BOOK REVIEW


Since the publication of the works of Qādī 'Abd al-Jabbar (d. 415 A.H.), especially his magnum opus al-Mughni fi abwāb at-tawḥīd wa'l-'adl, modern scholarship has made strenuous efforts to study his thought. Although 'Abd al-Jabbar was not an early Mu'tazili thinker, yet his voluminous writings provide us with a wealth of information about the Mu'tazili thinking on a variety of subjects, in particular on his theory of ethics. Professor Hourani has reconstituted his theory of ethics by his painstaking labour from various passages of his works, especially vol. VI of al-Mughni, showing that the theory developed by him corresponds to the modern British intuitionism (p. 2). This book traces in Muslim ethics the link between the Greek and the modern Western thinkers on ethical philosophy.

In the literature on the medieval Islamic Jurisprudence a good deal of material can be found that may serve as a basis for the formation of the ethical theory developed by al-Ash'ari and the Mu'tazila as a separate discipline known as al-Kalām. The classical jurists have discussed at length the points which have not been dealt with by the Qur'an. It is of course true as Prof. Hourani presumes, that 'the more general questions concerning human knowledge of ethical values were left by the jurists to theology (kalām) to settle' (p. 3). Nevertheless, it is worthy of remark that one finds full-dress discussion and debate on the two theories called by Prof. Hourani 'theistic subjectivism' and 'rationalistic objectivism' (p. 3) in the classical jurisprudence under the chapter qiyās. Rather we also find a moderate theory developed by al-Māturidī, a contemporary of al-Asha'ri, which is closer to that of the Mu'tazila. Prof. Hourani has dealt with the view of al-Asha'ri and not with that of al-Māturidī who in his theory of ethical values, seems to put a greater premium on reason than on revelation. The study of classical Islamic jurisprudence from the theological point of view may unfold fresh dimensions of knowledge, and of the interaction, in particular, of one to the other. While studying the ethical theory of values one must trace historically, the source of this problem, whether it lies in theology or in jurisprudence.

Fiqh or Usūl al-Fiqh is not purely law in the strict sense of the term. They are disciplines closely linked with ethics too. The classification of injunctions into five legal categories, the question of obligation (Fīāb) of the injunctions, the problem of ratio legis of the divine commandments, and the doctrine of amr (imperative) may provide material for the study of theological problems in jurisprudence. Al-Bazdawi, for instance, in his work on Usūl al-fiqh has devoted a chapter to reason ('aql) and also discusses the causal value of the injunctions in various other chapters. These points clearly indicate the theological approach of the jurists to the legal problems.

Prof. Hourani is not realistic when he says, "The Qur'an which provided the springboard though not the entire impetus of all early Islamic thought, it-self puts forward
no theories of value and ethics” (pp. 8-9). The Qur'an of course was not revealed to provide abstract theories, but to provide guidance for the conduct of a Muslim in his life. It put forward what the author calls ‘normative pronouncements’ (p. 9). Therein lie the fundamental ethical values though not abstract theories that are to be constituted by a thinker himself. To view the Qur'an in this perspective i.e. as a source of values and ethics is to let oneself be influenced by the developments which took place in Islamic history in a period later than that of 'Abd al-Jabbar. It is not necessary that he should have subscribed to this point of view.

Hourani may have good sense of philosophy or ethics and their Islamic developments but he seriously lacks the perspective of Islamic Jurisprudence and because of which he has made remarks which are sometimes naive and sometimes curiously mistaken.

While discussing the sources of Islamic law the learned author omits the consensus of the Muslim community or of its scholars from consideration by saying that ‘It is a source of second order, being the sum of deductions reached by any of the recognized first order method. Consequently, it cannot be classified with the first order methods without overlap( (p. 9. f. n. 5). Curiously enough, the learned author considers the analogical extension to be a source of first order, but not the consensus. In the process of analogical extension, the law of the original case applies to the parallel case on the basis of a common ratio legis. This is overlapping of the sources of the first order, i.e. the Qur'an and sunna. Analogy should be in fact treated as a second order method, for the same reason. It is worthy of remark that consensus is an authority which may accept or reject an interpretation of the Qur'an or sunna. It is consensus which brings the analogical deductions, judgement of equity and public interest on a par with the first order method. Hence al-Shafi'i juxtaposes it with the Qur'an and sunna and omits qiyas (Kitab al-Umm, VII, 261, 274, passim).

In the context of evolution of the two ethical theories it seems an exaggeration to say that “Shafi'i worked out in principle a complete system — on a positive basis leaving no room, and no need for independent ethical judgements of reason' (pp. 11-12). Al-Shafi'i of course laid great stress on the revealed authority in opposition to the judgements based on reason. What he really opposed was unfettered opinion' and arbitrary judgement which might lead to chaos and anarchy in legal thought. At this stage al-Shafi'i was right in his stand because no religion can allow independence to reason so as to become 'an authority' to judge the ethical values of actions. One however finds harmony between reason and revelation in a number of problems discussed by al-Shafi'i where he uses reason as a supplement to revelation (Kitab al-Umm, VII, 190, 205-6).

To name the Mu'tazilite theory of ethics 'rationalistic objectivism, and the orthodox theory 'theistic subjectivism' is also not convincing. The learned author calls the Mu'tazilite theory objectivism because 'the justice of human and of divine acts is the real characteristic of acts; and it is knowable in principle and often known in fact by natural human reason, without the aid of revelation' (p. 10). The reason for calling the latter theory subjectivism is that 'the value of action is defined by relation to certain attitudes or opinion of a mind in the position of judge or observer, such as wishing and not wishing, commanding and forbidding, approved and disapproved. It is theistic because the mind is that of God, in contrast with human subjectivism of various types (pp. 12-13). How can the judgement of the value of an act by reason be called objective and the judgement of it by
God subjective? How can we say that the value of an action defined by revelation is subjective because it is determined ‘in relation to certain attitudes and opinions of mind? Has the rationalistic objectivism no relation to attitude and opinion of mind? One cannot conceive of unprejudicial and pure human reason, totally free from attitude and inclination. Moreover, the value of acts defined by revelation is also in conformity with the dictates of reason, for reason itself is a gift of God. Revelation is rather supra-or-trans-rational and not anti-rational. Revelation never commands to do an act which is evil in itself and never prohibits an act which is good in itself. Hence the value defined by revelation should be called objective. On the contrary reason being fallible may err in its judgement of value of an act. Hence the judgement of reason should be called subjective. Here it involves attitude and opinion which defines the value of an act.

‘Abd al-Jabbār has himself reconciled reason with revelation by taking the values assigned by revelation as rationally justifiable (p. 131).

‘Abd al-Jabbār himself does not see any contradiction between reason and revelation so as to call one objectivism and the other subjectivism. According to him, the revealed prescriptions are rational and man has to depend on revelation due to his limited faculty of understanding of good and evil.

It seems, as Prof. Hourani has shown, that the position of reason in the Mu'tazili system of ethical knowledge is essentially supplementary. Revelation supplies details to reason and is concerned with the secondary obligations (p. 135). Further, showing how revelation plays an important role in ethical guidance, the author tells us that it affirms the goodness of God and gives man the advantage of His knowledge of values in the sphere where man cannot see the good by reason (p. 136). There is complete harmony between reason and revelation in the Mu'tazili system. “Scripture simply discloses truths that are established by reason” (p. 118). We hear the echo of this notion in later centuries in Ibn Taymiyya who believes that there is no conflict between revelation and reason. It is however difficult to say that this view held by ‘Abd al-Jabbār was also held by the Mu'tazila in general. This cannot be claimed until a thorough study of the Mu'tazili thought on this particular point is made.