

Book Review

Major Ethical and Religious Concepts in the Qur'an

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an by Toshihiko Izutsu, Selangor: Islamic Book Trust, pp332, reprinted 2007, PB, £16.

As the recipient of the Divine revelation, during his life time the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) “would have been the ultimate arbiter of meaning and the acknowledged mediator between the revelation and his immediate followers, whenever questions were posed about the Qur'an. After his death, those who had been closest to the revelation, including his family and Companions (*sahaba*), would have assumed most of the responsibility for the explication of the revelation. With the passage of the first generation of the Prophet's followers, however, the prerogative of interpreting the scripture became widely diffused among a succeeding generation of scholars who had known and studied with prominent individuals of the first generation...” (An Anthology of Qur'anic Commentaries, vol. 1, 2008, p2) Some of the prominent early commentators of the Qur'an included Abdullah ibn Abbas (d. 68AH/687CE), Abdullah ibn Mas'ud (d. 32AH/652CE), Ubayy ibn Ka'b (d. 42AH/662CE), Zaid ibn Thabit (d. 45 or 55AH/665 or 675CE), Aishah bint Abi Bakr (d. 58AH/678CE) and Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 40AH/660CE).

The aforementioned commentators were succeeded by another generation of outstanding scholars of the Qur'an. Some of the leading scholars of this period included Sa'id ibn Musayyab (d. 94AH/713CE), Sa'id ibn Jubayr (d. 95AH/715CE), Mujahid ibn Jabr (d. 104AH/722CE), Ikrima (d. 105AH/723-4CE), Hasan al-Basri (d. 110AH/728CE) and Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri (d. 124AH/742CE), among many others. Collectively, these scholars laid the foundation of the traditional Islamic science of Tafsir al-Qur'an (or Exegesis of the Divine Revelation). Succeeding generations of

Qur'anic scholars then developed, dissected and disseminated the ideas and thoughts of the early scholars, which, in turn, enabled the Muslim masses to benefit from their writings and scholarly contributions.

In the book under review, late Professor Toshihiko Izutsu, a renowned Japanese scholar and linguist, had attempted to explain some major ethical and religious concepts in the Qur'an with reference to classical Arabic, tafsir literature, linguistics and especially semantics. The author was born in Tokyo in 1914 and studied philosophy, comparative religion, linguistics and Islamic studies at some of the leading institutions of higher education in the East and the West. He was competent in more than a dozen languages and authored around thirty books on a range of subjects in English and Japanese including 'God and Man in the Qur'an: Semantics of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung' (1964, reprinted 2002), 'The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology: A Semantic Analysis of Iman and Islam' (1965) and 'A Fountainhead of Islamic Philosophy' (1980), in addition to his translation of the Qur'an into Japanese. After a life time devoted to research and writing, the author died in 1993.

As an eminent scholar and linguist, in Izutsu's complex but innovative linguistic thought, "there is no direct relationship between words and reality. He regarded language as an artificial sign system invented to segment, categorize and articulate non-linguistic reality and thus make it meaningful and recognizable... Izutsu maintained that human recognition of reality naturally differs according to the language code. That is to say, there are no words of any language systems that coincide completely with any equivalents in other languages both in denotation and connotation, since each term has a unique semantic field and structure in its language system." (p.viii) Later in his career, however, Izutsu shifted from semantic analysis of texts to focus more on reality itself prior to its linguistic articulation. That is to say, he argued that it was possible to know this unarticulated reality only through mystical experience, which he considered to be the essence of hikmat al-mashriqiyyah (or Oriental Philosophy).

Using his linguistic approach, the author hoped to "make the Qur'an interpret its own concepts and speak for itself. In other words, what is central to [his] inquiry is not so much the material as the method of linguistic analysis applied to that material, the

specific point of view from which it attempts to analyze the semantic structure of the value words of the Qur'an in the field of conduct and character." (p3) Divided into three parts, in part one, the author provided an analysis of the principles of semantics with reference to language and culture. In his own words, "We may approach the subject of ethico-religious concepts in the Qur'an in a number of ways. We may start from the elaborate systems of Islamic law, which, in later ages, came to regulate all phases of human conduct to the minutest details, and find that we are led back to the Qur'an as the original source of all these commands and prohibitions. Or we may start from the no less elaborate systems of theology, which we will discover to be nothing but a theoretic treatment of the basic problem of what a 'true believer' should believe in, what kind of attitude he should take towards God, and how he should act according to the dictates of his belief. Or again, we may set to work picking up more or less systematically various teachings and opinions on morals contained in the Qur'an, put them in order, and write a book called 'The Ethics of the Qur'an'." (p3) Instead, the author allowed the Qur'an to speak for itself and did so in the context of language and culture as they prevailed in pre-and-post Islamic Arabia.

According to Izutsu, "Islam, which arose in the seventh century in Arabia, undoubtedly represents one of the most radical religious reforms that have ever appeared in the East; and the Qur'an, the earliest authentic record of this great event, describes in vividly concrete terms how in this period of crisis the time-honored tribal norms came into bloody conflict with new ideals of life, began to totter, and, after desperate and futile efforts to resist, finally yielded the hegemony to the rising power. The Arabia of this epoch, from the pre-Islamic time of heathendom to the earliest days of Islam, is of particular importance to anyone interested in the problems of ethical thinking, in that it provides excellent case material for studying the birth and growth of a moral code." (p17) Even so, the author is of the view that the moral discourse of the Qur'an had three layers, namely the concepts that referred to and described the ethical nature of God; those that described the nature of man's attitude and relationship to God, and thirdly the principles that defined the socio-ethical relations between individuals in society.

From that perspective, in the third part of the book, the author provided a detailed analysis of a number of key Qur'anic concepts such as Islam (Submission/Peace),

Iman (Belief), Kufr (Disbelief), Nifaq (Hypocrisy), Ma'ruf (Good) and Munkar (Bad), among others. Consisting of more than 150 pages, in this part of the book the author has provided a detailed and illuminating lexical explanation of these Qur'anic terms and concepts. Although the author had relied primarily on the Qur'an to define its terms and concepts, it should be pointed out that the Qur'anic worldview does not only revolve around concepts, for just as it describes the ethical nature of God and man's relationship with his Creator, it also stipulates rules or codes for individual and collective conduct in society, which is the field of social ethics and morality. For this reason, the author was right to say that since the Qur'anic teaching was destined to develop not only as a religion but also as a global culture and a civilization, the social ethics of Islam as it developed during the Madinah period had not been thoroughly covered in this book.

Even so, soon after its publication in 1959, this book was hailed as one of the first major studies of Islamic theology to have been published in a Western language. And as the publisher has rightly pointed out, its importance has not changed with the passage of time. Recommended reading for scholars and lay people alike.

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