

Islamic Humanism. By Lenn E. Goodman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. 273 + endnotes, bibliography and index. £38.99.

This fascinating and eloquently written text represents a sophisticated attempt to accentuate some of the distinct threads of moral and ethical thought inherent in classical Islamic expressions of humanism, examining the perceived contextual constructs which allowed this tradition to engage in the synthesis of such thought in a functional yet creative manner. The objective of this endeavour is not to furnish a chronological survey of the Islamic tradition of humanism, neither does this book seek to broach a redefining or appropriation of its ethics and moral values, but rather its stated aim is to present a percipient gauging of the materials, concepts and thought which classical Muslim scholarship reflected upon in articulating a rich and cosmopolitan tradition of humanism. Intriguingly, Goodman takes the view that the vitality and greatness of Islamic civilisation, together with its capacity to imbue and inspire, stemmed manifestly from this tradition's ability to integrate, assimilate, and decisively synthesise resources and systems of thought with which it came into contact. Moreover, he asserts that the receptivity and responsiveness of classical Islamic thought and culture in its approach to such resources, which were purposefully subjected to critical appropriation and dynamic rational analysis, meant that individuality, creativity, tolerance, freedom of choice and benevolence were enthusiastically encouraged. This book argues that the synergy of this cohesive arrangement sustained a flourishing Islamic civilisation, a civilisation which deftly accommodated the mundane with the spiritual, enabling an enlightened articulation of humanistic values.

Introducing the thoughts which prefigure this work, Goodman explains that Muslims today are faced with rival and contrasting interpretations of their religious tradition: on the one hand, they are exposed to a militant, fanatical, and puritanical Islam, a form of the faith which professes a fiercely repressive constitution engendered by 'disillusionment and the politics of frustration'. Its image of the past is a deceptive illusion; apocalyptic claims and insularity colour not only its perspectives and attitudes, but also the very values of its culture. Goodman notes that regrettably this particular form of Islam continues to influence pejoratively Western perceptions of the faith. However, Goodman moves on to remark that there does exist another authentic form of Islam: it is a compassionate, tolerant, pluralistic, broad-based tradition, symbolising a profoundly spiritual expression of the faith. He contends that this is a tradition which strived to recognise universality in words and symbols, being simultaneously predicated on the rejection of compulsion, conservatism, and obscurantism. Furthermore, the currency of its thought has a pedigree firmly rooted in the institutions and values of the classical Islamic tradition, being naturally reconciled with expressions of religious beliefs and devotion. Indeed, it is this

‘other’ Islam with which this book is pre-eminently concerned, optimistically seeking to place it within the compass of rediscovery and reinvention, although relative distinctions between apparent forms of the faith are far more intricate than hitherto presented. It is stated by the author that this text is not an apology for Islamic humanism, but rather an attempt to induce a reflective and focused assessment of the issues raised in this text among progressive Muslim thinkers, furnishing landmarks and models for further enquiry as they rise to the challenges of modernity faced by the Islamic and Arab world.

Goodman’s subtle arrangement of the form and contents of this book allows him to conceptualise, in an albeit selective manner, Islamic expressions of humanism in terms of their historical environs, probing defined aspects of literary, theological, philosophical, and historiographical themes and constructs in which symbolic dimensions of Islamic humanism were evocatively projected. The first chapter is used to provide an overview of the interplay between the sacred and the secular in terms of literature and faith. Goodman maintains that terrain conventionally occupied by emblems of secularity also served contiguously as the landscape and relief for a religiously configured way of life: for example, the celebration of love as a secular value by orthodox figures such as Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), derives its impulse from the need to counter the antinomian excesses of a monistic mysticism; yet it is compellingly formulated with a purportedly secular countenance. Chapter two explores the articulation of the values of ethics essential to humanism across the gamut of the classical Islamic sciences. The chapter culminates with an imposing study of the system of virtue ethics devised by the ethicist and historian Miskawayhi (d. 421/1030). This individual’s system of ethics serves as a constructive example of critical appropriation stimulated by spiritual exigencies. The fact that his system of ethics is determinedly adapted and refined by al-Ghazālī (d. 555/1111) in his own orthodox articulation of Sufism allows Goodman to place this adaptation within a wider conceptual framework; it is a framework utterly germane not only to a prudent recasting of Miskawayhi’s humanistic ethics, but also one which also endeavours to give significant prevalence to the modes of integration and assimilation championed by this figure.

Chapter three of this text extends the theme of critical appropriation by exploring Islamic responses to Greek philosophical texts, particularly in the realm of metaphysics and epistemology: it highlights theological debates which presaged the definition of religious values together with their humanistic dimension. The discourse therein of cynosures such as al-Farabī (d. 339/950), al-Kindī (d. c. 256/870), al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) should, in the view of Goodman, serve to illuminate and inspire. Impressively, the final chapter shifts the focus to the subject of the literature of Arabic universal history and the rise of Islamic historiography. Identifying the theoretical parameters of a number of the

definitive texts from this genre, Goodman declares that their authors were able to transcend an insular approach to this subject and compose histories which were impelled by a sense of pragmatism and the quest for a universally contextualised chronicle of their own distinguished histories. The fruits of this labour advanced a consciousness and appreciation of the cultural and social import of milieux beyond the realm of Islam, fostering a universal spirit to the meaning and purpose of history together with its critical social value. Moreover, this thought brings one back to the central premise of this book: namely, the contention that the spirit of humanism can be appositely accommodated within the contours of the Islamic tradition.

This book offers a distinctively resourceful approach to the subject of Islamic humanism, presenting the issues with creative academic vigour. Indeed, Goodman's marshalling of the materials is impressive, while the clarity and insight with which the issues are explored add to the book's value. The subject of Islamic humanism is certainly worthy of even greater academic attention and this positive effort serves as one way of addressing this concern: a text of this nature should appeal not only to specialists in the classical Islamic sciences, but also to a more general audience that wishes to savour the fusing of the intellectual, moral, and religious forces which indelibly shaped Muslim expressions of their faith together with its palpable humanistic dimensions.

MUSTAFA SHAH