

Review of Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islamic Ethics: Fundamental Aspects of Human Conduct*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. x + 214.

In 2022 the prominent scholar Abdulaziz Sachedina enriched the field of Islamic ethics with a new publication titled *Islamic Ethics: Fundamental Aspects of Human Conduct*. Having received his education at religious seminaries and modern universities in India, Iraq, Iran (where he studied under Ali Shariati, d. 1977), and Canada, he settled down at the University of Virginia in the US, where he stayed for about four decades. Sachedina has mostly written on Islamic messianism from a Shi'ī perspective, jurisprudence and biomedical ethics, and pluralism. Among his publications are *The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam* (1988), *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (2001), *Islamic Biomedical Ethics* (2009), *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights* (2009). In the introduction to the current book, he says that writing on ethics has been on his “things to do list” for a long time.

The book is divided into five chapters: “In Search of a Comprehensive Definition of Ethics,” “The Genesis of Moral Reasoning in Religious Ethics,” “Scriptural Sources of Ethical Methodology,” “Natural Law and Ethical Necessity,” “The Ethics of Interpretive Jurisprudence,” in addition to an introduction and epilogue. The main argument of the work is that “Islamic ethics is not only integral” to juridical methodology and social ethics but is also “a critical component of the entire religious worldview presented by the Qur'an” (x). Sachedina proposes to see the “Islamic juridical tradition as a fundamental source for the study of Islamic ethics” (121). He believes that the core of the Qur'ānic message is individual morality, moral advancement, self-purification (*tazakkī*, in his words), as well as social justice and fairness (7, 8, 18, 183).

The chapters go into detail about juridical methodologies and definitions, with repetitions at times, as if the chapters were written over an extended period of time, forcing the author to be repetitive. Nevertheless, one has to read the footnotes and the epilogue, in addition to the introduction, to understand the major motives behind the writing of this work and its aims. These can be synthesized in three major points.

First, with this work, Sachedina says that he aims to go beyond an Orientalist and Western reading of Islamic ethics as a later philosophical discipline in the Islamic intellectual tradition, which only came into being after contact with the Greek and Persian traditions (9). That is, religious ethics in Islam are treated as a replica of Aristotelian ethics of virtue (50). Against this perspective, Sachedina proposes to deal with what he refers to as “interpretive jurisprudence” (*fiqh*), from the moment of revelation and the way it was lived and

interpreted, not only as law but also as morality to bring to the surface the “moral and spiritual genome” of Islam, which it shares “with other Abrahamic traditions” (50).

The abovementioned Orientalist perspective that ethics as a discipline emerged only after the Islamic contact with the Greek and Persian traditions is discarded by Sachedina by raising a socio-historical question: How did Muslims live and govern themselves before getting in touch with traditions other than the Qurʾān? Were the nearly two centuries that preceded the development of philosophic ethics and sophisticated legal theories devoid of ethical reflection among early Muslims? Sachedina says that Muslims lived their morality through law and combined their Sharīʿa legal prescriptions with morality; religion and ethics were fully intertwined, simply because revelation is a moral guide for both the individual and society – that is, the orthopraxis (right action), revelation, and Sharīʿa rulings were not seen as dichotomous or separate, since Sharīʿa legal prescriptions also encompass moral prescriptions. He says, “Islam provided the key element of human moral responsibility by setting forth the thesis of human creation with an infused scale of moral judgment (*fiṭra*)”; he adds that Islam “laid down the universal objectives (*maqāṣid*) that were to be implemented in the community, in its intra- and intercommunal relations” (181). “Technically, Islam emerged to organize a religious world community that needed both law and ethics” (186n). He also says, “The thrust of Islamic revelation, more specifically the Qurʾān, was to guide humanity toward good character and decent conduct founded upon justice” (8). Sachedina’s argument, then, is that Islamic ethics and its originality have to be looked at in its founding text, the tradition (Sunna), and its early lived practices, before the development of systematic legal theories and philosophical-theological ethics.

Second, Sachedina engages only indirectly with some major contemporary scholars of Islamic jurisprudence and intellectual history rooted in the Euro-American academic tradition. We come to know of his intellectual allies and foes from his notes (notes on 185–190), and only briefly from the body of the text (17–19). For example, he acknowledges the important works of Montgomery Watt (d. 2006) in which *tazakkī* (purification through moral behaviour), appeared as a fundamental value in the study of the Qurʾān and the Prophetic experience, a view Sachedina’s book aims to underline: “the Qurʾān as the source of *tazakkī*” (18). Sachedina also expresses intellectual gratitude to especially the works of George Hourani (d. 1984) and Richard M. Frank (b. 1927) on Islamic rationalism and Ashʿarism, respectively, and praises the approach of Kevin Reinhart (b. 1952) who sees Islamic law and Islamic ethics as inseparable [unlike Joseph Schacht (d. 1969), and his likes of earlier Orientalists, who underlined only the legal aspect of the Islamic intellectual tradition] (185n).

He says Hourani's work on ethics inspired his work and helped him avoid the approach of Majid Fakhry (d. 2021) (189n6). However, the work of Wael Hallaq (b. 1955), who is one of the contemporary major scholars of Islamic legal theories, is criticized for having emphasized the legal aspects of the Qur'an over its moral ethos, thereby referring to Hallaq's work *A History of Islamic Legal Theories* (1997). For instance, he says Hallaq claims that about 500 Qur'anic verses deal with legal matters, while he, Sachedina, stresses that major classical scholars like al-Suyūfī (d. 911/1505) spoke of only about 305 out of 6,236 verses [numbers here differ slightly among exegetes] – 104 on devotional matters, 70 on family law, 30 on penal law, 30 on justice, equity and consultation (187n6). Not to put too fine a point on it here, but I think Sachedina is not familiar with the latest works of Hallaq in which the morality of the Islamic legal tradition is the most emphasized and championed aspect – which, ironically, makes both scholars (Sachedina and Hallaq) allies in this approach and methodology, contrary to what these notes of Sachedina convey.

Third, from a comparative history of ideas perspective, Sachedina's *Islamic Ethics* is another important work of scholarship on Islamic jurisprudence that aims to retain a strong link between the legal and the ethical, despite the schism that has befallen the tradition in modern times. This contribution, however, does not solve the current predicament of the Islamic legal tradition, which he thinks has been hijacked in particular by political Islam, and its radical wings: "Modern Muslims have been uprooted from the moral bedrock of their tradition and have been captured by the conservative spirit of their tradition" (187n6). Sachedina champions the classical Mu'tazilī rationalist tradition and by extension the rationalist spirit that found its way into the Shī'ī legal tradition, and not so much to the Sunnī one that remained predominantly traditional/conservative. Sachedina does not fall into a Sunnī-Shī'ī polemic here. Moreover, he uses Hourani's terms of rationalism versus traditionalism, and ethical objectivism versus ethical subjectivism (61, 154). At some point, he gets to the gist of the problem; he says that the "traditionalist project ... created a dilemma" by "ontologically connecting ethics to religion." He does not elaborate on this, which I had hoped he would have done in the book, but his point further orients the reader to the obvious and the aim of the book: modern Islamic jurisprudence has to reclaim its (classical) rationalism, without losing the connection with the Qur'anic ethos that calls the individual and society for justice and fairness. Here Sachedina uses terminology from the philosopher John Rawls (d. 2002) he cites. However, the dilemma Sachedina points out is one he does not resolve "definitively," since the rationalism he calls for remains friendly with the divine and with revelation. He wants Islamic jurisprudence to become as dynamic and moralist as it was in its formative period,

through two methods of adaptation to human changes: “substantial transformation of circumstances,” and “functional transformation” (177–178). By way of illustration of the first method, the classical juridical subjecthood/citizenship of non-Muslims (e.g., People of the Book) within a Muslim majority community is now definitively outdated because the circumstances have changed. Equality, gender roles, the empowerment of women, permission for transplantation of organs, etc., are transformations that are nowadays predominantly endorsed by jurisconsults, despite some ongoing resistances in various parts of the Islamic world. What Sachedina has tried to argue for with these examples is to use the Qur’anic “universal objectives” (187) “to see a real development of ethics of concern and empathy for all human beings” (182); “these universal objectives, rooted in the human nature (*fitra*), align with those of the “Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic traditions” (182).

This being said, Sachedina’s display of past and present dynamics in Islamic jurisprudence, and the extent to which they meet the Qur’anic ethical ideals, do remain at the ontological level within the subjectivist (traditionalist) camp. He does not wish to detach them from revelation. Only at the epistemological level, he sets things in motion through applying methods of juridical adaptation to significant changes in society in modern times. He justifies these adaptations by considering them rooted in the tradition, which he seeks to resuscitate and revive. To use Hourani’s typology from *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (1985), Sachedina remains subjectivist at the ontological level and is rationalistic at the epistemological level – rationalistic here does not mean secular-materialist, but simply secular in the sense of this-worldly oriented at the juridical level, while remaining other-worldly oriented at the theological level. Or, in Louay Safi’s words from *Islam and the Trajectory of Globalization* (2022), Sachedina could also be described as a realist-idealist modern Muslim scholar-thinker. For these reasons, the book is an important contribution to the field of Islamic ethics, and it will serve scholars in their comparative studies as the field expands.

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