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Oliver Leaman

The Qur'an: A Philosophical Guide

Bloomsbury Academic, London
– New York 2016

The book that is here under review, *The Qur'an: A Philosophical Guide* by Oliver Leaman, is a part of the *Corpus Coranicum Project* by the same author, including previously published works *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Leaman, and *Islam: The Key Concepts*, written by Kecia Ali and Leaman. Also, the publisher of this book, Bloomsbury Academic, has already published several works on Islam, e.g. *Interpreting the Qur'an* by Clinton Bennett, *The Bloomsbury Companion to Islamic Studies* edited by Clinton Bennett, and *The Composition of the Qur'an* by Michel Cuypers.

Leaman's new book is not a concordance of the Qur'an like, for instance, Rudi Paret's book. In addition, in this book Oliver Leaman elucidates certain aspects of the philosophical and the rational structure behind the language of the Qur'an, which is the very heart of Islam. This implicates a further important distinction, namely, the distinction between the Holy Qur'an, on the one hand, and its interpretations, on the other hand. According to a long development of the philological efforts of Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic jurisprudence, which is simultaneously supported by a growing activity of translating foreign scientific books and intensified by the transfer of academic life for the sake of practical needs, such convergent developments supported philosophical thinking in Islam. As a result, the Qur'an is clearly the major source of authority in the religion of Islam, i.e. sacred, but its interpretations are not sacred and they have been shaped and have changed through time since context changes from time to time and place to place, so we cannot speak about their own sacredness – whatever the personal commitment happens to be. This is worth bearing in mind when dealing with the perennial question of how scripture and philosophy actually work together. It should be emphasized that Leaman is one of the rare scholars able to work on such a project.

Broadly speaking, in his new book Oliver Leaman is looking for a hermeneutic strategy which will be valid, philosophically based, and at the same time he is trying to remind

his readership that Islamic philosophical investigations are not just a blind cult of authorities, but that they also really do deserve our full attention or appreciation of Islamic philosophical thought. Set within the context of philosophical interpretations, ranging from the most Islamophobic to the extreme apologist, this volume offers philosophically critical, innovative, and productive dialogue with a valuable philosophical interpretation of the Qur'an, which makes it an immensely learned and stunningly good book of choice for every serious seeker in this field.

We do need to remind ourselves how to approach the Holy Qur'an as a rich and multi-faceted book, and how it has come to be understood in a variety of cultural contexts. The value of this is evident and presented in Oliver Leaman's book in a more academic setting through the development of different Qur'anic topics, and it will constantly remind us of this unravelling of the religious and philosophical language involved in its hermeneutical machinery presented here. Finally, I would like to mention Leaman's own words about himself, according to which he is "writing carefully so as not to raise the hackles of those who would be hostile to the ideas he is presenting".

Nevad Kahteran

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Snježana Veljačić-Akpınar

Buddhist Meditations on Islamic Contemplative Paths

Less Traveled Roads & Abandoned Junctions

Dharma Realm Buddhist University,
Ukiah, CA 2015

Snježana Veljačić-Akpınar, a daughter of the late professor Čedomil Veljačić, was somehow predestined by this key fact in her life and successful academic career. She is President Emerita of the Dharma Realm Buddhist University (DRBU, since 1995), Director of the Institute for World Religions, a scholar of Middle Eastern studies and comparative religion, etc.

Her book *Buddhist Meditations on Islamic Contemplative Paths: Less Traveled Roads & Abandoned Junctions* is a collection of academic lectures and papers that shows the connections between Buddhism and Islam. Snježana Veljačić-Akpınar's practice is Buddhism, but her studies are in Islam. These essays were written over a lengthy period of time as her attempt to focus on those criteria which were needed to assess our common worldviews, by simultaneously studying the cultures and languages of the Middle East.

Veljačić-Akpınar is originally from Croatia. She graduated at the University of Belgrade in Serbia (which was, at that time, just like Croatia, a part of the former Yugoslavia) and earned her Ph. D. degree in Ottoman Turkish Studies at the University of Istanbul. Before retiring, Veljačić-Akpınar spent half her time at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, a Chinese Buddhist Monastery in Northern California, teaching Buddhists about the West, while the remainder of her time she spent at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, offering courses in Islam and comparative religion, teaching Westerners about the East.

If we could draw a parallel with her distinguished father Čedomil Veljačić / Bhikkhu Nānājīvako (Zagreb, 1915 – Ukiah, CA, 1997) – a pioneer of Buddhist, indological studies, as well as comparative and perennial philosophy in the countries of former Yugoslavia – who used the expression “Himalayas of Soul”, then Snježana Veljačić-Akpınar's efforts summarized in this book, as her own repository of spiritual insight and practice, will be her own climbing to the same roof of the world from the opposite side (climbing that “connects the individual with the universe and the inevitable movement of anyone who is on the road, be it on an inward or an outward journey”). I am writing about her amazing approach to that area bounded by the Central Asian countries and the Mediterranean basin with Turkey and the Fertile Crescent in the West with many archaic traits that are really worthy of revisiting by influencing European thought on the eve of the Renaissance.

The very first chapter of this book forms the story about the medieval Turco-Islamic text known as the *Kutaḍgu Bilig* or *Sacred Knowledge* – an Islamicized text with Buddhist origins incorporated in the emerging Islamic norms, written in Kashgar in the 11th century – with a key question concerning connectedness on the Western side of Central Asia known to the ancient world as Bactria: Is there a connection between Buddhism and Islam? What characterizes Bactria the best is Buddhism and this region becomes important

for the Turks during the so-called Kushana period. Unfortunately, at the moment we have at our disposal only two books regarding this issue: F. Mujtabai's *Hindu-Muslim Cultural Relations* and Shah Reza Kazemi's *Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism*.

One of Veljačić-Akpınar's conclusions is the following: “It would follow that the advent of the Arabs and Islam did not wish to destroy the silent underpinning of philosophical and commercial discourses that kept trade routes relatively operable along these vast stretches of land. It is notable that many early commentaries on Buddha's discourses have been preserved in Turkish/Uygur, but lost in original Pali.” (Pali is considered to be the original canonical language of the Buddhists.) This is why today, in view of this Central Asian syncretism, Turks still consider the *Kutaḍgu Bilig* as a didactic gnostic treatise that links them across national and religious heritages and boundaries.

This is followed by the second chapter in which the author attempts to outline the history of pre-Islamic Arabia and the dawn of Islam in that light stressing that the influence Iran and the East had on these areas is not slight at all, because of remnants and traces of such proto-cultures scattered throughout the Arabian Peninsula.

The third chapter, “Paths of Meditative Absorption” is a collaborative work of Čedomil Veljačić and Snježana Veljačić-Akpınar in their study of Sufi techniques in the process of attaining the purification of the soul present in various degrees and eternal felicity and blessedness (through the analysis of Muhasibi, the Brethren of Purity, i.e. *Ikhwan al-safa*, al-Ghazali and other Sufi masters). Bearing all this in mind, the Buddhist path and Indian system of meditative absorption as the path of purification (*Vissudhi Magga*) is represented as comparable to the previous one. Actually, the authors underline that the goal of Sufi, as well as of Jain or Buddhist teachings, is a progressive elimination of unnecessary “particles” which compose the self, i.e. “impurities” which pollute the mind and block the entrance of mercy and are remarkably similar to Sufi views. The authors quote the statements of Sufis which correspond almost verbatim to typical koans in Japanese Zen, which will broaden and lead this discussion to the well-known studies written by Toshihiko Izutsu, another giant of spirit; for instance, his *The Structure of Oriental Philosophy (Collected Papers of Eranos Conference, vols. I & II)*.

The fourth chapter, “Islam and Its Cultural Roots“, discusses the matter of “transmigration of ideas”. The author is convinced that

they do not succeed in being isolated or remaining pure.

The fifth chapter discusses the place of doubt in Islam, keeping in mind the Eastern sources of such a manner of thinking and representing it as a salutary method for reaching the divine, so creating a viable and credible platform for their intellectual venture in the international arena through observing two giants of spirit, al-Ghazali and Descartes, with Hellenic and Indic connections regarding this issue.

The concluding chapter, “Modernity in Conversation with Islam and Buddhism: An Encounter of Intellect and Wisdom”, offers certain general concepts on the subject by considering possible challenges to modernity in view of globalization and its fragmentation.

Nevad Kahteran

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Massimo Campanini

Philosophical Perspectives on Modern Qur’ānic Exegesis

Key Paradigms and Concepts

Equinox Publishing, Bristol 2016

Many threads and various hermeneutical approaches were interweaved in *Philosophical Perspectives on Modern Qur’ānic Exegesis*, a book by Massimo Campanini, which is composed of two parts. Throughout the first part, which examines a number of hermeneutical problems, Massimo Campanini tries to stress a crucial point: truth is disclosure (*a-letheia*) and this highly phenomenological aim involves the necessity to decodify the symbols (*āyāt*), stressing the fact that contemporary philosophical hermeneutics seeks new methodology and horizons, which have not yet been assessed. Also, he insists that language and linguistic hermeneutics is the starting point of any other hermeneutics, even philosophical, while, in Part II, he puts forward a possible thematic interpretation of a circumscribed Qur’ānic aspect as his own hermeneutical key in this book, taking into account that this part explains the “conditions of possibility” of philosophical, or even better said, phenomenological hermeneutics of

the Qur’ān, especially because phenomenology offers a direct route to an investigation of the ontological reality of God. This is a highly hermeneutical key and an open question here.

So, how does one find common philosophical ground in order to enhance dialogue concerning these critical issues in the academic study of the Qur’ān and interrelated traditional teachings and beliefs which stem from it and which can be read in phenomenological terms, or to quote the author’s own term, *through the lens of a philosophical Qur’anology*?

This book is, without a doubt, Campanini’s own great contribution to the ongoing hermeneutical applications to the Holy Text, i.e. a contribution to the exploration of the conditions of possibility of philosophical hermeneutics of the Qur’ān starting with Ibn Rushd’s flexible utilization of language in describing metaphysical and ontological truth and including a modern philosophical approach. At the same time, he is well immersed and rooted in Western and Islamic philosophy alike, as a devoted pluralist and comparatist thinker, capable of speaking about reality in different ways. However, he stresses several times that the Qur’ān contains many verses that acknowledge pluralism, quoting Reza Shah-Kazemi who says that mutual knowledge and reconnaissance (*ta’aruf*) is the epistemological fundament of diversity while conditions of interpretation arise from the characteristics of the Qur’ān as *a-letheia* (knowledge emerges from a disclosure of Truth).

Also, the book enhances the need to (re)read the Sacred Text using new methods of inquiry within the broad framework of the mentioned hermeneutical key which he proposes in the field of contemporary (philosophical) hermeneutics of the Qur’ān, demonstrating the utility of finding a philosophical pattern in order to understand the Qur’ān as an open-textured dialogue with its internal coherence of language and the self-referentiality of the Qur’ānic language placing the Holy Text within a time-framed perspective, which is an essential element of hermeneutics developing a self-aware philosophical interpretation. Written in this manner, the book will become an unavoidable reference for contemporary philosophical Qur’anology, at least because of its insisting on harmonization between the Holy Text revealed 15 centuries ago and sophisticated modernity which is more and more sceptical about religious truths.

According to Campanini, Arabic is more than a key of interpretation and it is the real structure of the mentioned *a-letheia*. The translation of the Qur’ān is both a semantic task