Review of Ramon Harvey (2021) Transcendent God, rational world: a Maturidi theology

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Transcendent God, Rational World: A Maturidi Theology by Ramon Harvey (review)

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Philosophy East and West, Volume 74, Number 4, October 2024, pp. 1-5 (Review)

BOOK REVIEW

Transcendent God, Rational World: A Maturidi Theology. By Ramon Harvey. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. Pp. xiv + 280, Hardcover £90.00, ISBN 978-1-4744-5164-2.

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When can it be claimed that a certain discipline is doing something so new and innovative, that it can be labeled as such? Or when is something so new and innovative that it can no longer bear its original label? Either case signifies a level of discontinuity or rupture with the old ways of doing things. This is the fate of modern Islamic theology, which goes by the name *kalām jadīd*, New Theology.

The discipline of Islamic philosophical or dialectical theology, *ʿilm al-kalām*, acquired its distinct methodology and themes in the first two centuries of Islam, becoming the defining intellectual voice of the Islamic worldview. Responding both to the developed theologies of Christianity and Zoroastrianism and other religions and philosophies, as well as responding to inner theological disputes, it combined comparative theology, philosophy of religion, and dogmatics. It developed its own indigenous rationalism, and integrated and adapted other philosophical ideas and methods, especially those of Aristotle and Neoplatonism. Islamicate civilization generated many native philosophers, like al-Kindī (d. 873) and al-Fārābī (d. 951), but it was Ibn Sīnā (Latin: Avicenna, d. 1037) who literally overturned metaphysical thought in such a radical way that theologians, including Jewish and Christian, speak of theology as before and after his influence.

During the 750 years after the "Avicennian turn" many new philosophies have arisen, but none challenged the metaphysics of the Abrahamic theologies as much as Kant. *Kalām* can, similar to Christian Neo-Scholasticism, ignore the Kantian turn by restating their confidence in Peripatetic and Avicennian/Thomistic metaphysics, or it can integrate and adapt to it. The Muslim voices that have tried the latter are few but they have garnered more attention over the years. One of the biggest challenges of Kantian thought are towards retaining the classical proofs of God's existence, but also the possibility of speaking meaningfully of any type of metaphysical existence apart from empirical experience. The Ottoman theologian Muṣṭafā Ṣabrī (d. 1954) emphasized that the Islamic ideas of prophethood and the unseen spiritual realm (*ʿālam al-ghayb*) would not fit the minimalistic metaphysics of Kant, as many Muslim modernists started to reject the idea of miracles, angels, and life after death.

Kalām jadīd, or (post-)Kantian *kalām*, has therefore the interesting challenge to either reconfigure Kantian metaphysics so that it can sustain traditional Islamic ideas to a certain degree, or the other way around. This challenge is not new as, although Peripatetic and Avicennian metaphysics provided the basis for proofs of God's existence, it also problematized Abrahamic theism, prophethood and resurrection of the body. *Kalām jadīd* can therefore learn much from its discursive tradition on how to deal with those challenges, if one's intent is to salvage the classical Islamic worldview.

To this end, Ramon Harvey's *Transcendent God, Rational World: A Maturidi Theology* presents itself as a work of *kalām jadīd* but also as challenging important aspects of the discursive tradition it is using. When a discipline crystalizes into a certain epistemology and critical method, it attains a level of foundationalism whereby it becomes a tradition which is self-explanatory. This gives it a reasoning and stability which can be passed on over the centuries through certain core ideas and texts. Harvey sees this as the main problem explaining "why the *kalām jadīd* movement has been underwhelming." The Kantian turn upends the post-Avicennian foundationalism of *kalam*, forcing it to become an "open theology" that is "characterised by a receptiveness to diverse sources in its theological structure, prioritising meaning above systematic, foundationalist proof" (p. 5). The challenges for which a new theology has to be constructed are, according to Harvey, the developments in mathematics, logic, analytical philosophy, the phenomenological movement, and quantum mechanics (p. 2). Reality, and thinking about reality, are not the same anymore.

The function of *kalām* is to defend and rationalize scriptural theology against or in relation to prevailing modes of thought. Many *kalām jadīd* thinkers, like the Egyptian Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905), see their challenge as similar to the earliest theologians within Islamic thought who had to innovate without an already clearly defined systematic theology. Going back to the earliest thinkers therefore provides a certain safety net against the accusation that one is fully innovating a new theology from scratch, but at the same time gives enough space to do something new, as the early *kalām* thinkers and *kalām jadīd* thinkers share a "non-foundationalist epistemology" (p. 5).

There is not enough confidence, or competence, yet within the *kalām jadīd* movement to fully include the post-Avicennian *kalām* in their constructive project in the same way contemporary Catholic and Protestant thinkers are using Thomistic and scholastic ideas beyond the confines of Neo-Scholasticism. So, Harvey's choice to mainly use the 10th century Muslim theologian Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944) as his comparative baseline with modern thought shows the experimental phase of his project. His book "returns to the basic questions of epistemology, metaphysics, God's nature and His attributes from the twin lights of a robust *kalām* tradition and modern thought" (p. 3). This reflects the structure of his book which in general follows "the logical order of *kalām* manuals" and especially his chosen role model, al-Māturīdī's *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* (p. 8).

In his introduction he lays out his project of *kalām jadīd*, the need for an open theology, and his reasoning for a non-foundationalist approach. In the first chapter, *Tradition and Reason*, he lays out "the epistemology of al-Māturīdī's theological system…to develop it in *kalām jadīd*" (p. 10). But as he wants to separate al-Māturīdī from the school which arose out of his thought, Harvey spends much effort to map out al-Māturīdī's non-foundationalist approach versus the foundationalism of later school figures. Normally this type of differentiation is done between schools, as in the extensive literature on 'denominational disagreement (*ikhtilāf*)' and 'sectarian deviancy (*firaq*)' of premodern Islamic theology distinguishing for example Māturīdī, Ashʿarī, and Muʿtazilī ideas. But Harvey applies intellectual history here to formulate an apologetics for his own project. In what way are al-Māturīdī and Harvey really similar in their 'open theology', and did the later Māturīdī school really filter "out some of al-Māturīdī's distinctive concepts and methods" because of their 'closed theology' (p. 5) as Harvey states, or was it simply because they deemed these as philosophically not strong enough? He and I had discussed these points during the draft phase of his book (as mentioned in fn. 23 p. 5), and although I share Harvey's interest and enthusiasm for al-Māturīdī, I have come to see fewer problems with the foundationalism of the later tradition for the development of *kalām jadīd*.

The difference between using singular voices, like al-Māturīdī, and working from within a discursive tradition like the later Māturīdī school, is that the latter upholds high standards of verification and dialectical reasoning. But do these standards really form a closed theology which are unworkable for *kalām jadīd*? Again, Harvey does not really answer this question as all his efforts go into singling out al-Māturīdī as much as possible, which also problematizes the readability of this chapter. Showcasing the workable relation between *kalāmic* and post-Kantian epistemology would already have been a major achievement for his *kalām jadīd* project. But instead, Harvey focuses heavily on the intellectual history of *kalāmic* epistemology and MacIntyre to state the contingency of intellectual traditions, seemingly thereby more invested in convincing a Muslim audience to drop their foundationalism than showing a philosophical audience the possibilities of Islamic thought.

The latter audience is treated better in the second chapter, *Rational Reality*, wherein Harvey combines al-Māturīdī, other *kalāmic* thinkers, and Husserl's phenomenology to engage the epistemological and metaphysical challenges of quantum mechanics and Kantian skepticism. Is the world knowable, especially with the shift from seeing the world through detached Cartesian reason towards experiencing it through interdependent consciousness (pp. 64-5)? The possible compatibility between al-Māturīdī and Husserl as both examples of realism-idealism approaches is interesting, but also feels forced from time to time as al-Māturīdī is clearly more in line with a Neoplatonic realism which was upended by post-Kantian thought. Using the whole menu of *kalāmic* thought to engage the latter would in the end be more productive than to force a single voice

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to perform on stages it was not talking from. In this chapter Harvey also presents another of his unique interpretations of al-Māturīdī's thought.

The majority of premodern Muslim theologians were atomists, one of the unique contributions of *kalāmic* philosophy to uphold an occasionalist ontology (pp. 87-9). Although al-Māturīdī was already understood by other intellectual historians to deviate from atomism, Harvey proposes to label him as a proponent of bundle or trope theory and provides an overview of scattered statements by al-Māturīdī to make his point (pp. 89-94). Trope theory is then presented as useful to overcome both the unknowability of essences in Kantian thought and the non-determinative nature of quantum reality (pp. 94-101). Here again the feeling is that two very distinct discussions of Islamic intellectual history and of contemporary philosophy of religion are mixed in a way that only a small audience would be interested in or capable of following.

The third chapter, *Natural Theology*, is more direct and focused as it engages the classical arguments for God's existence and if and how Kantian metaphysics disables them. Now we are in the field of expertise of any good *kalām*, as to prove the reasonableness of scriptural theology one has to prove first the existence of a God who can possibly send revelation. This is also the subject wherein *kalām* and analytical philosophy of religion are easier to align, as the logic behind the *kalām* cosmological argument (KCA) and other proofs for divine existence overlap. Al-Māturīdī is presented again as a reliable baseline, although the majority of *kalāmic* thinkers, including the sophisticated thought of post-Avicennian theologians as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), would have been very useful voices. Harvey engages Western analytical philosophers of religion, like William Lane Craig and Richard Swinburne, showing the sophistication of al-Māturīdī's approaches to the KCA and teleological arguments which "are not exclusively deductive and that they admit the kind of inferences from observation that fit the inductive model," (p. 122) as they did not take the theistic paradigm as a given.

Chapter four, *Divine Nature*, is an interesting engagement with the non-temporality and modality of God in Māturīdī *kalām* and the related discussion in contemporary analytical philosophy of religion (pp. 125-140). In Harvey's discussion on divine nature, he partially presents the dominant *kalāmic* discourse and in what ways al-Māturīdī is in line with it (pp. 141-151), but here Harvey returns to his idea of trope theory and suggests that al-Māturīdī also applied it to God (pp. 152-158). To interpret al-Māturīdī's ontology from trope theory is by itself innovative and maybe requires more engagement among intellectual historians before using it in a book of this nature.

Chapter 5, *Omniscience and Wisdom*, Chapter 6, *Creative Action*, and Chapter 7, *Divine Speech and the Qur'an*, discuss the unique emphasis on these divine attributes within Māturīdī thought which undergirded the Māturīdī claim of a rationally known and non-irascible God, mainly in comparison to other *kalāmic* discussions. These chapters are therefore more defined by intellectual

history than a *kalām jadīd* engaging with analytical philosophy of religion; moreover, they also showcase Harvey as a specialist of Māturīdī thought. Especially from the latter chapter one expected a larger engagement with the idea and possibility of prophethood, a subject which has been discussed and defended extensively within *kalām* and which has been the most undermined idea of Abrahamic religions by post-Kantian thought.

    Ramon Harvey's *Transcendent God, Rational World: A Maturidi Theology* is a fascinating crossover between Islamic intellectual history and contemporary philosophy of religion. The critiques mentioned above are a clear result of the experimental phase in which *kalām jadīd*, especially the ones done in English, are in. To know and prove what has to be done new and differently, one must both discuss the old ways of doing things and the new ideas which are forcing the demanded innovation. Harvey, as an expert in Māturīdī thought, uses his expertise as a way to engage his secondary interest, analytical philosophy of religion. His book should therefore be read as a serious attempt by the Māturīdī school to expand its territory into the field of contemporary English philosophy and by doing so being reflective and reflexive about how it should adapt to this new context.