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# AL-SHAJARAH

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*Al-Shajarah* is a refereed international journal that publishes original scholarly articles in the area of Islamic thought, Islamic civilization, Islamic science, and Malay world issues. The journal is especially interested in studies that elaborate scientific and epistemological problems encountered by Muslims in the present age, scholarly works that provide fresh and insightful Islamic responses to the intellectual and cultural challenges of the modern world. *Al-Shajarah* will also consider articles written on various religions, schools of thought, ideologies and subjects that can contribute towards the formulation of an Islamic philosophy of science. Critical studies of translation of major works of major writers of the past and present. Original works on the subjects of Islamic architecture and art are welcomed. Book reviews and notes are also accepted.

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**Joseph J. Kaminski. *Islam, Liberalism, and Ontology: A Critical Re-evaluation*. New York: Routledge. 2021. 198 pp. ISBN 978-0-367-53985-6 (hard cover)**

*Reviewer:* Ahmad El-Muhammady, Assistant Professor, ISTAC-IIUM

In responding to the long-drawn debate between Islam and liberalism, Joseph J. Kaminski's *Islam, Liberalism, and Ontology: A Critical Re-evaluation* offers two things: first, a critical analysis of the basic categories and constructs that comprise "Islam" and "liberalism" via a clearly defined methodological mode of inquiry; and second, plausible solution to the fundamental clashes between Islam and liberalism. What makes this book even more interesting, instead of taking a "scratch on the surface" approach with a spattering of references and anecdotes, the author dissected Islam and liberalism using ontological inquiry based on the primary and canonical sources. By doing so, he was hopeful that it ultimately serves as a useful asset and contribution for those studying comparative political theory or the relationship between international politics and religion. Kaminski holds MA and PhD in political science with deep interest in political theory/philosophy and comparative politics with a regional focus on the Muslim world. Currently, he serves as an assistant professor at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, International University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As a backdrop, Kaminski set off the discussion by recounting his experience listening to Mustafa Akyol's talk at the Brookings' roundtable discussion on the issue of Islam and Liberalism. Akyol calls on Muslims to "embrace Liberalism under certain conditions... that so long as progressive interpretation of Islamic doctrines and texts were offered, Liberalism could eventually come to take root." For Akyol, this principle applies to all religions, citing the examples of Jewish enlightenment and Mu'tazilah movement in the history of Muslim intellectuality. Responding to Akyol's suggestion, Shadi Hamid, Senior Fellow at Brookings, who is also an expert on the

Middle East, expressed his doubt on that possibility arguing that “most Muslims do not want to risk their spiritual wellbeing and embrace liberal or non-traditional positions and Islam is exceptional compared to Christianity, especially regarding law, politics, and governance.” This encounter informed him one thing, enthusiasm for promoting liberal Islam fails to appreciate the ontological differences between Islam and Liberalism. For Kaminski,

liberalism—Enlightenment or political—and Islam operate on fundamentally different baseline assumptions about the nature of reality itself. The stark differences regarding the overarching ontology of both discourses make reconciling them very problematic. Generalized lower-order similarities between Islam and Liberalism should be seen primarily as incidental to rather than indicative of any deeper discursive congruence.

In the author’s view, Liberalism can be generally divided into two categories: comprehensive (or Enlightenment) and political liberalism. The former refers to a “philosophical position, complete with an ordering of values, that supports liberal political principles.” It is a unique conception of the good that, like any other conception of the good, excludes other conceptions that lie outside its ethical parameters and epistemological assumptions. It also can be understood as “a way of life, a theory of value, and an epistemology” and that its followers “value rational autonomy, critical scrutiny of tradition, skepticism, and experimentation,” while the latter – political liberalism – first refers to a set of political principles built upon a certain conception of the good life and second, it is built to promote Liberalism ethos. For Kaminski, comprehensive Liberalism and political liberalism work in tandem, and the effort to divorce the two is impossible.

Kaminski argues that Liberalism – comprehensive or political liberalism – is deeply rooted in the Enlightenment ethos, particularly Secularism. For him, Secularism refers to a development that is connected to the rejection of the Church’s authority over worldly affairs and the rise of modern scientific inquiry. He reiterates that Secularism, classical Liberalism, and European Christianity are all

intimately connected; modern Secularism is a fundamental Enlightenment and liberal values that nonetheless remains rooted in the Christian ethos. These three discourses operate in tandem to shape the modern world. One cannot understand Secularism in isolation from the historical and intellectual developments that transpired within the classical liberal and European Christian traditions. Thus, although Liberalism claims to be a “neutral arbiter,” which is also another relatively new “conception of good,” the concept itself, he argues is historically and culturally situated rather than standing somehow ‘above’ such conceptions or standing independently as a true arbiter. This makes Liberalism inflexible or a stranger in another environment, especially in the revelation-based discourse of Muslim society.

Turning to the discourse of Islam, Kaminski acknowledges the challenge of constructing a unified, coherent, and conclusive account of Islam. However, using Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance and idea of prototype theory, Kaminski argues that Islam has both theoretical and practical dimensions. One cannot have Islam without both theory and practice. The performance of Islamic rituals such as prayers, fasting, and almsgiving further gives concreteness to the meta-category that is Islam. One can observe someone performing the Muslim prayer and understand that this act is connected to Islam without even knowing the actual content or reason why the person they are observing is performing those physical movements. Most importantly, the unifying theme and the necessary core that hold Islam together can be found within the five pillars of Islam (*arkān al-Islām*), which are rooted in the *Sharī‘ah* and the Qur’ān along with the six articles of faith (*arkān al-imān*).

The difference between Islam and Liberalism becomes more acute when discussing issues such as human rights, moral epistemology, the role of religion in public sphere, and their approaches to law. Touching on the concept of humanity for instance, Kaminski argues that Islamic definitions of humanity and similar normatively oriented moral categories are undeniably more rigid and timeless than Western liberal portrayals, which are often subject to radical transformations within very short periods of time. Just over 150 years ago, slavery was legal and just 30 years ago the idea of

same-sex marriage was unthinkable in most Western liberal democracies. While the Islamic understanding of what is constitutive of “humanity” is not necessarily entirely static, he argues, it is apparent that certain elements remain more fixed than others. In the words of Qardhāwī, Islam has both the element of stability (*thabāt*) and flexibility (*murūnah*). Thus, in Kaminski’s view, it is safe to assume that the standard liberal and the Islamic understanding are far apart both in principle and in practice.

Similarly, on the issue of religion in the public sphere, Kaminski argues that the liberal idea of public reason as expounded by John Rawls for instance cannot simply be justified on secular ground. Kaminski tells readers, however, that “this is not to suggest that Islamic law is irrational; the *Sharī‘ah* is vastly rooted in readily identifiable dictates of *maṣlahah* or public interest, and the safeguard of the five necessities as expounded by al-Shāṭibī and al-Ghazālī.” At the same time, however, there also is an undeniable voluntarist undercurrent within Islam perhaps best illustrated by one of the more well-known verses of the Qur’ān related to fighting, which reminds readers that “it is possible that you dislike a thing which is good for you, and that you love a thing which is bad for you. But Allah knows, and you do not know.” There simply are some things that one ought to obey even if one does not fully understand why. This is also true in the case of Islamic approach to law, which is deeply rooted in the Divine guidance and not human reason per se.

Therefore, given the difficulty of reconciling between Islam and Liberalism, what is the way forward, then? For Kaminski, the way forward can be achieved through communitarianism as an alternative discourse in a contemporary modern society. Communitarian, in his view, must be imbued with

the dialectical interaction between personal responsibility, a sense of communal obligation, and authentic moral autonomy, specifically in the sense that people are permitted to *freely* choose to follow Islam’s moral order or not is something that can be further scrutinized via a communitarian lens.

Clearly, unlike Liberalism ethos that emphasize on “the

universalization of secular liberal individualism” and then “devalue communitarian identities founded upon collective constraints,” communitarianism in this context sets to balance both. The ultimate intention is to produce virtuous citizens; individuals with excellence character, with an Islamic mindset, and finally the Muslim community imbued with the value of *ummatan wasatan* that make “a conscious effort to tread the middle path in their daily lives between excessive (*ifrāt*) and laxity (*tafrīt*). Again, unlike the Aristotelian conception of morality founded upon human’s rational capacities, communitarianism should encourage the use of rational capacities in fostering a relationship with God or following Ibn Miskawayh’s conception of virtue ethics, in perfecting the soul for God’s pleasure.

Finally, Kaminski concludes that a society that prioritizes positive communal bonds is bound to produce a different moral agent and a different public conceptualization of moral agency than one that does not. The prioritization of communal bonds does not necessitate denigrating into the politics of sectarianism or exclusion. Drawing from Islam’s historical moral resources, further scholarship should aim to create models of political discourse in which the “Islamic” part of Islamic societies remains at the forefront and which at the same time offer reasonable accommodations for non-Muslim citizens to participate in socio-political processes and enjoy a maximal range of individual liberties and freedoms. This is the only way to ensure social harmony and political stability in an increasingly diversifying world.

One may appreciate Kaminski’s work for three main reasons. First, its comparative methodology focusing on ontological analysis of Islam and Liberalism. He has laid down a useful method for students who are interested in understanding ideology and belief system in a contemporary society. Second, Kaminski takes a middle path in resolving the ontological conflicts between Islam and Liberalism by introducing communitarianism as an alternative discourse and the way forward for society and policymakers grappling with the issue of Islam and Liberalism. Third, the author’s ability to maintain his identity as a Muslim scholar, which he proudly declares, in dealing with Western scholarship without sacrificing his values. His ability to benefit from the Islamic heritage or *turāth* while

appreciating the contemporary political theory is also commendable and should be emulated by young scholars.

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**Ayman Reda. *Prophecy, Piety, and Profits: A Conceptual and Comparative History of Islamic Economic Thought*. Palgrave-Macmillan, 2018. 402 pp. Hardcover, ISBN 978-1-137-56824-3.**

*Reviewer:* Wan Omar Fadhli bin Wan Mahmud Khairi, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Economics, Department of Economics and Management Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia.

The majority of Muslim economists agree that developing a proper Islamic economics study as a distinct subject needs the ability to comprehend the past thoughts of Muslim scholars all the way back to the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). Such a study would require proper foundations, axioms, scope of study and clear definition of the subject-matter, which could only be furnished by a comprehensive understanding of the thoughts of past Muslim scholars. In fact, the secularized-modern economics study that dominates the economics curriculum nowadays also emanated from past discourses in economic thoughts. Accordingly, Ayman Reda attempts to study in this book the genesis of modern and Islamic economic thoughts, which could help develop the foundations of Islamic economics. By scrutinizing these past ideas and discussions, a researcher may be able to develop the necessary worldview and concepts for the purpose of formulating the axioms of Islamic economics viewed as an independent discipline.

Reda, an economics lecturer at Michigan State University, USA has beautifully written an ostentatious comparative history of Islamic economic thoughts with special focus on five main issues, namely “Abundance and Scarcity”, “Wealth and Poverty”, “Charity and Usury”, “Self-Interest and Rationality” and “Utopias and

## TRANSLITERATION TABLE

### CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	
ء	ء	ء	ء	ز	z	z	z	گ	—	g	g	g
ب	b	b	b	ژ	—	—	ʀ	ل	l	l	l	l
پ	—	p	p	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m	m
ت	t	t	t	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	n
ث	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h <sup>1</sup>	h <sup>1</sup>
ث	th	th	th	ص	ş	ş	ş	و	w	v/u	v	v/u
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ی	y	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	—	-a <sup>2</sup>
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al <sup>3</sup>	—	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	‘	‘	‘	—	—	—	—	—
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğh	—	—	—	—	—
ڈ	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f	—	—	—	—	—
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	q	—	—	—	—	—
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	—	—	—	—	—

<sup>1</sup> – when not final

<sup>2</sup> – at in construct state

<sup>3</sup> – (article) al - or l-

### VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iy (final form ī)	iy (final form ī)
	و	uww (final form ū)	uvv
	و	uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	ev
	ی	ai or ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a or e
	ا	u	u or ū
	ا	i	o or ö
	ا	i	i

### URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. چ jh گ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

# AL-SHAJARAH

Vol. 26, No. 1, 2021

## Contents

### **ARTICLES**

THE PERSONIFICATION OF HOSPITALITY (DIYĀFAH) IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SOCIAL SOLIDARITY (TAKĀFUL IJTIMĀ'Ī) THROUGH THE PROPHETIC TRADITION (SUNNAH) 1

*Ahmad Hassan Mohamed, Mohamed Aslam Akbar, and Hassanuddeen Abd. Aziz*

IBN AL-'ARABĪ'S CONCEPT OF DREAMS 27

*Megawati Moris*

SYED AHMAD KHAN'S TWIN OBJECTIVES OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS IN BRITISH INDIA: 49

MUSLIM ADVANCEMENT AND HINDU-MUSLIM UNITY

*Md Yousuf Ali and Osman Bakar*

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN INDIA DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: 71

A SURGE OF STIGMATIZATION, VILIFICATION AND MURDER

*Thameem Ushama*

### **REVIEW ESSAYS**

SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL-ATTAS AND THE DIALOGIC 99

OF OCCIDENTAL KNOWLEDGE: A PASSING GLANCE TO THE STUDY OF SOCIETY IN THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO

*Ahmad Murad Merican*

ALBERT CAMUS, THE ABSURD AND MARTYRDOM 111

*Arief S. Arman*

**BOOK REVIEWS** 121

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