

Book Reviews

Book Review

Vicegerency in Islamic Thought and Scripture: Towards a Qur'anic Theory of Human Existential Function, by Chauki Lazhar, London and New York, Routledge, 2023, pp vii +269

Reviewed By: Owais Manzoor Dar

Guest Faculty, Department of Islamic Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

owaismanzoor188@gmail.com

مراجعة كتاب

«الاستخلاف في الفكر الإسلامي والقرآن: نحو نظرية قرآنية لوظيفة الإنسان الوجودية»،

لشوقي الأزهر

مراجعة: أويس منظور دار

قسم الدراسات الإسلامية، الجامعة المليية الإسلامية، نيودلهي-الهند

| | |
|--|---|
| Vicegerency in Islamic Thought and Scripture: Towards a Qur'anic Theory of Human Existential Function Authored by: Chauki Lazhar Edition: English language Publisher: London & New York: Routledge Year of publishing: 2023 No. of pages: 284 | عنوان الكتاب: الاستخلاف في الفكر الإسلامي والقرآن: نحو نظرية قرآنية لوظيفة الإنسان الوجودية المؤلف: شوقي الأزهر الإصدار: اللغة الإنجليزية الناشر: روتليدج، لندن - نيويورك سنة النشر: ٢٠٢٣ عدد الصفحات: ٢٨٤ |
| ISBN: Hardback: 9781032372211 - eBook: 9781003335948 | التقييم الدولي (ردمك): Hardback: 9781032372211 - eBook: 9781003335948 |

Cite this article as: Dar, Owais Manzoor, Book Review “Vicegerency in Islamic Thought and Scripture: Towards a Qur'anic Theory of Human Existential Function”, *Journal of College of Sharia and Islamic Studies, Qatar University*, Volume 42, Issue 2, (2024)

<https://doi.org/10.29117/jcsis.2024.0391>

© 2024, Dar, Owais Manzoor. Published in *Journal of College of Sharia and Islamic Studies*. Published by QU Press. This article is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0), which permits non-commercial use of the material, appropriate credit, and indication if changes in the material were made. You can copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format as well as remix, trans.form, and build upon the material, provided the original work is properly cited. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

In the vast discourse encompassing the theory of vicegerency (*istikhlāf*) in Islamic thought, a myriad of interconnected inquiries populates the intellectual landscape. These inquiries revolve around classical scholars' perceptions of the concept of *istikhlāf*, its elaboration within the context of modern Islamic reformism, the relevance of classical perspectives to contemporary scholarship, and the limitations contemporary scholars face in theorizing this concept. *Vicegerency in Islamic Thought and Scripture: Towards a Qur'anic Theory of Human Existential Function* by Chauki Lazhar provides a comprehensive discussion on these profound questions. Through its comprehensive exploration, it reconstructs key elements of the subject matter within the Muslim intellectual tradition, classical and contemporary, and synthesizes them to theorize vicegerency as an existential function within the Islamic worldview.

The book is divided into two interrelated parts that enrich and inform each other. The first part, spanning chapters One to Four, meticulously examines the significance and critical analyses of classical and contemporary discourses surrounding the concept of vicegerency. The first chapter and book's introduction outline the research questions, methodology, and focus while providing an epistemological and methodological framework for understanding the concept 'worldview' in Islamic thought. The second chapter, "Islamic Worldview in the Context of Modern Reformism," sets the stage by exploring the emergence of the emphasis on vicegerency within modern Islamic reformism. It addresses the challenges posed by European modernity to Islamic thought, prompting Muslim reformists to reassess classical Islamic epistemology and methodology. This chapter illuminates how the disruptions brought by modernity compelled Muslims to cultivate a comprehensive worldview capable of navigating the complexities and competing with Western paradigms. As vicegerency stands central to this worldview for most modern reformists, this chapter is essential for grasping its significance within contemporary Muslim literature.

In the third chapter, "The Concept of *Istikhlāf* in Islamic Heritage," Lazhar explores the conceptualization of vicegerency as an existential function in classical Islamic scholarship, probing the divergent positions that have shaped its understanding. Through a hermeneutical lens, Lazhar dissects the nuances of *istikhlāf* and examines the ways pre-modern scholars grappled with its many complexities, including al-Ṭabarī, al-Baghawī, Ibn ʿArabī, Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn al-Qayyim, al-Shāṭibī, Ibn Khaldūn, and al-Alūsī, among others. Key to his discussion here is the analysis of important divergences, particularly those revolving around Quran 2:30. The fourth chapter, "Vicegerency as Existential Function in Contemporary Reformism," advances a comparative analysis of various contemporary views on vicegerency as carried out by leading reformists both from Sunni and Shīʿī circles, and across notable intellectual and political projects, such as the Islamization of knowledge. Through this chapter, Lazhar foregrounds the deficiencies hindering the formulation of a coherent theory of vicegerency, entertaining important questions such as: How do scholars conceptualize *istikhlāf* as an existential function? What is the perceived object of vicegerency (*al-mustakhlaf fih*)? Moreover, he explores the integration of *istikhlāf* into the Islamic worldview and its alignment with core Islamic principles, as well as contemporary efforts to ground it in Qur'anic teachings and Islamic theology. As such, the book discloses significant shortcomings and inconsistencies in the critical examination of

contemporary interpretations of vicegerency. Despite their understanding of *istikhlāf* in relation to human presence, there remains a notable lack of a theocratic foundation and holistic vision of human existential function rooted in Quranic epistemology.

Against this backdrop, the book's second part, comprising Chapters Five and Six, advances the discourse by attempting a comprehensive theory. Building upon preceding analyses, Lazhar strives to formulate a coherent and inclusive theory of vicegerency as a human existential function, raising important questions such as: Who and what human is vicegerent of? What is the objective of vicegerency? How vicegerency is an human existential function? In a bid to transition the discourse into a novel philosophical framework, Lazhar undertakes two pivotal tasks. Firstly, he elucidates various modalities through which *istikhlāf* is envisaged within modern scholarship, ranging from stewardship of the earth to the manifestation of divine attributes. He particularly highlights five modalities, including vicegerency to the earth and its resources, in terms of adherence to Allah's commands and their implementation on earth; vicegerency in terms of the responsibilities of free choice and disposition that have been conferred upon human beings; vicegerency to the endeavor of manifesting divine attributes and ethics on earth, and vicegerency to assume several material and moral meanings. Secondly, Lazhar explores the ontological relationship between God, human nature, the universe, revelation, and the human existential function, weaving these elements into a cohesive narrative that grounds vicegerency within the cosmic tapestry of Islamic thought.

Central to Lazhar's approach in this book is the integration of Quranic verses and the application of contextual and conceptual intertextuality, which led to enriching our understanding of *istikhlāf* as a human existential function. Through this methodical inquiry, he invites the reader to embark on a profound exploration of Islamic thought, illuminating the intricate tapestry of vicegerency within the broader fabric of the Islamic worldview. Conceiving of the Quranic theory of vicegerency as a cornerstone of human existential understanding, Lazhar proceeds to dissecting the hermeneutical strategies employed by scholars across epochs in their quest to interpret *istikhlāf* within the Quranic framework. Lazhar points out a key difference between classical and modern interpretations, which marks a transition from perceiving vicegerency through a political lens to recognizing its significance as an existential function. He posits that within classical scholarship, scant attention had been paid to the concept of vicegerency, while viewing it neither as a prominent existential function nor as a subject that merits an independent study.

In the sweeping currents of modernity, where epistemological paradigms tend to clash with traditional Islamic scholarship and societal norms undergo seismic transitions, the timeless wisdom of classical Islamic sciences finds itself at a crossroads of relevance. This juncture has sparked a renaissance of interest in the foundational concepts of Islam, prompting a poignant reflection on the dynamic interplay between tradition and contemporary exigencies. At the core of this discourse is the concept of vicegerency that emerges as a pivotal facet of human existence. Yet, amidst the resurgence of interest, a disquieting lacuna emerges: a deficiency in articulating a comprehensive vision of human existential function rooted in the Quranic epistemology. In his incisive critique of contemporary reformist literature, Lazhar exposes this shortfall,

lamenting the absence of a robust theological foundation for vicegerency and a definitive delineation of its object. This shortcoming, he contends, has resulted in a fragmented conceptual landscape, bereft of clarity and cohesion. In this vein, Lazhar points out a tendency in reformist narratives to react defensively to perceived Western worldviews, thereby diluting the profundity of the concept of vicegerency.

In addition, Lazhar debunks the assumptions that the classical debate on vicegerency was primarily creedal. He elucidates the nuanced critique of pantheist doctrines within which scholars like Ibn Taymiyya situated their rejection of human vicegerency, reframing the discourse within its intellectual milieu. For instance, Ibn Taymiyya's arguments like; "it is not permissible to ascribe a khalīfa to God" and whoever did so is "said to be committing an act of polytheism" because "God Almighty has no successor at all" (48). According to Lazhar "all these statements, with exception whatsoever, in context of Ibn Taymiyya's response to those who advocated pantheism and anthropomorphism" (ibid). Therefore, Ibn Taymiyya's assertion emerges within his rebuttal of the notion of humans as God's vicegerent within a pantheistic framework, "not within the intellectual model of exegetes and those who shared their views" (50). Rejecting facile interpretations of human purpose, such as the simplistic notions of "knowing God" and "being tested," Lazhar navigates the depths of the Quran to unveil a more profound understanding of human existence. He holds that the pursuit of God's knowledge serves as a means to enable humans to fulfill their function, rather than constituting the function itself. In his own words, "knowledge of God is one of the means that enables the human being to perform his function, and is not a function per se" (195). Similarly, the trials humans face are not mere tests, but rather defining characteristics that underscore the weighty responsibility inherent in the human mission (196). Thus, Lazhar invites readers to transcend simplistic narratives and embrace a more nuanced comprehension of human purpose rooted in the rich tapestry of the Quranic wisdom.

Vicegerency in Islamic Thought and Scripture lays the foundation for a comprehensive theory of vicegerency by providing serious analysis and delving deep into the intricate layers of the question of the role of humans as vicegerent. The author's assertion that "vicegerency is the deputation of God and not somebody else" underscores the unique essence of humans distinguished by faculties not shared by any other creature (156). Emphasizing the existential significance of vicegerency, he navigates the intricate interplay between worship and human purpose. For him, "the function for which the human being was created is nothing more and nothing less than worship" (166). He presents vicegerency as a distinct form of worship intrinsic to human nature and separate from the generic worship shared by other beings, since worship is a function shared by all creatures. This nuanced perspective has led him to identify worship as the defining criterion for understanding the object of vicegerency, as it constitutes the fundamental purpose of human existence. So, "the key point is ... the objective of vicegerency is not something exogenous that human being introduces to the universe. Rather, it is something through which the human being joins the cosmic harmony" (172). Furthermore, Lazhar introduces "cosmic worship" as a concept that transcends conventional rituals to encompass every element of the universe, thus fulfilling its inherent function in harmony with the cosmic order. This holistic perspective holds vicegerency as an inherent aspect of human

participation in the grand symphony of existence, rather than an external imposition. Crucially, Lazhar distinguishes vicegerency from worship, asserting that while they are intertwined, they are not synonymous. Vicegerency is a unique mode of worship specific to humans. It serves as a means through which they contribute to the balance and harmony of the cosmos. Therefore, in elucidating the multifaceted nature of vicegerency, Lazhar underscores its role in preserving the spiritual, social, and environmental equilibrium of the universe, and advances the preservation of cosmic balance as the ultimate objective of vicegerency, encapsulating the profound responsibility bestowed upon humanity as custodians of the cosmic order.

Despite the proficient quality of the book, it nonetheless suffers a few minor mechanical shortcomings, including typos, word repetition, and inaccurate translations of Arabic terms, which may pose a challenge especially for novices in Islamic studies and general readers. Word repetition is observed in, for example, the recurrence of “that that” several times, including on pages 196, 210 and 230. Moreover, on page 173, the translation of the Arabic “*mushkil*” as “problematic” invites scrutiny and calls for further clarification, especially as it is engaged with reference to the Quran. Ibn ‘Āshūr’s enumeration of twenty instances where the term *mushkil* is mentioned in the Quran, alongside the assertion that a verse is deemed “problematic,” necessitates contextual elucidation. Indeed, within the Quranic context, “*mushkil*” conveys a sense of difficulty rather than inherent problematic. Thus, a subtle yet vital distinction rises, underscoring the need for precision and clarity in conveying Islamic scholarship to readers of diverse backgrounds. While adeptly questioning the notion that humans’ purpose is “to know God,” and “put through trial,” the author thoroughly challenges the first one and argues “knowledge of God is one of the means that enable human being to perform his function, and it is not function per se” (195). As for trial, he overlooks sufficient grounds to challenge the notion of being. For him, “trial is not a function, but rather a function-defining characteristic portraying the human beings’ mission as responsibility and test” (196).

Furthermore, although Lazhar’s thesis on vicegerency is well developed and substantiated, it seems to receive scant attention amidst the broader discourse within the book. In other words, the author’s own narrative is *overshadowed*, due to the book’s division into six chapters, with the first four focusing on the discourses of classical and modern scholars on vicegerency. As such while the first section scrutinizes existing narratives and identifies gaps in articulating a comprehensive vision of human existential function rooted in Quranic epistemology, only in the last two chapters that the author’s thesis on vicegerency as an existential function gains attention. Yet, even there, considerable space is devoted to dismantling previously held narratives, somewhat overshadowing the author’s own proposition. It is eagerly anticipated that the author will expand his exploration of vicegerency in later editions of the book.

Finally, the journey of reading this book is nothing short of enlightening, as it charts a course through diverse interpretations while significantly enriching our understanding of the Quran’s profound conception of vicegerency. With his innovative approach, Lazhar not only sheds light on the intricacies of *istikhlāf* but also unveils a comprehensive theory of human existential function embedded within the Quranic narrative. Lazhar’s study is one of few studies that provide a systematic examination and classification of

Qur'anic teleological concepts, weaving them into a cohesive framework that illuminates the contours of a vicegerency theory within the Qur'anic worldview. Beyond serving as an unparalleled resource on *istikhlāf* in the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition, Lazhar's book lays out the conceptual basis for understanding *istikhlāf* as a fundamental aspect of human existence. Therefore, in bridging tradition with contemporary discourse, *Vicegerency in Islamic Thought and Scripture* stands out as a significant contribution that will shape the discourse in the field of Islamic studies and the burgeoning discipline of 'Ummatics', grounded in establishing religion (*iqamat al-din*), justice, and prosperity in ways that fulfill the divine imperative.