



BOOK REVIEW

## Ramon Harvey. *Transcendent God, Rational World: A Māturīdī Theology*

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R.T. Mullins 

University of Lucerne, Switzerland  
Email: [rtmullins@gmail.com](mailto:rtmullins@gmail.com)

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There is a certain sense in which I, as a Christian theologian, am spoiled. If I want to see a recent, systematic reconstruction of Christian doctrine, I can grab a three-volume systematic theology textbook. If I am feeling particularly ambitious, or perhaps masochistic, I will read a five-volume Christian systematic theology textbook. How Christian systematic theology came to adopt this particular multivolume format is beyond my comprehension, but here we are. Also, as an analytic theologian, I also have access to all manner of recent philosophical reconstructions and explorations of Christian doctrine. Thankfully, these tend to be a single volume. Yet when I want to venture outside of my own religious tradition, things become a bit more difficult. If I want to know about the history of Jewish or Islamic thought, there are plenty of places to turn. If I want a systematic or philosophical reconstruction of Islamic theology that is not simply a history book, I find myself with fewer options. This is unfortunate since interreligious dialogue needs fresh accounts of differing religious belief systems. Seeing how a system of beliefs works from the inside out is deeply important for the shared task of searching for the truth.

Much to my delight, Ramon Harvey has written a wonderfully systematic book that brings the Māturīdī tradition of Islamic thought into dialogue with contemporary philosophy. Harvey has taken important thinkers from the Islamic past and developed a philosophical reconstruction for contemporary audiences to explore. For me, personally, this is exactly what I was looking for to help me understand how the different pieces of Islamic thought can fit together into a coherent whole. I enjoy reading Islamic thinkers from the past, but I want to know how those ideas come together, and how they can handle contemporary philosophical issues. As an added bonus for Christian theologians like me, one will find Harvey offering a rather robust engagement with Christian theologians and philosophers. I would like to see Christians return the favour, and Harvey's book will be an excellent starting point for such an endeavour.

Harvey's book has an introduction and seven chapters. In the introduction, readers are introduced to the task of the book. Following the notion of *kalam*, Harvey sets out to offer a systematic philosophical discourse about the divine. Much like his medieval forbearers, Harvey wishes to offer an articulation of the truths of theology in a way that will be appropriate to the current intellectual milieu. As Harvey understands things, part of this intellectual milieu is a mix of continental phenomenology, analytic philosophy, and

advances in physics. To be sure, Harvey is not advocating the rejection of past Islamic thought. Rather, he is retrieving past theological traditions, and using new philosophical insights to articulate and defend the Māturīdī tradition. Harvey points out how contemporary Christian analytic philosophers and theologians have done this with Christian doctrine. So it is time for Islamic thinkers to do the same. A renewed *kalam* for the contemporary world.

For those of you who don't know, Abū Mānṣūr al-Māturīdī was an Islamic theologian who died in 944. The subsequent school of thought that follows in his footsteps bears his name. Al-Māturīdī held that one can consider natural and special revelation to come to a better understanding of God. The natural world is accessible to human reason because God has made a rational cosmic order. Harvey sets out to offer his own interpretation of al-Māturīdī, and philosophically reconstruct his thought.

In chapter 1, Harvey takes us through the theme of tradition and reason. Here, readers are introduced to a number of important Islamic thinkers in the Māturīdī tradition. Harvey walks through debates in epistemology over classical foundationalism and non-foundationalism, rationalism, the epistemic role of tradition, and the need to think through the variety of rival religious opinions. Harvey argues that al-Māturīdī's epistemology might be better thought of along the lines of Stephen Wykstra's sensible evidentialism. Readers are even given a comparative analysis of al-Māturīdī with the philosophy of Husserl, Gadamer, and MacIntyre in order to understand how al-Māturīdī reasons about tradition and interpretations of the Prophet.

Chapter 1 also lays out important themes that will be developed throughout the book. In particular, how the following themes from Philo of Alexandria are taken up in Islamic thought. For Philo, there are eight presuppositions for theists to keep in view when adopting the rational methods of Hellenistic thought. These are the existence of God, the unity of God, the creation of the world, divine providence, the unity of the world, the existence of Platonic Forms, the revelation of the Law, and the eternity of the Law. As Harvey points out, some of these are controversial in Islamic thought. Most Muslims reject the eternity of the Law saying that God alone is eternal. Divine simplicity was also a point of deep contention, with many rejecting simplicity in favour of divine unity. A rejection of the Platonic Forms is another important theme in Islamic thought.

In chapter 2, Harvey develops the notion that the created order is accessible to rational investigation. There is a God-given unity to the world, and humans can come to some knowledge of God by investigating His handiwork. Harvey develops the relationship between the mind, the world, and God through engagement with Husserl, and many other important thinkers. Of particular interest to some Christian theologians is the use of analogical inference in knowing God through the rational world. Readers are also taken through considerations of God creating a world that contains laws stated in contemporary quantum physics. We see a clear transition from epistemology to ontology in this chapter.

In chapter 3, Harvey introduces readers to the natural theology of al-Māturīdī. Do Kant's musings on natural theology present a problem for the Māturīdī tradition? Not as far as I can tell. Harvey considers Kant's claims, and like many natural theologians, is able to move swiftly on to discuss ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments for the existence of God. Harvey offers a lengthy discussion of the *kalam* cosmological argument that shows interesting connections between al-Māturīdī and contemporary philosophers like William Lane Craig. Harvey's discussion of the *kalam* cosmological argument demonstrates a deep understanding of the literature, and offers various important critical insights. The same goes for the teleological argument, where the arguments of al-Māturīdī are developed alongside those of Richard Swinburne.

Chapter 4 focuses on the divine nature. This will be a chapter that surprises many contemporary Christians. It is standard rhetoric today for Christians to say that Jews, Christians, and Muslims throughout history have all affirmed divine simplicity. While this rhetoric may be standard, there is this problem called *actual history*. As alluded to earlier, the majority of kalam theologians in the past have not affirmed divine simplicity. Instead, they have affirmed that God has extramentally distinct attributes. In chapter 4, Harvey develops the metaphysics of God's attributes, and discusses the problem of God and abstract objects. There is an interesting discussion comparing al-Māturīdī to John Duns Scotus (d. 1308). Like al-Māturīdī, Scotus affirms that God's attributes are extramentally distinct. Yet Scotus claims to be affirming divine simplicity despite holding a view that the much earlier Māturīdī tradition explicitly says is not divine simplicity. There is a further contrast worth noting. Scotus famously holds that these extramentally distinct divine attributes allow us mere mortals to speak univocally of God. For al-Māturīdī, we still must speak analogically of God.

In chapter 4, we are also given a discussion of God's relationship to time. The Māturīdī tradition seems to predominately affirm divine timelessness, and Harvey uses contemporary insights from the philosophy of time to develop and defend the attribute of timelessness. Harvey even gives us a divine conceptualist account of modal metaphysics. Contemporary analytic philosophers of religion ought to greatly appreciate this chapter because Harvey offers a deep engagement with thinkers like Alvin Plantinga, David Lewis, Brian Leftow, and more to defend the Māturīdī rejection of Platonic Forms.

Chapter 5 examines divine omniscience and wisdom. Harvey argues that God's wisdom can be the basis for divine propositional knowledge and the moral perfection of God's actions. We get an interesting discussion of the general problem of creation. Why would God create anything at all? Al-Māturīdī seems to answer that we cannot ask the question, though admits that many will ask anyway. I'm one of those people who will keep asking anyway. One potential answer is that God creates with the intent to benefit others. Al-Māturīdī thinks this is dubious since some people experience corruption instead of benefit. One interesting point in this chapter is the emphasis on wisdom being the fundamental divine attribute, and not knowledge or creative action. I find this plausible. If God does not create anything at all, He would not know anything about the world because there is no world. Yet surely God would still be wise. If God does choose to create a particular world, He will know various things, and display mercy and justice. Chapter 5 also gives a defence of God's timeless knowledge of the temporal world.

If you are like me, you might balk at how a God without succession can know the ever-changing successive facts of the temporal world. You might also wonder how a timeless being could act in this temporal world. Chapter 6 aims to address these problems. Unlike the Christian tradition, the Islamic tradition seems to have been more bothered by the problem of an eternally wise God intentionally creating a universe with an absolute beginning. A common worry is that if the universe begins to exist, then God's act of creating must have begun to exist. The Augustinian bald assertion that 'God just eternally wills it' leads to the worry that the effect must also be eternal. In which case, the universe would be co-eternal with God, and most Muslims do not want to affirm that proposition. Why? For many, to be eternal is to be necessary, and creation is supposed to be contingent. To be sure, there are early Muslim groups who just accept that creation *ex nihilo* entails divine temporality, but the Māturīdī tradition is unwilling to embrace the temporal God. Harvey takes readers through these thorny issues with a substantive engagement with contemporary thinkers like William Lane Craig, Rowan Williams, Katheryn Tanner, and many others.

Finally, in chapter 7, we come to the topic of the Qur'an. In what sense is the Qur'an divine speech? An important divine attribute in the Māturīdī tradition is speech. This is a God who communicates. The issue is not merely how God communicates, nor merely the epistemic

authority of the scriptures. There is also a significant debate over the language used in the communication. For example, is Arabic uniquely special, or can one recite scriptures in Persian? Another interesting problem relates to the earlier discussion on God and time. If God's speech acts are eternal, then shouldn't the Qur'an be eternal? That's a tricky situation. As stated earlier, various Islamic theologians do not want to affirm an eternal Law. Yet, this raises the issue of God's speech acts beginning to exist, and thus raises the previous worry that God is temporal. Of course, I don't think it is a problem for God to be temporal, but I am not in the Māturīdī tradition.

All in all, I highly recommend Harvey's *Transcendent God, Rational World*. It offers a historically informed philosophical reconstruction of a significant Islamic school of thought, all while offering a deep engagement with contemporary philosophy and Christian theology. If you want to see Islamic philosophical theology advance, this is the kind of work to look to as an example. If you want to see meaningful interreligious dialogue among Christians and Muslims, this is a great starting point for Christian philosophers to gain a better grasp of Islamic thought.