

## BOOK REVIEWS

### ETHICO-RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS IN THE QUR'ĀN

*By Toshihiko Izutsu.*  
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*253 pp., Index 255-284.*

Islamic studies in Japan, especially Qur'ānic studies, are regrettably far behind those of Christianity and Buddhism, in spite of the fact that Islam is one of the three predominant world religions.

One of the main reasons for this is that Japanese intellectuals are generally so strongly Western-oriented in their attitudes towards foreign cultures that until relatively recent years academic interest in the Islamic field has been extremely limited. Another is the linguistic barrier of Arabic itself, which is considered one of the most difficult languages in the world. Moreover, it is universally recognized that an approach to Islamic thought without an expert knowledge of Arabic can achieve little in comprehending its essentials. To rely upon translation for this is hazardous at best.

It follows, under these circumstances, that Japan has been serious-

ly handicapped by the lack of scholastic interest in Islamic studies.

In this connection, we should be proud of Dr. Izutsu, the author of this book, who is the pioneer Arabic scholar of Japan and the only translator of the Qur'ān directly from Arabic into Japanese—a noteworthy achievement considering that his Arabic had to be entirely self-taught. The excellence of the English in the work under review clearly illustrates the writer's remarkable aptitude for languages. He is now Professor at the Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, Keio University, Tokyo, and Visiting Professor at McGill University, Montreal, where he lectures on Islamic theology and philosophy.

The present book is a revised edition of his earlier work, *The Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Koran*, published in 1959, but as the author states in his preface,

“a number of passages have been completely rewritten. So much has it been altered that the book may very well be regarded as a new one.” His scholarly conscientiousness is to be highly respected, also in the case of the revised edition of the translation of the Qur’ān where occasional ambiguous translations have been thoroughly corrected (e. g. IV, 34, Modern Egyptian verse number).

Needless to say, the Qur’ān is one thing, and Islamic law, the post-Qur’ānic code, is another. Nevertheless, mainly because of the tendency of Islamic scholars to over-glorify the Qur’ān, these two are often confused when the concepts of the Islamic moral code are considered. They often condemn the ethics of pre-Islamic times as barbarian paganism, and praise the rise of the new Islamic religion. The author of this book is neither praising nor defending any of the numerous ethical theories that have been offered to date by philosophers and scholars. His attitude is highly objective towards both pre-Islamic ethics and those of Qur’ānic time, and he draws a distinction between

Qur’ānic ethics and the post-Qur’ānic code. This objectivity is coupled with his method of semantic analysis of the value-words of the Qur’ān in the field of conduct and character.

The first section (Principles of Semantic Analysis, Language and Culture, I. The Scope and Focus of the Study, II. The Method of Analysis and Its Application) is concerned with considerations of method. The simplest and commonest way of ascertaining the meaning of a foreign word is by being told an equivalent word in one’s own language. Dr. Izutsu points out that this way of understanding words is the least reliable one especially for Qur’ānic Arabic. For instance, there is a great difference between *kāfir* and *misbeliever* which is usually given as its English equivalent. “In point of fact, translation turns out to be far more frequently misleading than enlightening.” “The semantic discrepancy between words and their foreign ‘equivalents’ naturally increases as we turn to those regions of existence where unique words of vision tend to dominate and where

language is charged with the task of reflecting and expressing the truly ethnic features of a people's life." Dr. Izutsu assumes a strategic importance for the method of semantic analysis in seven cases: 1. contextual definitions, 2. synonyms, 3. contrasts, 4. deduction from opposites, 5. semantic relations of words, 6. parallel meanings, 7. other contexts.

Focusing on the Arabia of the period, from the pre-Islamic time of heathendom to the earliest days of Islam, the author begins the analysis of the key ethico-religious terms of the Qur'ān by giving a number of concrete examples in order to illustrate his method. He shows how far a mere translation of the terms 'kāfir,' 'zālim' and 'dhanb' as *misbeliever*, *evil-doer*, and *sin* come short of doing full justice to the original words. He analysis in detail the words derived from the root 'JHL.'

In the second and third section, he gives the main results obtained by the practical application of his methods, quoting numerous Qur'ānic passages and ancient Arabic poems such as *Mu'allaqah* (Ṭarafah

and Labīd), *Hamāsah* (Abū Tam-mām) or *Diwān* ('Abīd b. al-Abrāṣ) which are beautifully translated by the author.

In the second section (From Tribal Code to Islamic Ethics), he discusses the pessimistic conception of the earthly life which is shown by both pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān. The second part of this section deals with another characteristic of *Jāhiliya* (pre-Islamic time), the spirit of tribal solidarity, in which there was a distinction between right and wrong, between what is good and what is bad, although their sense of morality derived from tribalism "lacked a constant, theoretical basis." "It is of supreme importance for the right estimation of Muhammad's religious movement to realize that it was just in such a circumstance that he declared the definite superiority of religious relationship over the ties of blood," which was the foremost bond of the tribe. The author, thirdly, after having discussed the two basic features of pre-Islamic ethics, ventures to make an analytical approach to the dynamic transformation of the old ethical

elements of paganism into the new religious concept of monotheism within the framework of Islamization. The fourth part of his contention is to point out that the Qur'ānic outlook divides all human qualities into two diametrically opposed concepts, 'Paradise' and 'Hell.' He refers to many instances of that basic dichotomy of moral properties in Qur'ānic verses.

In the third section (The Analysis of Major Concepts), Dr. Izutsu discusses in detail the Qur'ānic system of ethico-religious concepts against the historical background described in the section. The strategic importance for the method of semantic analysis mentioned in the first section is here fully applied in analyzing the inner structure of 'kufr.' The author emphasizes the concept, 'kufr,' with the view that it is a "most comprehensive term for all negative ethico-religious values," and "the very center of the whole system of negative properties." After analyzing the concept of 'kufr' itself, the other key terms that surround this major subject, 'fāsiq,' 'kāfir,' 'zālim,' 'mu'tadi,' 'musrif,' 'nifaq,' and 'imān' are

precisely analyzed. 'Nifaq' which is customarily translated as 'hypocrisy' in English, and 'imān' which is the exact antithesis of 'kufr,' are given independent chapters respectively. The final part of the third section is devoted to "the very strong and vigorous" dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad,' although there are in the Qur'ān itself no abstract concepts of good and bad. The Qur'ān "judges human conduct and character in a very concrete form: 'imān' and 'kufr', ... constitute the two pillars of Qur'ānic ethics."

It could be said that Dr. Izutsu's interpretation of 'kāfir' and 'mushurik,' for instance, is somewhat over-semantic without due consideration of the chronology of the Qur'ānic passages which are inextricably connected with the social events of the time about which Muhammad revealed each verse of the Qur'ān. As the author states in his concluding paragraph, "The Qur'ān, particularly in the Medina period, has much to say about community life. This side of Qur'ānic ethics has not been systematically explored in the present work." This however, in no way minimizes the

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importance of his invaluable, stimulating work.

An index of Qur'ānic citations listed under both the Flügel and Modern Egyptian system, an index of Arabic words grouped under

their respective roots arranged in order of the Arabic alphabet, and an index of subjects are included at the end of the book.

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