

BOOK REVIEWS

Moral teachings of Islam: prophetic traditions from *al-Adab al-mufrad* by Imam al-Bukhari

Abdul Ali Hamid (Ed. and Trans.), 2003, Walnut Creek, CA, Alta Mira Press, \$69 (hbk), 132 pp. ISBN 0-7591-0416-6

This short volume will be a welcome addition to the shelves of anyone with an interest in the religious roots of moral education in Islam. A *hadith* ('prophetic tradition', plural *ahadith*) is a record of the words, actions or silent approval of the Prophet Muhammad or his companions, and the *ahadith* are the second most authoritative source of moral guidance in Islam, after the *Qur'an* itself. Of the many collections of *ahadith* in existence, that compiled by al-Bukhari in the third century of Islam is generally considered the most authentic. Known as *al-Jami' al-sahih*, al-Bukhari's *magnum opus* includes over 7,000 stories and traditions gathered from the most reliable sources and subjected to rigorous standards to establish their accuracy and truthfulness.

The current volume follows a well-established practice of compiling selections from the larger collections of traditions grouped according to a particular theme, in this case manners and moral guidance. *Al-Adab al-mufrad* (literally, 'good behaviour singled out') was compiled by al-Bukhari himself out of his larger work, and contains 1,329 narratives that provide practical moral guidance for Muslims. The present English translation includes nearly half of al-Bukhari's selection (there is much repetition in the original), together with the Arabic text and transliteration of all the prayers mentioned in the narratives. There are a number of distinctive features in the editor's approach. Al-Bukhari's own commentaries and headings have been left out, in favour of a new and perhaps more consistent set of headings provided by the editor. More significantly, the *isnad* or chain of authorities traced back to the Prophet himself (by which each individual *hadith* is judged authentic or otherwise) is omitted. A short introduction and brief glossary are provided, but otherwise the text is left to speak for itself.

The prophetic traditions included here encompass a wide range of issues, particularly virtues and good conduct. Since the Prophet Muhammad was the embodiment of Islamic virtue and a living example of how Muslims should behave, every incident in his life is potentially edifying. The incidents and stories that are included demonstrate the importance of being kind to parents, maintaining family bonds, being neighbourly, looking after children, respecting elders, helping others, supporting the poor and needy, and generally living virtuous lives. Personal qualities such as honesty, loyalty, generosity, kindness, modesty, sincerity and forbearance are praised and believers are warned against meanness, injustice, anger, lying, malice, ingratitude, vulgarity, arrogance and vanity. Good behaviour out of good motives is central to the Islamic worldview and is regarded as the sign of perfect faith. Many traditions place good conduct even above acts of worship, and indeed the Prophet Muhammad is quoted as saying: 'The dearest of his servants to Allah is the one whose behaviour is the most correct'.

However, the reader with comparatively little knowledge of Islam needs to bear two points in mind in using this book. The first is that any single *hadith* taken in isolation does not always provide the last word on any given topic. For example, the rules about the treatment of animals in Islam are much more complex than the simple principle of kindness to animals which is enunciated here. The fact that forgiveness of sins is granted to a man who showed compassion to a thirsty dog (No. 225) should not be taken as justification for keeping dogs as house-pets, for *ahadith* from other collections make it clear that dogs are 'unclean' animals that contaminate anything they touch with their tongue. The second point is that it would be dangerous to assume that there is an easy move from prophetic tradition to underlying principle to contemporary application. This approach to Islamic morality is sometimes possible, but it requires considerable religious knowledge and expertise, and even the editor of this text does not attempt it.

The Western reader will inevitably be struck both by the cultural gulf that exists between the world of these

traditions and the contemporary world and also by the different and sometimes unexpected territory covered by the concept of morality in Islam. Inevitably, there is an extended section on the treatment of slaves, but more surprisingly there is guidance on a wide range of comparatively trivial issues, including sneezing and yawning, searching someone's head for lice, abusing a flea, laughing at the thinness of someone's legs, cursing the wind and seeing rain clouds. There is little attempt here (or indeed in other books on the concept of *adab*) to distinguish moral duties from religious duties, matters of etiquette or matters of social custom. Through all the anecdotes, however, what comes across most vividly is the figure of the Prophet himself, aware of human foibles yet always compassionate, caring and good-humoured. We see him as a fully rounded individual, engaging in every aspect of human activity from hugging a child to visiting the sick or simply sitting with his legs dangling, yet constantly offering guidance and advice to his followers, sometimes directly, sometimes in metaphor or by example, but always with the assurance that he speaks with the authority of a divinely inspired prophet.

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