

Şarkiyat Çalışmalarında İslam Ahlâk Metafiziği, editör İbrahim Aslan (İstanbul: Endülüs Yayınları, 2020), 462 sayfa, ISBN: 9786052105931

Abdul Basit Zafar | <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0840-5865> | zafar@ankara.edu.tr

Öz

İncelenen ‘Şarkiyat Çalışmalarında İslam Ahlâk Metafiziği’ başlıklı çalışma, İslamî etik teoriler alanında tanınan Batı’lı araştırmacılarca kaleme alınmış olan eserlerden seçilmiş derleme bir metindir. TÜBİTAK’ın yurtdışı desteğiyle hazırlanmış olan bu eser, İslamî etik teorilerin metafizik çerçevesini incelemektedir. Müsteşriklerin ‘bakış açısından’ yola çıkarak okuyucuyu Mu‘tezile, Eş‘arî ve Mâtürîdî çevreler arasındaki klasik tartışmalara yönlendirerek, teolojik değer sistemlerine ihatalı şekilde yaklaşmayı teşvik etmektedir. Bu tür çalışmalar, kuşkusuz, İngilizce, Almanca ve Fransızca gibi batı dillerinde kaleme alınmış olan literatürü fark etme, anlama ve eleştirme gibi hususlarda Türk İlahiyat akademisindeki araştırmacılara katkı sağlayacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

İslam Ahlâkı, İslam Metafiziği, Şarkiyat Çalışmaları, Teolojik Değer Sistemleri, İbrahim Aslan, Şarkiyat Çalışmalarında İslam Ahlâk Metafiziği

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A Review of Islamic Ethic Metaphysics in Oriental Studies by İbrahim Aslan (İstanbul: Endülüs Yayınları, 2020), 462 pages, ISBN: 9786052105931 *

Abdul Basit Zafar | <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0840-5865> | zafar@ankara.edu.tr

Abstract

In the present work, ‘*Islamic Ethic Metaphysics in Oriental Studies*,’ Aslan successfully managed to groom the project with the translation, edition, and compilation of the most notable names in Islamic ethical theories. The work endowed by TUBITAK investigated the Islamic metaphysical frame of ethical theories. From the orientalist’s standpoint, it urges the reader to thoroughly understand miscellaneous metaphysical issues and problematics of Kalām value systems by bringing classical discourses between Mu’tazilites, Ash‘arite, and Maturidite. Such initiatives certainly will help the Turkish scholarship notice, grasp, and criticize the enormous literature in western languages.

Keywords

Islamic Ethics, Islamic Metaphysics, Oriental Studies, Theological Value Systems, İbrahim Aslan, Islamic Ethic Metaphysics in Oriental Studies

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Aslan, currently holding the chair of the professorship in the Faculty of Divinity at Ankara University, stated in the preface of the work, namely, *Islamic Moral Metaphysics in Oriental Studies*, that the compilation of articles is shaped by bringing together carefully chosen texts within the framework of the research project he undertook abroad. These research papers that make up the compilation have a shared theme around virtue ethics, the problem of good-evil (*husn-qubh*), which directly concerns the value system of traditional theological schools of thought. Aslan attempts to translate, edit and compile included texts and delivers a holistic understanding of Islamic ethical structures. The primary inspiration for this successful project is, he expresses, to make the reader aware of the discussions on ontology and epistemology that have overshadowed the meta-ethical problems of Kalām (p. 8-9). The mentioned work encompasses miscellaneous metaphysical issues and problematics of value systems by bringing classical discourses between Mu'tazilites, Ash'arite, and Maturidite, from the orientalist's perspective to one table.

From a tribal society to urban Arab life, the ethical principles, if not transformed, have undergone significant change. The literature of pre-Islamic Arab poetry especially marks the universal Bedouin values, tribal honor, and the idea of eventual justice. A new ethical structure that came with the prophet Mohammad reshaped the moral fabric of society, from a tribal alliance to a more inclusive community expressed as brotherhood grounded on faith and good deeds (p. 12-14). The faith could be described as an inner journey, an intellectual quest, or a tranquil state of mind no matter the psychological conditions; it is rooted in the oneness of Allah Almighty (monotheism/tawhid). If one is not fully accepting the oneness of God, the faith and good acts are in jeopardy/ are on shaky grounds. The actions of virtue are intrinsically good, and for Muslim rationalists, their moral status is out of the question since every rational mind accepts them. The Almighty abides by those ethical principles. Hence, He creates abundance by giving a man a chance to choose and carve his destiny on his terms.

Aslan, in the preface, elaborates on the oriental approach in brief and marks the distinct names of oriental and Muslim scholarship, which has renowned works in Muslim theology and Ethics (p. 9). Aslan, an emerging character in Turkish academia, chose these lucid ethicists and academics to show his concern for the subject. Three articles of Hourani, two of Grunebaum and Reinhart, and other prominent names among modern oriental scholarship, to mention a few, O. Leaman, D. Brown, Carney, and Frank, are enlisted in the schema of this editorial publication. Aslan explores the roots of the gradual decline of Muslim social and cultural values, and perhaps this

editorial work shall be considered an effort on his part.

The presented work portrays the stream of development in metaethics. Commencing with Ethics and Morality (Muslims), De Boer uses the references of oriental literature as in *The Thousand and One Nights* (p. 29), Goldziher (p. 33,36), implying his lack of availability of first-hand sources. He notices that the ideal ethical principles repeated in scholarly circles were perhaps unsuccessful in developing roots in society, i.e., marketplace or among wealthy bourgeois continued with their extravagance and inclination toward materials bounties (p. 45-47). As the study proceeds with Reinhart's thoroughly researched work, *The Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought*, one can instantly observe the reach and availability of primary sources for instant Mu'tazilî theologian al-Nisâbüri's *al-masâ'il fi al-khilâf bayn al-Başriyîn wa al-Bağdâdiyîn* or extensively quoting *Kitâb al-Mughnî* of Al-Qâdi Abd al-Jabbar al-Hamadani (p. 223, 225).

John Renard, in his study of *The Muslim World, Muslim Ethics: Sources, Interpretations and Challenges*, almost seventy years after De Boer, came up with a unique perspective. Regarding the practical implications of the Muslim ethical approach, Renard indicates that Islamdom has two distinct features: ethical fatalism and the fear of innovation (*bida'*). He depicts widespread ethical fatalism among Muslims who accept that whatever happens as God's decree (*qadar*) is bound to happen. Such an attitude may imply belief in a binding or decreeing agent. Both factors certainly impacted the Muslim world. Almost it is a suspicion that Islam only strengthens the hand of traditionalism in underdeveloped regions and renders people incapable of responding to the demands and benefits of new technologies (p. 73).

Like philosophy, theology also engages with ultimate questions of morality. Perhaps the difference is that theology considers the Transcendental God the Ultimate Agent. So, the metaethical questions are entertained by framing God as a priori in any given system, i.e., moral principles are with God's commands (revelation) or the outcome of human reason. Such questions have perplexed Muslim theologians for centuries. If God is in the ethical equation, how would he permit so much evil in the world and not interfere in human history? As Plato recorded in the dialogue, it echoes *Euthyphro*, and the question nevertheless persists; whether morality exists beyond God/ revelation or does God abide by the same universal moral principles that He commands. God does/did interfere via revelation, miracles, and bestowing humans' "intellect" or a capacity to reason for theologians. The answer might be satisfying at first, but it brings more aspects of religious ethics.

Regarding *Some Aspects of Islamic Ethics*, the responsibilities and duties are considered at the start to observe values in detail and how religious beliefs are

intertwined with individuals' responsibilities and communities' value structures. S. Carney's this study is of great importance for developing a methodological understanding of Islamic metaethics. For any theology student, learning the primary intention, formation, and outcomes of such a venture in the ethical realm is vital. Likewise, basic terminologies are finely defined in Turkish by Aslan, such as Value, Virtue, Responsibility, Guilt, Shame, and Regret (*Değer, Erdem, Sorumluluk, Suçluluk, Ayıplanma, and Pişmanlık Hissi*), as the foundational marks in ethical studies (p. 78).

When considering the counterpart of the Mu'tazilites discourse and ethics, the first name that may come to mind is Ash'arism. al-Ash'arī, who was qualified in the Mu'tazilites environment, later developed his distinct approach to ethical predicaments. Al-Ghazālī and al-Juwaynī, propagators and specialists of Ash'arite, are considered part of Aslan's current project translated from G. Hourani's articles (p. 412). The Mu'tazilites, following the Platonic path, were more inclined toward moral objectivism/ natural law theory. The Ash'arism, however, felt more content in theological voluntarism. Hence left it on divine command as it directs, without any inquiry (*bila kayf*) because they argued that moral principles are above and beyond the grasp of human capacities (p. 278). Among these two intertwining approaches, it could be said that theologians from either camp did not appreciate moral relativism or the skeptical approach to the realm of ethics. As Daniel Brown would suggest, balancing the two systems created the Islamic moral structure (p. 103).

For the Mu'tazilites, the binding force of nature is ethics, universally accepted moral codes that tie the law of grace and justice between the creator and its creation in an absolute manner. As one discusses the problem of moral freedom and the human capacity to act of its volition, we face multiple terminologies to correspond to such a situation. Human efficacy (*qadar*), capacity to act (*ikhtiyar*), and intention (*irada*) are the prerequisites to any potential action. For this, the Mu'tazilites scholars came up with multiple levels of understanding and interpretations (p. 318), stretching a tendency closer to the predetermination camp of Ash'arite to absolute human freedom in volition and action. The significance of the day of judgment, accountability, or reward and punishment would have no value in case of no moral agency of an agent, in this case, a human being, a believer. Eventually, the actions generated by man are further classified into voluntary, non-voluntary, etc.

A relatively more balanced approach between the intense debates of voluntarism and fatalism could be found in Māturīdian thought. Pessango's study *The Uses of Evil in Maturidian Thought* introduces al-Māturīdī and his somewhat optimistic view of life with the Divine wisdom (*hikmah*); there is no futility in divine action, and nothing is

useless (p. 393). So, for al-Māturidī, the apparent evil is a mere lack of human knowledge to grasp the cosmic schema and its prevailing divine wisdom. On the other hand, Muʿtazilites defended the conceptual barriers between Transcendental God and human affairs by doing evil (p. 246), either an acquired event by man or as a natural disaster, for which they believed the believer would be compensated in the hereafter (p. 393).

In the present-day scenario, the Muslim world is experiencing turmoil between modernity and antiquity, the tussle between rationalists and traditionalists, and tension between trusting human intellect or God's divine word/ divine volition. De Boer forms serious referential details on the origins of Kalām and its ethical sources by divining into Ikhwan Safa and classic Muslim esthetics as Ibn Miskawayh (p. 29-36). The orientalist perhaps did a better job examining opposing approaches and their difference in the Muslim community. G. Hourani, much like Patrica Crone, and Richard Frank, also improvise multiple theories on the origins and intellectual lineage of Muʿtazilite, the advocators of reason in the formative period of Islamic History (p. 182). As for now, we know that Muʿtazilite was not a homogenous entity but a school of thought, a group of rationalists from different ethnic and racial backgrounds who followed the same principles and applied them differently in their unique theological systems.

Aslan initiated this endeavor of translating and editing these research papers. It was a tiresome job, one can guess, to choose the appropriate documents from well-known orientalist and translate them to the best possible way reader could comprehend and grasp the topics at length. Perhaps it is a balanced choice of western scholarship in Turkish translation available in one volume. However, a few famous names, such as Joseph Van Ess, Patrica Crone, and Binyamin Abrahamov, were not considered. The example of the *Theologie und Gesellschaft* series¹ by Van Ess may suffice this argument. Unfortunately, this compendium is yet to be translated into Turkish. Perhaps their works are already translated or will become part of future projects. One can consider this compendium as an academic depository of classical references around the field of metaethics and a quest to find some

¹ Josef Van Ess, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra. Volume 2, A History of Religious Thought in Early Islam*, trans. Gwendolin Goldbloom (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2017); Josef Van Ess, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra. Volume 3. A History of Religious Thought in Early Islam*, trans. Gwendolin Goldbloom (Brill Publishers, 2018); Josef Van Ess - John O'Kane, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Century of the Hijra, Volume 1: A History of Religious Thought in Early Islam* (Brill Publishers, 2017); Josef Van Ess - Gwendolin Goldbloom, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra. Volume 4: A History of Religious Thought in Early Islam* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2018).

explanations; if not, then the tools and methodology of his predecessors in future scholarship.

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