

BOOK REVIEW

Maszlee Malik. *Foundation of Islamic Governance: A Southeast Asian Perspective*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017.

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At first, this reviewer was reluctant to pick up this book. He was not very interested in Islamic political economy and he was not sure what he could gain by reading this book. He turned out to be completely wrong. Maszlee Malik has written a superb book that provides an intellectual framework for anyone interested in deconstructing Western paradigms in the social sciences, economics and management. He proposes an Islamic alternative that goes beyond Islamic political economy but touches at the core of how the Muslim world might look like in the future. This reviewer proposes to first outline the various chapters before making some further observations.

The book is composed of an introduction and eight chapters. These are: Introduction; Chapter 1 (Governance: Definitions and conceptual framework); Chapter 2 (Deconstructing the concept of good governance); Chapter 3 (Religion and governance: A philosophical enquiry); Chapter 4 (Ontological and epistemological sources for Islamic governance); Chapter 5 (New approach to the texts: Epistemological methods-related concerns); Chapter 6 (Contribution of Muslim scholars in the development of knowledge base for governance); Chapter 7 (Architectonics of Islamic governance: Locating the axioms, foundational principles and working mechanisms); and Chapter 8 (Articulation of Islamic governance).

The titles of the chapters indicate the only problem with the book. Its academic style can be off-putting for readers. However, once this reviewer got used to this somewhat formal style of writing, reading this book became very instructive.

In the introduction, Maszlee sets the problem. Over the last two centuries, Western societies have pushed religion outside the public discourse. Due to their political and economic power, they have exported their beliefs

about governance to the rest of the world. At the same time, religion is making a comeback. Will this be a repeat of history? This seems to be the fear of Western intellectuals. Will society return to the Dark Ages? Or will religion be a positive force for change but without a return to the past? To make a positive contribution to this debate, Maszlee argues that Muslim scholars need to look at their sources in a new light.

The first chapter, probably the least interesting, starts by defining various concepts—like governance, modernity and so forth. This experience is a reminder that almost all social sciences are rooted in the Western historical experience. This reviewer realises that definitions are important, but the first chapter lacked anything concrete to get excited about. Perhaps Maszlee should have merged the introduction (which set up the problem nicely) with the first chapter to better hook the reader. This reviewer felt somewhat disappointed by the first chapter.

The second chapter is much more interesting. First of all, it is well researched. For example, this reviewer did not know that the “colonialist mindset” actually originated with the ancient Greeks. Second, Maszlee systematically deconstructs many concepts—such as governance, modernity, development and science—and shows how they are rooted in a European-centric worldview. A certain humour runs through this chapter—for example the discourse on development is defined as “a set of practices and beliefs that are part of the Western political and cultural imagination” (47)—that makes this chapter much more engaging.

The third chapter was more serious. Can religion be a force for positive change? In this chapter, Maszlee shows that religion is not a monolithic concept. The European experience was somewhat unique and has framed the way religion and governance are viewed. However, religion is already a positive force in many parts of the world. For example, in Central and South America, “theologies of liberation” have really helped the people deal with poverty and fight against injustice instead of simply connecting with the sacred. Similarly, many Islamic movements are working hard to benefit their communities in various parts of the Muslim world. This reviewer would have like more explanations and more numbers to back up the claims that Maszlee was making. It’s almost as if he knows his subject so well, he forgets that other readers might not be as familiar and that extra explanations enhances his points.

The title of the fourth chapter—“Ontological and epistemological sources for Islamic governance”—was somewhat vague but it turned out to be a thorough discussion about *tawhid* and other related concepts. Muslims are so

used to discussing *tawhid* within the framework of theology that one forgets that *tawhid* is a broad concept with multiple implications and applications. Maszlee does a good job at explaining the original meaning outside of the framework that Muslims are used to. Maszlee's argument seems to be that if Muslims scholars are going to make a positive contribution, they have to take concepts—like *tawhid*—but apply them more broadly. This highlights the fundamental problem with the Western discourse on governance. It assumes that there is only this world. The practical implication of *tawhid* is that before making any decision, Muslims would think about the consequences in this world and the next, for themselves and the society around them. Towards the end of the chapter, Maszlee raises an issue that runs through the rest of the book. Are Muslims encouraged to work together with non-Muslims for the common good? Maszlee reviews the historical evidence to support his points. At the stage, this reviewer was thoroughly engaged with the book and reading it slowly and carefully.

The fifth chapter focuses more on some technical issues—such as whether legal rulings should reflect a deontological or a consequentialist perspective. There is a rather interesting discussion on the evolution of the *maqasid al-shariah*. However, this chapter was quite brief so maybe some additional material could have helped readers better appreciate the points being made.

The sixth chapter reviews the contributions of classical Muslim scholars to the field of governance. Maszlee briefly reviews the contributions of al-Mawardi, al-Juwaini, Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Khaldun among others. The approaches of newer scholars in the 19th and 20th century is also analysed. It is clear that many decisions made in the past were based on *ijtihad* due to contextual considerations at the time. The question is whether Muslims today are going to replicate these decisions or develop a new set of decisions based on sound ontological and epistemological principles but reflecting current contextual factors. This reviewer found this historical perspective very useful, well-organised, comprehensive, yet concise.

The seventh chapter is by far the most fascinating chapter in the book. It is also the longest as it is about 60 pages long. It reviews the key axioms that underpins Islamic governance. Many of these axioms are well known—such *tawhid*, *amanah*, *ukhuwaah* and the like—but this reviewer was quite impressed with Maszlee's analysis of the importance of sustainable development. This is a new theme in economics and management. But there is no doubt that the current economic system is completely unsustainable and destroying the planet in process. Unless there is a complete shift to sustainable development,

humanity is committing a form of collective suicide. Unfortunately, many business owners only see the short term. They don't seem to realise that there is a contradiction between running a *halal* business and destroying the environment at the same time. This addresses a key issue in Maszlee's work. To solve many social problems, Muslims need to apply the principles of *maqasid al-shariah* in a broader manner. This chapter left this reviewer extremely satisfied.

The eighth chapter ties some loose ends in the analysis. For example, Maszlee analyses the role of *ulama* over the centuries. Maszlee's main point in this last chapter is to make sure that the recommendations are practical.

Overall, this reviewer has benefited tremendously from reading this book. Maszlee did an excellent job deconstructing Western concepts related to governance and development. He then did an equally excellent job at presenting an Islamic perspective that reflects the contributions of previous scholars but also providing new avenues for research. For most readers, many of the concepts will not be new but the organisation of the concepts allows readers to develop an overall picture that is very useful. This book is therefore very useful for any Muslims wishing to better understand the Islamic perspective to social sciences. It is also useful for Muslims interested in *fiqh* who wish to link existing rulings to a bigger picture. Last but not least, Maszlee deserves a lot of credit for persuading a renowned publisher like Routledge to publish his work.

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