Islamic Thought and Sources

AGENCY, RATIONALITY, AND MORALITY: A QUR'ANIC VIEW OF MAN, by Mona Abul-Fadl. London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2024, 107pp. ISBN: 978-1642056979.

Agency, Rationality, and Morality (hereafter: *ARM*) is a book-length essay by Mona Abul-Fadl (1945-2008), the Muslim Egyptian academic who came to prominence as a critic of modern feminism and western liberalism. It was published some nine years ago in abbreviated form in a UNESCO publication.[1] This latter volume, which was commissioned for the UNESCO Histories project, was intended, in the words of Irina Bokova ("Preface," p.5), Director-General of UNESCO (2009-2017), as a 'seminal contribution to exploring the richness of Islamic civilization, and its immense contribution to the history of humanity.' In the spirit of UNESCO's founding vision, the volume was compiled to 'underline the importance and value of diversity for all societies and for humanity as a whole....' Taking advantage of the current hysteria surrounding the increasing cultural visibility of artificial intelligence and machine learning, IIIT saw fit to publish *ARM* eight years after the UNESCO publication and 16 years after its author's death from breast cancer in 2008. The work under review, though longer than the version published by UNESCO, presents the same message. In the intellectual climate of 2024, however, the book can now be read as responding to current anxieties about what makes humans human and whether or not robots matter to God. The work under review, therefore, appears to have originally been a provisional draft of the UNESCO publication which was still incomplete at the time of the author's passing.

ARM's objective is, 'to provide a reading of the Islamic view of man against a background of the preoccupations of modernity' (p.1). It shares, therefore, the critical agenda of authors, such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who are highly critical of modernity, alarmed by the precipitous decline of religious faith it has generated, and who see Islam as providing an authentic spiritual remedy for modernity's ailments. Unlike Nasr, however, Abul-Fadl's approach is not guided by the concept of tradition, which has gained much traction of late in recent research in Islamic studies. Indeed, the approach Abul-Fadl takes to developing the Islamic view of man is quite traditional. It seeks to arrive at a Qur'ānic anthropology by an

1 Mona Abul-Fadl, 'The Islamic View of Man: Agency, Rationality and Morality as Seen through the Qur'ān," in *The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture, Volume 1: Foundations of Islam*, edited by Zafar I. Ansari and Isma'il I. Nawwab (Paris: UNESCO Publishing,

unsophisticated, common-sense reading of the Qur'ān. It is one which assumes that there is ultimately one, coherent Islamic view, and that this view can be reliably got from direct engagement with scripture, mainly the Qur'ān. The approach taken in *ARM* also assumes that the exegetical tradition on the Qur'ān is largely dispensable, and that in order to develop remedies for modernity's numerous illnesses, consulting how medieval and early modern Muslim philosophers and *mutakallimūn* understood key Qur'ānic concepts in other discourses is largely unnecessary. Finally, unlike thinkers such as Nasr, who are intensely aware of how modern philosophical categories shape how we approach scripture, *ARM* exhibits little reflexive awareness of which elements of medieval and modern thought have informed the Qur'ānic view of man the book purports to uncover. To be sure, there are references to a motley collection of thinkers, including al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1143), Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273), Ibn Taymīyah (d. 1328), Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185), Rūmī (d. 1273), Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), Abū l-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. ca. 910), Ibn ʿAṭā'illāh (d. 1309), ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 1424), Fakhr alDīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) and, I assume, al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. probably early fifth/eleventh century and who may or may not be the same person as one "al-Asfahani" who also appears in her book twice). But *ARM*'s engagement with their thought is so superficial that appeals to them appear to be no more than performative nods to traditional Islamic scholarly authority. *ARM* (pp.47-50) exhibits some interest in showing the diversity of the Islamic view of man, but the views of the above scholars are so utterly incongruous that it is hard to see how anything like a single, consistent Islamic view could be got from such thinkers, several of whom did not believe that certain other thinkers who appear in this very list were even Muslim.

ARM consists of four chapters and a conclusion, though the brief overview at the beginning of the book (pp.1-5) lists two chapters that do not exist. The aim of Chapter One, "Initial Reflections on a Theme", is identifying what outlooks Abul-Fadl believes lie at the heart of modern perspectives. Like Nasr and many environmental thinkers, Abul-Fadl takes the anthropocentric nature of modernity, that man rather than God is the measure of all things including the source of morality, as the root of the many evils in the modern world. Secular humanism, materialist philosophies and science, particularly evolutionary biology, have not only ejected God from the world but alienated man from nature and from himself. In such an atmosphere, it is hardly surprising that humanity has lost its way and must, according to the author, renew the search for God and guidance (p.11).

In the second chapter, "Islam Remembered" (pp.12-24), the author identifies some salient characteristics of *insān*, or the idealised form of the human being. This includes the idea that the human being is a 'relational entity' who, as the object

of God's special providence and concern, has been set a mission to serve as God's privileged representative (*khalīfah*) on earth (p.13). Man, though perhaps not a fully natural being, possesses a close connection to nature, which has been "subordinated" to man through God's 'act of providential *taskhīr*' (p.14). The author also speaks about the *nafs* (heart, soul, self, [see, p.66]), offering a sort of potpourri psychology, which makes it variously the 'site of volition,' the ground of certain dispositions to act preferentially, an 'active agent that is capable of commanding and restraining,' the entity 'responsible for whether man's inner condition is in turmoil or at peace,' and possibly, too, the ground for reason, sensation, deliberation, discernment, discrimination, learning, knowledge, memory, intuition and mind (pp. 14-16, 66). The author also speaks at some length about the Qur'ānic narrative of the Fall, which she says was not punishment for Adam's transgression in Paradise, but the arrival of an event of cosmic significance, when Adam and Eve fulfilled their destiny to take up their joint "vocation" as *khulafā'* on earth (pp.20-4).

Chapter three, "A Replenishment from the Sources," finally begins to unpack the Qur'ānic view of *insān*, what the author calls the 'generic man' (p. 27). She discerns three 'levels of discourse' about this Qur'ānic figure: the discourse on man's creation, another on 'man's elevation and ennoblement into: "God's Honoured Creation" [sic],' and finally 'a discourse on man's guidance and instruction' (pp.27-28). The author immediately turns, however, to a somewhat tangential discussion of what the Qur'ān is and the nature of the Qur'ān's mode of communication (pp.27-37). She does not return to discuss these levels of discourse in the rest of the chapter. The chapter concludes with a largely irrelevant digression about the "Abrahamic Way" in the Qur'ān.

The final chapter is entitled "The Qur'anic Discourse on the Creation of Man." As the title suggests, the first part of the chapter takes up a discussion of the first "level of discourse" mentioned early in chapter three. In the following subsection, the author takes up the question of whether the Qur'ānic view of man she seeks is as immutable and homogenous or "monolithic" as the Qur'ān itself. This is a fair criticism, which the author's highly abstract approach has made her especially vulnerable to. Unfortunately, she does not answer it. Instead, she briefly alludes to "diversity" about the nature of man in the Islamic tradition (pp.47-8), but ultimately concludes that the question itself is the problem because the source of its critical force relies on a false dichotomy of permanence and change. Abul-Fadl observes that the sacred sources of Islam provide "fixity" in the midst of the enormous diversity of the different views that individual Muslim thinkers offered in answer to the question of what the human being is (p.50). This response is, of course, highly unsatisfactory as it runs contrary to her approach in the book; indeed, it challenges

the very assumption that, apart from its individual instances in the works of Muslim scholars of the past, a single, fixed and idealised Qur'ānic view of man exists, which is by all accounts what *ARM* is supposed to be about. The final two sections are devoted to the social and political implications of the Qur'ānic view of man. The author speaks about the principle of equality, especially of the sexes (pp.60-73). The equality that characterizes all human beings, the author argues, is due to all creation's single, divine source. Privilege that really matters, the one with cosmic significance, 'remains possible within this equality by striving in the way of devotion and good works to seek God's countenance. In this case the boundaries of equality overlap with those of privilege and man assumes a status earned as much as a status conferred' (p.67). The author argues that man's calling and vocation as *khalīfah* can only be completely fulfilled when men and women work together in households in different but complementary roles that promote the fulfilment of man's God-given destiny. The author calls this a teleological 'principle of duality,' which takes on cosmic and not merely biological significance (p.68). The Qur'ānic view of politics the author develops, which regards the needs, dispositions and capacities of the *nafs* as the foundation of political organisation and welfare, has much in common with the moral and political philosophy of some of the *falāsifah* of classical Islam, such as al-Fārābī (d. ca. 950) and Miskawayh (d. ca. 1030) (p.64). This chapter is followed by a brief synopsis of the main lines of argument in the book.

In terms of editing, language, writing style, organisation *ARM* is highly unsatisfactory, which is a pity as these are shortcomings that could have been avoided had the publisher put more effort into preparing the text for publication. Other shortcomings, however, cannot be so easily mended. One has to do with the author's deep antipathy, even loathing of philosophy and rational speculation more generally. The author is highly dismissive of philosophy. She does not see it as one of the 'central tasks of life' (p. 29), but regards it as an 'ordeal' that humans may be spared by following revelation (p.51). She deems it an unworthy preoccupation and distraction (p.51), and as no more than vain speculation that indulges in 'flights of the imagination' (p. 51) which yield an 'aberration from the essence of a just order' (p.52). Yet, the book's main topics, agency, rationality and morality are hallmark themes in modern philosophy, and readers can be forgiven for expecting some direct engagement with these concepts in a way that is familiar from the standpoint of contemporary philosophy. Yet, these terms are barely discussed in the book.

Finally, *ARM* suffers from an incoherence that undermine its aims. The author is engaged in a search for authentic Islamic alternatives to the moral philosophies of the Enlightenment whose secular humanism, materialism and dogmatic rejection of religion and the spiritual have indeed contributed in part to

humanity's moral decline. Yet, even as Abul-Fadl seeks to reject the legacy of the Enlightenment and its pronouncements about Islam and religion more generally, the concepts that guide her analysis, agency, morality, rationality, are cornerstones of much Enlightenment philosophy. Hence, what the book offers is not a Qur'ānic alternative to Enlightenment moral philosophy, but an interpretation of the Qur'ān developed within an Enlightenment framework. An example of how the author has become ensnared in Enlightenment categories is how she deals with what she might call the Qur'ānic doctrine of the moral agent. Her view that 'created agents' are 'neither the emanations of a pure intellect nor the instruments of a pure will' clearly represents a firm rejection of the view, promoted by Muslim Platonists, such as Ibn Sīnā, that human beings are no more than embodied souls, and the orthodox voluntarist view, defended by classical Ash'rites such as al-Ghazālī, that every stage of the process that constitutes a human act, whether it is subject to moral evaluation or not, is created and determined by God (p.35). But such abstract views of the grounds of morality are also characteristic of what Alisdair MacIntyre has called the "Enlightenment project" and its search for abstract foundations for ethics. Abul-Fadl likewise thinks such abstractions should play no part in the metaethical narrative she tells. They 'are meaningless abstractions,' she avers, 'which are figments of the imagination and constitute wonton projections of the speculative mind' (p.35). Counter to the 'wonton abstractions' of the *mutakallimūn* and the *falāsifah*, she argues that the Qur'ānic view of moral agency takes into account all aspects of the human constitution and its faculties (pp.35-6). Yet, the abstractions which she so detests in Enlightenment moral philosophy as much as in traditional Islamic doctrines, resurface in her treatment of the human being, the *nafs* and sex. Abul-Fadl's view of the *insān*, which she calls the generic human being, though a compound of rationality, will and sense perception, is, nevertheless, a highly abstract entity. Moreover, in order to secure the perfect equality of men and women, Abul-Fadl insists on their essential similarity. She urges us to recognise that, having been created out of 'the self-same entity, men and women share an identical nature which... qualifies them for morality and responsibility. Indeed, the site for this morality is the *nafs* which is... a vital and dynamic entity, which transcends gender and whatever other differences that might subsist between any two individuals, singly or collectively [sic]' (p.64). In her effort to turn boldly away from traditional Islamic and Enlightenment anthropologies and to amplify the idea of equality in the Qur'ānic view of man, Abul-Fadl ends up being ensnared in the tangle of Enlightenment thought she sought so desperately to escape.

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