

REVIEW

The Qur'an and the Just Society by Ramon Harvey, 2018. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 288 pp., ill., £80.00. ISBN: 978-1-4744-0329-0 (hbk).

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In *The Qur'an and the Just Society*, Ramon Harvey attempts to establish a foundational framework of societal justice as prescribed in the Qur'an. This daunting challenge is undertaken in four parts. The first part provides the ideological basis for which justice is understood and implemented while the remaining three apply this understanding within three arenas (political, economic, and judicial).

Part I delves deep into the idea of justice, its philosophical basis, its Islamic interpretations, and its theoretical applications. Part II focuses on socio-political justice. The Qur'anic injunctions regarding these are found in the areas of politics (the legitimacy of the ruler, loyalty of followers), peace (treaties, alliances), and war (jihad, breaking alliances, *jizya*). Part III expands on the socio-economic descriptions in the Qur'an, or 'distributive justice.' These are categorized under the wider social spheres of trade (fair trade, *ribā*) and alms as well as the smaller familial spheres of marriage (contract and responsibilities, marital strife, divorce and widowhood) and inheritance (orphans, bequests, and shares of inheritance). Part IV discusses judicial or 'corrective justice' in the Qur'an, namely public crimes (murder, brigandage) and private crimes (thievery, fornication, slander).

Overall, this book is an excellent resource for one interested in navigating the various Qur'anic subjects related to societal justice. It is quite a challenging endeavour as not many previous works have focused on the numerous, and sometimes subtle, facets of justice in the Qur'an. Harvey admirably tackles these facets through a new approach to justice, one grounded in God's wisdom (*hikma*) that can be known to all humanity, whether believers or not. This somewhat controversial perennialist take on justice is referred to as 'natural law'. Although all mankind shares in this natural moral order, believers are favoured with God's written Word – divine law – which was sent to perfect the natural. The culmination of these two laws results in the just society.

The application of this law is examined in Parts II–IV. Notwithstanding the obvious constraint that the Qur'an broaches a limited number of subjects, Harvey does a thorough job in discussing Qur'anic justice in the fields that it does elaborate on. Most explanations of societal rulings are done in the context of the Prophetic age in which they were revealed, although stories of other prophets, Biblical views, and hermeneutics are also applied. One theme emerging from his analysis is the placement of Qur'anic verses within the Meccan and Medinan time periods. He concludes that verses from each of these periods reflect the human progression from the natural to divine law: 'The Meccan Qur'an can be read as

pointing its audience to follow natural law – a morality of which they are expected to be aware – while the Medinan Qur’an provides the further elements of divine law’ (p. 194).

His analysis of these laws leads to some interesting conclusions. In the arena of politics, Harvey argues that peace is the normative approach of the Muslim society toward non-Muslims (within and without) and war is a last resort to ensure security. This benevolent approach is extended in the judiciary where the focus is on repentance, forgiveness, and conciliation between the wrongful and wronged parties. Punishments are only applied as deterrents against crime in an attempt to restore the moral code. Harvey also convincingly argues for an economic model in which people have the right to acquire wealth but with a responsibility to society, resulting in an ebb and flow of wealth from higher to lower classes and between generations.

The author’s divisions and subdivisions of the various categories aid in the navigation of the topics under discussion. However, these categories are not always neatly divided. In the chapter on war, sections are not given. Of the topics discussed, treason is noticeably absent. Instead, the author chooses to focus on breaking alliances. *Fitna* is another area which merits some discussion within the framework of societal justice. Though it is mentioned 60 times in the Qur’an, it is only referred to briefly in reference to a Prophetic story. It is understandably a large topic that could perhaps take up too much space for a short (200-page) work. However, to leave it out entirely without an explanation is disappointing.

Additionally, the placement of verses discussed is sometimes puzzling. For example, 8:58 discusses the breaking of treaties. However, the author places this within the chapter on peace and not the one on war. Again, space may make it difficult to discuss every relevant *āyah* in all its possible connotations. But it remains unclear as to why the author chose a certain verse for one category and not another.

With regard to style, the author does well to reinforce the concepts he introduces but the introduction of said concepts is sometimes confusing. Terminology like ‘syntax-pragmatics’ (p. 44) and ‘neo-Maturidi natural law ethics’ (p. 41) can leave those unfamiliar with these concepts feeling lost. But as the subject is continually reinforced throughout Parts II–IV in the application of these concepts, they become easier to comprehend. Additionally, some discussions seem more appropriate for the footnotes. For example, there is a long discussion on hadith methodology and its critics (p. 54–58). It appears to diverge somewhat from the topic and would be better summarized in a few paragraphs rather than pages.

Despite these minor critiques, this book maintains its place within literature on Islamic political thought and Qur’anic works in general. Though sometimes lacking, Harvey succeeds in drawing an outline for a Qur’anic model of justice in society. As with any scripture, many interpretations can be given and by extension, argued. However, Harvey employs a consistently rational approach which leaves the reader with a sense of understanding of his interpretations, even if not always persuaded by them.