Book Review

Ethical Theories in Islam

By Majid Fakhry. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991, 230 pp.

The most striking element of Majid Fakhry's *Ethical Theories in Islam* is its reminder of the intellectual and philosophical dynamism that characterized Muslim scholarship during the late Umayyad and 'Abbāsid periods. No discussion was too small or considered taboo. Rather, the search for truth took on many manifestations, ranging from the strict ethical logic

of the Mu'tazilites to the philosophical contemplations of Fakhr al Dīn al Rāzī. All are recounted in Fakhry's primer, which may be considered a fine summary for students of Islamic ethics and also a good introduction for western ethicists. Not only might many myths be dispelled, but western ethicists may find striking similarities between this discourse, which took place in the Islamic world centuries ago, and the one that took place in Europe hundreds of years later.

Fakhry sets out his task clearly in the introduction:

> An ethical theory is a reasoned account of the nature and grounds of right actions and decisions and the principles underlying the claim that they are morally commendable or reprehensible.

Thus, the term *ethical concepts* must be defined and our discriminations between right and wrong justified. The Qur'an, despite its centrality in Muslim intellectual and philosophical contemplation, contains no ethical theories per se. It does, however, provide an "Islamic ethos."

Fakhry limits the list of those who developed an Islamic view of the universe and humanity's place in it to those who practiced Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and scholastic theology (*kalām*). As for the Sufis (mystics) and philosophers, Fakhry argues that too much "extraneous" influence colored their view for their arguments to be considered thoroughly Islamic. Whether this is true or not is, of course, still debatable. It is also outside the author's field of concern, for his task is not to prove as much as it is to describe, which he does tenaciously and admirably.

The central debate revolves around two approaches to theology: the Mu'tazilite and the Ash'arite. The Mu'tazilite position will be the most familiar to students from the western tradition as it is based largely on a metaphorical interpretation of the Qur'an to support positions influenced by the Hellenistic trend. This was possible largely because of the remarkable work done in translating ancient Greek philosophical works into Arabic during the ninth and tenth centuries.

The Mu'tazilites argued that human beings were free agents responsible to a just God. The Qur'an abounds with verses reminding humanity of its responsibility and the consequences of failing to act within that context. However, if God were to be fair in His judgment of humanity, individual human beings had to have the capacity to distinguish right from wrong. In addition, the category of justice had to be objective if God were to judge all of humanity for its actions. Although elements of justice could be propounded in a divinely inspired revelation bestowed upon a prophet, human beings could still be expected to recognize the rightness of an act whether it was revealed or not. In other words, the Mu'tazilite view considered natural reason a source of spiritual and ethical knowledge.

According to the Mu'tazilites, this reason-based knowledge exists as a universal guidance provided to all humanity and helps human beings recognize the truth revealed through revelation and prophethood. Once they

recognize revelation, God furthers their guidance in more particular ways. It is on this basis that it becomes possible for the Qur'an to discuss natural–moral grounds of human conduct, which form the basis of much of the ethical discourse in the western tradition. Moral self-determination for each human being, in sum, becomes necessary as a function of God's nature as a totally just being. Thus, for the Mu'tazilites, human capacity and God's justice and wisdom become the cornerstone of Islamic ethics.

However, if the Qur'an provides a great deal of implicit evidence for moral responsibility and self-determination, Fakhry reminds one that explicit textual evidence in particular is scant, especially when compared to the verses stressing God's power and sovereignty. This is even truer when considering the hadith literature, which is even less explicit. Fakhry writes:

> Significantly enough, the two major canonical collections of Hadith, that of al-Bukhari and Muslim, each contain a separate section (or book) on *qadar*, understood in the sense of divine power rather than human capacity, but there are no separate sections either on the nature of the good or on divine justice, . . . nor are there any sections on books on justice in general.

Mu'tazilite discussions were a response to the inability of some Muslims to reconcile God's omnipotence, as stressed by the Qur'an, with one's capacity to act and to be judged for that action. Proponents of the latter view articulated a determinist view of ethics, which was refined in the tenth century by the Ash'arites and was opposed diametrically to the view of the Mu'tazilites on all major ethical questions. For example, reason was not believed to be adequate enough to stipulate anything as being either morally or religiously necessary. Thus, knowledge of God may be attained through reason but only become obligatory through revelation.

As a matter of fact, that which is obligatory is that which God has commanded as a "matter of necessity in such a way that its omission is a sin deserving of punishment." That which is prohibited is that which God has forbidden and has decreed that those who engage in it deserve to be punished. The grounds for these criterion are God's command and prohibition in the nature of revelation. Without such revelation, in the Ash'arite view, human beings would have no obligations whatsoever.

However, this left the Ash'arites with the problem of the Qur'anic references to free will. As the necessity of heaven and hell or reward and punishment required some form of human responsibility, Asharite thinkers developed the concept of acquisition (*kasb* or *iktisāb*). A great amount of linguistic and intellectual effort was expended to provide human beings with responsibility in a manner that fundamentally denied human will. That they were successful in this endeavor can be implied from the fact that this view has become the one most accepted in Sunni circles. (Mu'tazilite views survived through the Ja'farī *madhhab* of the Shi'ah and with many independent modern Sunni scholars, where they remain influential.)

This simplified discussion gives just a taste of the complexity and vigor with which Muslims debated these issues that are recounted so well by Fakhry. Philosophic and religious ethics also receive major consideration. The philosophic impulse was given great support by those Greek ethical materials in wide circulation among Muslims of the ninth century. Such Greek authors as Galen, Prophyry, Aristotle, and others had a "direct impact on the moral philosophers and conditioned their views on the nature of moral activity, right and wrong, virtue, happiness, deliberation and choice, and related ethical questions." Anyone interested in summaries of the views of al Kindī, al Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and Ibn Rushd will find Fakhry's work more user-friendly than the *Encyclopedia Islamica*.

However, the depth of discussion of Muslim views during a time of great intellectual ferment begs the question, why then as opposed to now? Intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual introspection occur in some periods more often than others, and one cannot help but wonder about the historical milieu in which these ethical and philosophical discussions took place. Certainly, there existed at that time a living concept of community (*ummah*) among Muslims throughout the expanse of Islamdom. Even the surviving Umayyad caliphate in Andalusian Spain looked east to the 'Abbāsids for intellectual and cultural trends. Yet, despite the security thus afforded, there was great political ferment as first the Umayyads and then the 'Abbāsids faced the discontent of dispossessed Muslims.

Fakhry's work, however, creates more than a sense of nostalgia for the ethical discussions of Muslims long since dead, for the arguments and debates are still alive and remain very relevant to the contemporary world of Muslims and humanity. His book jogs the mind and encourages one to reparticipate in a discussion that is at once historical and contemporary.

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