main objective is to focus on the morality of the Qur'an as he set earlier and "not get involved in much of this supplementary material, except to point out how far it often is from the Qur'an itself." (p x), his entire discourse, however, is replete with commentary on supplementary materials, especially disagreements found in jurisprudence and theological matters. His entire discussion discursively responds to current Muslim views, perceptions and practices, ranging from fundamental theology to the status of particular Prophetic traditions; from various schools of thought including the Shiites and Sufis to the Muslim practices at specific locality. The author's attempt becomes overly ambitious as discuss every major issue pertaining to Islam. The discussion in the chapters and sub-chapters conflates subject matters ranging from morality, principles, conflicts, sin, to core values such as justice, each of which requires a long and subtle discussion. Other matters touch on *asbāb al-nuzūl*, abrogation, linguistic analysis, and juridical discourse on *maqāṣid*. He takes much trouble to remark on varied Muslim inclinations of thought and practices ranging from traditional piety to conservative reactionaries and radical reformists.

The task is ambitious but his limited knowledge about Islam is arguably the obvious weakness of the book. He begins with a problematic definition of morality by tracing the word *akhlaq* to *makhlūq* or creature in relation to *khāliq* as creator, instead of *khulq*, which holds the singular and correct meaning of morality. His exploration of metaethics becomes

reductionist as he is unable to capture the gestalt or configuration of Islam's concept of morality.

The book's Orientalist treatment of Islam and modernist framing of morality explores the Islamic framework as problematic. The author is thus unable to grasp the Qur'an's moral purview on its own terms. The author somehow expects Islamic morality to magically hold forth general principles and, at the same time, provide precise answers for what is good and bad in all area of applications with the most details that it can be for all walks of life. He plunges the strength of dynamism from general formulations of the Qur'an into weakness at one point, and ready to claim of a rigidly autocratic system of unctuous probity at another. In expecting for specific answers as inherent solutions of Islamic morality, all types of in-house Muslim disagreements in jurisprudence, theology and Sufism are dealt with in a cynical way but without hint of solutions linking to the Qur'an.

Furthermore, the author expects that the moral principles to follow a subjective basis of personal reasoning that refuses to bow to any set of rules including those perfectly clear on their prohibitions with rational basis in the Qur'an, for instance, on gambling, drinking and usury. "Not really" he writes, "it is open acceptance of a fact of life that for most people alcohol is part of their lives." — and again: "... yet our experience of the world brings out the ubiquity of alcohol, the fact that its consumption is often without obvious negative effects on both those who drink and those who do not." (p 197) He also insists to permit the practice of gene editing and euthanasia as permissible actions.

It is not surprising that the author's conception of the relationship between law and ethics becomes problematic, inconsistent and full of conflicts. He begins with squabbling jurists to track the basic tenets of Islamic ethics. He then posits that law cannot be based on ethics since causes for human actions are obscured by divine motives i.e. everything is 'up to God' so to speak.

In addition, the author's attempt to make the entire moral law into teleological ethics is rather unacceptable. His reductionism is exacerbated by his strict subjection of moral rules to the theory of *maqāṣid*. Although morality in Islam is receptive to teleological aspects as it is obvious in the Qur'an's language, the application of *maqāṣid* theory to unabridged moral concerns would bring strange consequences since *maqāṣid* is more

to juristic solutions. After all, exploring general principles of morality found in the Qur'an requires a far deeper discussion than what the author inadequately indicates. Such a discourse supposedly begins with a world view that regards the nature of Man and his moral responsibilities from an Islamic perspective. In addition, principles of morality are further divided into tenets that govern rules, values and practical aspects. Ideal expectations of human actions are themselves a complex yet vital topic to understand the general principles of morality described in the Qur'an. As for the practical aspect of morality, gestalt Islamic morality concerns theistically derived principles from revelation along with dynamics that will let each person to choose his or her actions. Consequently, instead of shedding light on the philosophical foundation of Islamic morality in a holistic manner, the author's overly ambitious aims misrepresents the moral principles of Islam as an unorganized system by breaking them into all sorts of disagreement and wide array of questions.

Despite these shortcomings, this book is a 'must read' for Muslim scholars to understand about the current image of Islamic and Muslim morality from an external observer point of view. The book is a wake-up call for a properly developed framework for Islamic ethics based on the Qur'an to sustain its relevance and actively respond to inevitable social and environmental changes and challenges.

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Book Review

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