

## BOOK REVIEWS

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Majid Daneshgar • *Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī and the Qurʾān: Tafsīr and Social Concerns in the Twentieth Century* • London and New York: Routledge, 2018 • Hardback. xvii + 176pp • ISBN: 978-1-138-05252-9 (hardback) • 978-1-315-16776-3 (e-book).

The French Orientalist Carra de Vaux (1867-1953) in his 1926 *Penseurs de l'Islam* (5:275-284) had assessed Ṭanṭāwī b. Jawharī (1863-1940, hereafter TJ) as an erudite translator of Western science, a Utopian advocate of universal peace and a political philosopher who was 'completely innovative, very modern, all so original... and skilful' in representing the Qurʾān as a seedbed of modern natural science. Similarly the German Arabist Martin Hartmann (1851-1918) and the Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989) had expressed that TJ was much more concerned with socio-cultural activism than exegesis. Junior Fellow at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies Majid Daneshgar builds on these and other assessments in his timely, all-too-brief book *Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī and the Qurʾān* to show that TJ promoted the idea that virtually all the major trends and discoveries of Western science are 'explicitly expressed' in the Qurʾān and other Islamic texts or at least primarily based on knowledge taken from Muslims—including Darwinism, spiritism, and Einstein's theory of relativity (pp. 33, 64, 81) but not feminism (p. 65). The Egyptian physician and scholar Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Iskandarānī (d. 1889) had preceded him in taking the borrowed-knowledge stance in his three-volume *Kashf al-asrār al-nūrāniyya al-Qurʾāniyya fīmā yataʿallaq bil-ajrām al-samāwiyya wal-arḍiyya wal-ḥayawānāt wal-nabātāt wal-jawāhir al-maʿdaniyya* (Revealing the luminous Qurʾānic secrets pertaining to the celestial and terrestrial bodies, animals, plants, and mineral substances) (p. 76), although TJ's teacher Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849-1905) probably influenced him more.

TJ was a teacher at Cairo's Khedival Dār al-ʿUlūm (whose curriculum was intended to provide a secondary education in the Western syllabus), a philosopher of social reform, activist, genial scholar and litterateur with an Azhar background and a prolific output especially on language and science. Born and raised in the Manūfiyya region of Egypt he joined al-Azhar at age 14 but took a dislike to the memorization of texts, after which he returned to his town and took up farming. He then joined Dār al-ʿUlūm where he studied

English and took to the natural sciences such as chemistry, engineering, astronomy and earth sciences, eventually becoming a teacher there. Among his earliest books was a call to reform in support of the nationalist movement entitled *Nahdat al-umma wa-hāyātuhā* (The renascence of the community and its life), published in installments in the newspaper *al-Liwāʾ*. An avid reader, he authored works on Arabic poetry, philology and grammar—such as *al-Farāʾid al-jawhariyya fīl-ṭuraf al-naḥwiyya*, *Mudhakkirāt fī adabiyāt al-lughat al-ʿarabiyya*, *Jawāhir al-inshāʾ wa-yalīh mulakkhas kitāb Adab al-dunyā wal-dīn*—as well as humanism and world peace such as *Ayn al-insān* (Where is man?) in which he imagines a dialogue between al-Fārābī, Ibn Ṭufayl, Thomas More and others, and *Ahlām fīl-siyāsa wa-kayfāyatahaqqaq al-salām al-ʿāmm* (Dreams in politics and how to realize world peace).

Many if not most of TJ's books revolved around the theme of the wonders of creation. He enshrined this theme in his magnum opus and last work, a commentary of the Qurʾān which totalled 11 volumes in its first finished form, which he then expanded to the 26-volume *al-Jawāhir fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-karīm al-mushtamil ʿalā ʿajāʾib badāʾiʿ al-mukawwanāt wa-gharāʾib badāʾih al-āyāt al-bāhirāt* (The jewels in the exegesis of the precious Qurʾān containing the marvelous wonders of created things and the striking self-evident truths of the magnificent signs). Contrary to popular opinion, the latter work is not a 'scientific *tafsīr*' but an impassioned and learned socio-philosophical critique of Arab society coupled with an illustrated vulgarizing encyclopedic anthology of the sciences of Jawharī's times in Arabic. Jawharī used each of the suras of the Qurʾān as a keynote address for the purposes of illustrative relevance and—for the most part—a rhetorical appeal to authority. Thus it is the first such type of commentary in the history of *tafsīr* and an unapologetic, massive departure from (if not betrayal of) the genre. He prefaced it with the expressed intent of waking up the *Umma* to the wonders of creation and making Muslims understand the sciences of the cosmos (*al-ʿulūm al-kawniyya*) and crafts that are mentioned in the Qurʾān, particularly 'agriculture, medicine, mineralogy, arithmetic, engineering, astronomy... zoology, botany, earth and heavens' and exhorting them to apply themselves to those sciences and excel in them (*Jawāhir* 1:3).

Daneshgar offers a useful bio-bibliography (pp. 19-49) and sura-by-sura synopsis (pp. 105-146) of TJ's themes in his Qurʾānic commentary. His approach is mostly descriptive rather than analytical or critical: he does not challenge, for example, the accuracy or logic of TJ's infelicitous, fateful claim that 'only a few verses were revealed about the religious law, but more than 700 verses related to the natural wonders' (p. 12); or that it was 'unnecessary to interpret the verse *And of him He made two sexes, male and female* (al-Qiyāma 75:39) from a physiological perspective' (p. 67); or that 'when discussing *amshāj*,

for example, he had only a minimal degree of understanding of embryology and physiology, remarking only that *amshāj* deals with the elements required by the human body' (p. 70). Thus he barely scratches the surface of what looks like amateurism on TJ's part. He makes sweeping generalities, misrepresenting the French gastroenterologist Maurice Bucaille (pp. 92-98) as a founder of science-related *tafsīr* who 'developed the classical exegesis through empirical science' (p. 98). Not only was Bucaille preceded by several Egyptian scholars of greater standing who were far more instrumental in constructing the concept of scientific inimitability (*i'jāz ʿilmī*) such as 'Abduh, Fikrī, Ghamrāwī, Mar'aghī and Wajdī (of whom Daneshgar shows no knowledge except for 'Abduh), but more importantly they were all Arabists and two of them were scientists as well, whereas Bucaille's knowledge of *tafsīr* was based on a three year-course in Arabic he took at the Sorbonne in 1969. It might be fair to say that what Bucaille contributed in reality was the impetus for the concept to become the multi-million-dollar semi-academic industry we witness today, in the form that might have prompted the Algerian astrophysicist Nidhal Guessoum to redefine *i'jāz ʿilmī* in 2015 as 'a mixture of pseudo-science and naïve exegesis and theology' (p. 92).

TJ's earlier *al-Tāj al-murassaʿ bi-jawāhir al-Qurʾān wal-ʿulūm*—which he gifted to the Emperor of Japan—was a theoretical introduction to his special Qurʾānic hermeneutics in which he presents his vision of the objectives (*maqāṣid*) of Islam and of the order of the world, a theme he had also taken up in his 800-page *Nizām al-ʿālam wal-umam aw al-ḥikmat al-Islāmiyya al-ʿulyā* (1905, The order of the world and nations, or the lofty Islamic wisdom). The *Tāj* also contains advance installments of his *Tafsīr* in their earliest form. The ubiquity of the term *jawhar/jawāhir* (gem/gems) in his book titles is a self-referential pun on his own name as their author doubling as a declaration of originality and quality. He developed that pun further in his *Tafsīr* by using the term *jawhara* (gem-stone) to refer to section-headings instead of the more conventional terms *bāb* (chapter) or *faṣl* (section). He included in his *tafsīr* illustrations on human anatomy, flora and fauna, as well as maps and other unconventional material such as extensive discussions on music. Rashīd Riḍā, after commending *Jawharī* for drawing attention to the importance of education in the sciences, nevertheless considered (in *al-Manār*, vol. 7, no. 30, Shaʿbān 1348/January 1930, pp. 516-517) that

he is more deserving than al-Rāzī of the unjust quip that "there is everything except *tafsīr* in his book." ... Humankind expands the field of the modern sciences by the day, taking back today some of what they had asserted the day before; hence not everything their experts record holds inherently true, let alone being what Allah meant in His Book. He revealed the Book as a guidance for people, not an exposition of what they can attain of the sciences and crafts through their

own endeavors.... In sum this book [the *Jawāhir*] is not a reference for those who seek to know the truths of *tafsīr* and in-depth understanding of the Qurʾān, nor is it dependable in whatever it mentions of hadiths and reports... and whatever interpretations he alone comes up with, he knows very well that he goes against the masses of the scholars and that they go against him in that.

In illustration of Riḍā's assessment one needs only look at the first page of Jawharī's 1900 work *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Fātiḥa*, where the very first authority he cites is the French zoologist Henri Milne-Edwards (1800-1885). Another example would be Daneshgar's translation (p. 40) of Hartmann's epitome of TJ's discussion of 'the life of the souls after death' in *Nizām al-ʿālam* (here corrupted to *al-Nizām wal-ʿālam*, 'Order and the world'), where TJ not only seems unaware of the abundant hadith literature on the subject, but mostly relies on hadith-nescent sources such as Ibn Sīnā, Farābī, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, and Mullā Ṣadrā. Khayr al-Dīn Ziriklī (1893-1976) similarly gave Jawharī short shrift in his entry in *al-Aʿlām* (3:230-231), dismissing him as 'a virtuous man (*fādīl*) who employed himself with Qurʾānic exegesis and modern science.... He authored *al-Jawāhir fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-karīm*... keeping far from the meaning of *tafsīr* in most of it.... and he gave inflated titles to the rest of his books as well.' The *Jawāhir* fared better in Iran: Daneshgar cites (p. 9) the Persian exegete Sayyida Nosrat Amīn's (d. 1983) 1982 15-volume *Makhzan al-ʿirfān dar tafsīr-i Qurʾān* (The repository of gnosis in the explication of the Qurʾān, 'apparently the only Muslim woman at that time who compiled a *musalsal* exegesis covering the whole Qurʾān') as influenced by TJ's commentary. In the same paragraph he makes the misleading statement that 'few non-Arab exegetes of the Qurʾān have been profoundly impressed by his work(s)' which implies that the Arab exegetes are more, when the contrary is true.

TJ was eulogized by the Association France-Asie in 1908 as 'the sage of Islam' and by Carra de Vaux as one of the three luminaries of Azhar (with Rifāʿat al-Ṭaḥṭāwī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh). He was the first Arab ever nominated (1939) for the Nobel peace prize but died shortly thereafter. Baljon in his *Modern Muslim Koran interpretation (1800-1960)* (Leiden: Brill, 1961, rept. 1968, pp. 92-93) calls him a 'champion in exhibiting science-promoting trends in the Koran.' He cites Jawharī's comparison of the Disjointed Letters, which point to the necessity of reducing words into letters, to the roots of sciences, such as the necessity for someone who works with bronze to know about the properties of copper and tin; and his assimilation of Mūsā's resuscitation of the slain man in the story of the yellow cow to spiritism: 'Muslims should be aware that they, and not America, have laid the foundations of the science of spiritualism (*ʿilm taḥḍīr al-arwāḥ*).' In many places in his *Tafsīr* TJ brings up spiritism, at one point recommending mediumship as a reliable avenue

of knowledge which he compares to hypnotism and the truth serum in effectiveness. He had already explored mediumship in his 1919 book *al-Arwāḥ* (Spirits), possibly his bestselling work with many reprints and a Persian translation published in Tehran in 1928. Such emphasis, together with his maverick methodology, might have been among the reasons behind his lack of endorsement by the Sunni scholarly world apart from the West, Iran, and the Muslim Brotherhood: he was chief editor of their weekly magazine *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn* since its inception in June 1933 and represented their Cairo chapter in their 1935 *shūrā* (per the article entitled *al-Shaykh Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī... al-‘Arabī al-awwal al-ladhī rushshihā li-jā’izat Nūbil* on <https://www.ikhwanwiki.com> as of 3 May 2018). The Egyptian modernist exegete Muḥammad Farīd Wajdī was another such great believer in spiritism.

In addition to the gaps already pointed out, Daneshgar shows no awareness of Aḥmad ‘Umar Abū Ḥajr’s 534-page *summa* on *tafsīr ‘ilmī* entitled *al-Tafsīr al-‘ilmī lil-Qurʾān fīl-mizān* (Assessment of scientific Qurʾānic commentary, 2000) in which TJ is ranked, together with Muḥammad ‘Abduh, among the ‘exaggerators’ (*mughālīn*). His knowledge of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh’s groundwork seems limited to whatever is found in Edward G. Browne’s (misspelled Brown) *The Persian Revolution* (1910) and Marwa Elshakry’s recent *Reading Darwin in Arabic*. He concludes with the bizarre prediction (p. 151-152) that in the future Muslims will face ‘a dilemma: whether to accept Islam or science;’ they ‘will have three alternatives: to ignore scientific discoveries,... to ascribe the majority of scientific discoveries to Islam, as was pronounced by TJ; or to follow a metaphorical qurʾānic [sic] exegesis, one focusing on ethics and... ignoring the physical world.’ The bibliographies are helpful but the index is marred by many gaps.

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