BOOK REVIEWS

**‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Ḥusayn – *Al-Amānah fī’l-islām wa-ātharuhā fī’l-mujtama* ‘
[Trust in Islam and its effects on society]**

(al-Dammām: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1426 AH [2005]), 536 pp.

Nora S. Eggen *University of Oslo*

Intrinsic to the ethos of Islam are concepts of trust, not only the theological concept of trust in God (*tawakkul*), but also various concepts of social trust. Yet the latter are often an implicit premise rather than an explicitly treated topic within the literature, and few if any writings are wholly dedicated to treating this important social and moral issue from an Islamic perspective. A commendable exception to this rule is the book under review. It was originally written as a doctoral thesis, submitted at the al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh in 2003 and has been published in Dār Ibn al-Jawzī’s series of theses (*Rasā’il jāmi’iyyah*). The author is currently an associate professor at the al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, College of *Sharī’ah* and Islamic Studies in al-Ahsa in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

In *al-Amānah*, the author offers a survey of important areas in human life affected by trust, and by loss of trust, with the notion of *amānah* as the fulcrum of the study. The author translates *amānah* into English as ‘honesty’ or ‘trust’ and into French as ‘sincérité’ (pp. 39–40). This translation may however cause some confusion, as it becomes obvious that what the author is discussing is not trust as a phenomenon but trustworthiness as an ethical value. The book is in fact a study in trustworthiness as an ethical value from a normative, Islamic point of view, and the overall message is that preserving the ethical value of trustworthiness is necessary for the well-being of humankind both in this world and the next. On the other hand the author barely touches upon the question of trusting, and whether there are in Islamic thought any normative evaluations attached to the ethics of trusting fellow human beings.

After discussing a number of different definitions, the author’s chosen definition for *amānah* is “all the matters of the religion with which the human being has been entrusted” (p. 23) explained as a charge (*taklīf*), obedience (*ṭā’ah*) and the obligatory matters (*al-farā’id*). This definition certainly makes sense in as much as it is tied up to the qur’ānic notion of *amānah* which is a divine directive to be trustworthy (Qur’ān 4:58, 8:27, 23:8, 70:3). However, by choosing this definition as a pivot the

author comes up against some problems. For instance, the adjective *thiqah* is defined by al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (d. 1413) as “someone to be relied upon in his words and actions”,¹ which evaluates the relative moral value of a person’s action but not the moral nature of the action in itself. ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Ḥusayn ties this understanding of trustworthiness up to *amānah* in the qur’ānic sense, and consequently *thiqah* becomes “a characteristic of whoever is qualified for the *amānah*” (p. 281). But if a general concept of trust (*thiqah*) is linked to the ultimate Divine good and truth, what do we then make of the trust based relationships which do not have this Divine good and truth as neither explicit nor implicit goal? It is for instance well known that certain criminal activities are dependent on strong bonds of internal trust (cf. the mafia), at the same time as they thrive from general distrust in the society. In these cases public interest actually lies in collapsing rather than building trust and cooperation. In order to deal with such complex phenomena it would be useful to keep some notions of trust morally neutral.

The study is introduced by pinning down understandings of trustworthiness in different cultures, observing that this value is commonplace to most, if not all, human societies and cultures. Trust has received considerable and growing interest in the academic literature within such diverse fields as sociology, psychology, business management and moral philosophy in recent years, but these are not discussions ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Ḥusayn refers to. He engages with Islamically-based arguments in an analysis of the basis for the great importance attached to trustworthiness. Throughout the text the argument is substantiated with quotations from the Qur’ān and the *Sunnah* as well as several great thinkers from Islamic tradition (such as al-Ṭabarī, d. 923, al-Ghazālī, d. 1111, Ibn Taymiyyah, d. 1328) and contemporary authors both within and without the Islamic frame of thought. In terms of the stylistic makeup of the study it falls quite well into the literary genre of *akhlāq*, where arguments about virtues and vices are substantiated both by normative texts, wisdom literature, narratives and anecdotes without further contextualisation.

The basis for the importance attached to trustworthiness is according to ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Ḥusayn of three kinds: the natural, the rational, and the normative. The author argues that inherent in the human being, as part of the *fiṭrah*, there is a drive towards being trustworthy as well as appreciating trustworthiness in others, as the human being accepted the primordial Divine trust (Qur’ān 33:72). Human rationality (*al-aql*) on the other hand is a prerequisite for taking up the Divine charge (*al-taklīf*), as well as being a trust in itself. However, although the human being appreciates trustworthiness through rational means, the author firmly rejects that moral reasoning can be based on rational grounds. This leads him to the normative (*shar‘ī*) basis for trustworthiness as it, and its antithesis ‘betrayal’ (*khiyānah*), is perceived in the Qur’ān and the *Sunnah*. In this manner it becomes clear that the foundational textual sources of Islam are in unison in claiming that human

beings wish for trustworthiness as well as in charging them with trustworthiness and warning them against betrayal.

With this framework established 'Abd al-Latīf al-Ḥusayn presents the role of trust in areas of human life, generally labelled belief and worship, social life, economic life, and the sphere of knowledge. This main body of the study is structured in three parts. First, the author outlines the importance of trust within different fields in the four areas. Then he precedes to point out the positive outcome of a high level of trust and the negative outcome of breach or failure of trust. This way of structuring the material causes quite a bit of repetition which prolongs the text unnecessarily. On the other hand the potentially negative outcome is not always given corresponding to the potentially positive outcome, so we get for instance to know that according to our sources the leaders have to be trustworthy (pp. 175ff.), but what if they're not? What will the effect be on the society, and what are the legitimate means for the Muslims in reaction to it and in trying to regain the balance of trust?

There is hardly any area of human social life that is not in some way affected by the issue of trust, as the author successfully shows. Trustworthiness is a crucial value in family life and married life as well as in society at large, and it is maintained by such actions as keeping one's promises, honouring one's agreements, keeping the secrets of others and covering their flaws and faults as well as one's own. In the commercial sphere special emphasis is put on paying one's debts and maintaining one's trust funds. Among the positive outcomes of high trust levels are economical boom, while corruption is the most obvious and vicious negative outcome of lack of trust. Scholarly trustworthiness is upheld as a crucial value in Islamic tradition of learning, epitomised in the *isnād*-system. As long as compliance to these standards are upheld, intellectual life will prosper; and the opposite is also true: when a sense of personal responsibility is lost even intellectual life will suffer.

The general message in the book is that if trustworthiness is upheld as a value the individual as well as the society will thrive, whereas if the opposite happens and trustworthiness becomes a lost value, cheating, lying, loss of sense of responsibility will spread and eventually the individual as well as the society will be afflicted by general misfortune and suffering. This rests on the premise that *amānah* makes up the sum total of good values. It seems to me as with the author that there is a straight causal relationship between the level of trustworthiness and the level of trust, and on an overall level it may hold, but does it hold on the level of individual relationships? It would imply a rather simplistic view of the way social relations work. Distrust as a fundamental attitude is within this framework dismissed by default. But what about attitudes and feelings developed within one social setting that are brought over to other social settings? In such a scenario a person who has learned to become distrustful could distrust a trustworthy person, at least in the initial phases of the relationship. Even though it is perfectly legitimate to give an account

of the ethics of trust, when assessing the effect it has on the society it seems to this reader to be difficult not to include other elements such as social infrastructure, social control and cultural codes. What is the difference between culturally defined social expectations and trust, between a generally optimistic attitude and trust?

Trust is in this book seen as an utterly positive value, with the implication that trusting is utterly positive. It follows that the author does not reflect upon potentially problematic sides of trust, or dilemmas in trust based relationships such as child–parent, student–teacher. Is it possible to trust too much? In education for instance there needs to be an element of critical thought on the part of the student to avoid the fallacies of ‘blind trust’ and to promote intellectual growth. Even in assessment of trustworthiness in transmission of knowledge, as well as the Prophetic *aḥādīth*, an element of critical thought is necessary in order to uphold the true value of trust. There is also a rhetorical potential in praising individuals as trustworthy or dismissing them as not trustworthy, a potential which may be used and abused in struggles for power. These are considerations not taken into account, but which may have further enhanced an otherwise interesting and thorough study.

Note

1. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī, *Kitāb al-ta’rīfāt* (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1985), 76.

Irfan A. Omar (ed.) – *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*

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Christoph Marcinkowski *International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia*

A Muslim View of Christianity features key texts on Muslim–Christian relations from the pen of Professor Mahmoud Ayoub, who is currently Faculty Associate in Shi‘ite Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations at the renowned Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations in the United States and who was born into a Shi‘ite family in Southern Lebanon. His authority in both the scholarship and comparative study of Islam and Muslim–Christian relations, as well as interreligious dialogue, is demonstrated by the national and international recognition he has received. Hailing himself from a multireligious kaleidoscopic setting – in Southern Lebanon, Shi‘ite Muslims have for centuries lived side-by-side with Christians of various denominations – Ayoub is perhaps particularly well suited when it comes to discussing Christianity from the perspective of Islam. Significantly, among his