

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

**Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi‘ (ed.).** *Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought: The Case of Said Nursi*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2010. xiii+268 pp., ISBN 978-1-4094-0617-4, PB.

*Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought* explores modern Muslim theologian Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s (1876-1960) understanding of theodicy and justice. It is, so far, the fourth book on Nursi edited by Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi‘ of the University of Alberta. As he rightly notes in his *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, “even though academic research and interest to Bediuzzaman Said Nursi has accelerated in the last few years, it is still very fresh and does not enjoy the same research and analyses as other modernist Muslim intellectuals and their works, such as Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Sayyid Qutb.”<sup>1</sup> Nursi wrote prolifically on a great range of topics, including divine unity, existence and creation, prophethood and divine revelation, the hereafter, spirituality, interfaith relations, modernity and civilization, politics, and jihad. Published literature on Nursi however has for the most part been biographical or quite broad; this is the first book specifically discussing the notions of theodicy and justice in Nursi’s thought. The 18 chapters in the book (including the editor’s introduction) are contributed by authors based in Turkey, USA, England, Germany, Canada and Russia. It includes both classical and modern voices in engaging “the Qur’anic verses dealing with theodicy at length and Nursi’s intricate theological arguments with respect thereto” (xii).

In the first chapter, Barbara Freyer Stowasser of Georgetown University explicates the notion of evil both in the Qur’ān and the Bible. She further scrutinizes classical Islamic philosophy and theology, especially that of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi‘ (ed.), *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), ix.

---

Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites. In seeking an answer to the question of evil, Stowasser argues, "Nursi addresses the problem by way of contrasting Divine Determining (to save the human soul from pride) with the gift of choice (to make the human soul admit to its responsibility). God creates both good and evil, but it is man's soul that 'acquires' (*kashb*) good or evil acts by its own free will" (15). She notes that, unlike in premodern exegeses of the Qur'ān such as al-Ṭabarī's (d. 923) *Jāmi'*, al-Zamakhsharī's (d. 1144) *Al-Kashshāf*, and al-Rāzī's (d. 1209) *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* "pays no attention to the old gendered hadiths that diminish the woman's creational rank and augment her role in mankind's primeval act of disobedience against God" (16). However, Stowasser does not clearly indicate the authenticity of these hadiths and Nursi's approach to them.

In the second chapter, Ian Markham puts Bertrand Russell in conversation with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi in regard to their understanding of life after death. He draws our attention to the fact that "in the West, (...) it has become fashionable to offer an account of faith that does not include life after death" (19). Markham argues that Nursi's explanation of life after death is compelling and persuasive (26). Affirming Nursi's perspective of evil, Markham highlights that "the evil of the world is impossible to understand unless there is an afterlife. Left with all the evil in its naked awfulness makes theism a complete nonsense" (24). Markham concludes that, as a Christian, he stands with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi in the hypothetical exchange with Bertrand Russell (27). This essay was previously published in Markham's *Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: A Model of Interfaith Dialogue* (Ashgate, 2009).

In the third chapter, Thomas Michel, who has written a number of articles on Nursi, aptly elucidates the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment in Nursi's thought. For Michel, the reason that Nursi insists so strongly on the resurrection of the dead and the Day of Judgment is "because for him these are neither marginal elements of Islamic faith nor mythological representations of eschatological hope. They are expressions of Divine wisdom which validate the whole intention of God's creation" (40). Nursi regards belief in God and the resurrection "as a kind of double talisman which will protect and guide a person through the dangers of life" (33). Though Michel skillfully describes Nursi's understanding of the resurrection of the dead, the question of Nursi's contribution to broader Islamic tradition remains unanswered.

In the fourth chapter, Sukran Vahide, who translated Nursi's magnum opus (the *Risale-i Nur*) into English, outlines the method Nursi used to prove the resurrection of the dead. Vahide argues that Nursi derived his methodology from the Qur'ān. For her, what makes Nursi unique among contemporary Islamic scholars is that "he claimed to have proved the resurrection of the dead to ordinary people and even children" (41). She does not address the question of the audience of other contemporary Islamic scholars.

In the fifth chapter, Bilal Kuspinar focuses on the concept of death and its relation to theodicy. According to Kuspinar, Nursi's treatment of death "appears to be a fresh articulation of the hitherto widely-accepted notion of death among the Muslim intellectuals, but with substantial elaborations and further novel additions based on his own examination and self-experience of death" (54). He summarizes Nursi's view of death as follows: "the creation of death is part of the all-encompassing mercy and all-embracing goodness and beauty. This all-inclusive mercy and beauty in fact, necessitates the existence of both life and death. Despite its scary face in appearance, death yields ultimately good results as it paves the way for an everlasting life" (68).

In the sixth chapter, Lucinda Mosher, a Christian moral theologian in the Anglican tradition, examines Nursi's *Lā Siyyamā*, a treatise on the resurrection published in his major book *al-Mathnawī al-ʿArabī al-Nurī*. Mosher comments on the structure of *Lā Siyyamā* and reflects upon its themes, pointing out that Nursi provides evidences for the existence of God and the necessity of the resurrection from the natural order (74-5). If the reader does not understand the essential connection between faith in God, prophethood, and the Hereafter, "Nursi makes it overt by means of a series of analogies" (75).

Among other contributors, W. Mark Richardson and Leo D. Lefebure compare Nursi's understanding of the resurrection of the dead with broadly held views in the Christian tradition and with Jürgen Moltmann, respectively. Cuneyt M. Simsek of Turkey reflects on Nursi's approach to the problem of animal pain. Dale F. Eickelman of Dartmouth College examines the *Risale-i Nur*'s relationship with modernity in the context of justice and morality. He argues that "the *Risale-i Nur* bridges older yet thoroughly 'modern' ways of explaining justice and morality. Unlike other religious intellectuals of his time, Nursi never lost his rural roots and often employed the metaphors and imagery of Turkey's rural population. Other religious modernist contemporaries, in contrast, distanced themselves from popular belief and rhetorical styles" (144). Leonid Sykiainen of Moscow discusses Said Nursi's approach to justice and its role for political reforms in the Muslim World. For Sykiainen, "Nursi underlines that the pure justice of the Qur'an does not spill the life and blood of an innocent, even for the whole of humanity. The two are the same both in the view of Divine Power, and in the view of justice" (186). Eric Ormsby, David R. Law and Ian Kaplow compare and contrast Nursi's perspective on justice, theodicy and resurrection with various thinkers like al-Shahid al-Thani, Jürgen Moltman, Thomas Merton, and Immanuel Kant.

*Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought: The Case of Said Nursi* is not only timely but also a major contribution to the Islamic literature on the problem of theodicy and justice. Additionally, this collection of essays is a most useful introduction to various aspects of Nursi's understanding of death and resurrection and to the message of his *Risale-i Nur*. This volume will be an

essential reference work for any study on Nursi for readers who have no access to the literature in Ottoman Turkish and Arabic, and who cannot read the significant secondary literature in modern Turkish.

SALIH SAYILGAN  
University of Alberta



***Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal.*** Vaduz, Lichtenstein: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation, 2006-2008. HC 12+2 vols., pp. 6752 + 171 in 12 vols., plus 833 pages (containing *takhrīj* and bibliography) in two volumes. ISBN 978-3-908153-00-9

This superbly produced, large format, 12+2 volume edition of the *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (164-241/780-855) raises to new heights the already exceptional bar of quality set by Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation's previously published set of primary hadith texts.<sup>1</sup> Printed in two colors on off-white matte-finish paper with liberal margins separating the main text from hadith numbering (on both left and right sides) and variants (at bottom, in maroon), in readable, custom-designed font,<sup>2</sup> and handsomely bound using a gold and blind-embossed motif inspired by the celebrated Sultan Oljeitū Qur'ān preserved in the Egyptian National Library, this edition of the *Musnad* is a feast for the eyes. The text was prepared by consulting thirty-eight manuscripts and printed editions, many of them rare and read by the narrators of the *Musnad*, sixteen of which texts have never been consulted before for any printed edition of the work (p. 1), and all of which are described in some detail in the introductory pages (pp. 80-152). The handwritten manuscripts consulted by the team of scholars who prepared this edition under the guidance of living hadith scholars include those of Ḥanbal b. 'Abd Allāh al-Raṣāfī al-Mukabbir (d. 604/1204), Yūsuf b. Khalīl al-Dimashqī (d. 648/1250), and 'Abd al-Laṭīf b. 'Abd al-Mun'ām al-Ḥarānī (d. 672/1273). An additional hand-written manuscript was later obtained from Maktaba Fayḍ Allāh, Turkey, but the researchers could only benefit from it for *musnad al-nisā'*.

On the basis of this rare collection of manuscripts, the researchers found that "there were more than one hundred Hadith missing from one single place

---

1. For previous publications, see <http://www.tradigital.de/downloads/sunna-project-broschure.pdf>.

2. The font is based on the 1932 King Fu'ād Edition of the Qur'ān, generally acclaimed as the apogee of Arabic typography, with at least a thousand additional characters to enhance the text's readability and beauty.