

## **LIVING IN THE WEST WHERE ALLAH THE BEAUTIFUL COULD ONLY BE NAMED GOD**

Book Review of:

***God is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Qurʾān***,  
by Nawīd Kirmānī, translated from German into English by Tony  
Crawford (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA-USA: Polity Books,  
2014), 400 pp., ISBN: 978-0-7456-5167-5, \$45.00

Originally written in German:

*Gott ist schön: Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran*, von Nawīd  
Kirmānī (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1999, 546 pp., ISBN 978-  
3406687402)

What a sensation before the millennium, in 1999, when the dissertation thesis of orientalist-islamologist Nawīd Kirmānī, delivered in 1997 at Bonn University, was first published in hardcover in Germany: in the heart of secular Europe, a book on the holy Qurʾān with an inclusive approach, written in a highly stylistic manner, reading suspiciously like a poem! This sensation was far from tolerance, however, when a decade later the Cultural Prize of the State of Hessen was revoked upon the claim of Cardinal Lehmann from the Catholic Church that Mr. Kirmānī wrote an essay disparaging the holy cross of Christianity.

Never mind! Of Persian descent, intellectual Nawīd Kirmānī was born in 1967 in Germany, and he finished his doctoral thesis with the same title as the book. The book was well received in Germany and in German-speaking countries, and after the year of, the same 'literary success' shall be granted to him in the much wider English-speaking world.

On the cover of the book, one of the holy names of Allah: **السميع** (*al-Samīʿ*) is written in Arabic letters. These are called the beautiful names of Allah, hence the title of the book. Mr. Kirmānī desires to stress the aesthetic aspect of the Qurʾān and the aesthetic experience of the believers in the Qurʾān. Nevertheless, this work is surely not a work by a *madrassa*-scholar but rather a product of a Western secular education. This should, however, not cause a misunderstanding or a

bias toward the book. Indeed, the book deals with German philosophy in addition to the research fields of islamology and related sciences. As Kirmānī indexes Theodor W. Adorno of the Marxist tradition on 17 pages and handles Nietzsche on a highly theoretical level, he thoroughly stresses Qurʾān scholars such as Angelika Neuwirth and John Wansbrough and many ‘*ulamā*’ from Islamic countries.

Thematically, Kirmānī illuminates the aesthetic experience of the Qurʾān by explicating a series of basic tenets under six headings: first receivers, text, sound, wonder (*iʿjāz*), Prophet among poets, and listening of the Sufis. The author formulates his main thesis that for a corresponding assessment of the aesthetic face of the Qurʾān, one must keep in mind the environment in which the revelation took place, namely where the language in general, and the poetry in particular, had an outstanding status because of their supernatural leverage. Nonetheless, his criticism is that the beauty and perfection of the Qurʾān language were not well appreciated in Western islamological circles.

Mr. Kirmānī further explains the basic terminology of his work. Here ‘aesthetic’ refers to both the world of the senses and to “what is artistically perceptible and pleasurable from an objective appearance, in contrast to its discursive content, relying on abstract concepts” (p. 12). The author states that there is no doctrine of beauty in the Qurʾān. His approach here is to be considered quite pluralistic as the same aesthetic dimensions of books of other religions are also hardly or not at all unfolded.

He then addresses a number of issues such as the untranslatability of the Qurʾān, the ambivalent relations of poetry and the Qurʾān and the recitation of the holy text with music or singing. In this sense, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the auditory elements of the recitation were settled as rules and the dogma of the “miracle character of the Qurʾān (*iʿjāz*)” was written down as a kind of “aesthetic proof of God” born in the barrack rooms of the theologians (pp. 72, 241, and 313). Mr. Kirmānī correctly makes use of the argument of the linguistic excellence and of the stylistically unsurpassable character of the Qurʾān; this all makes the recitation a sacramental act.

Despite social problems in the specific environment of German society, his fame and scientific quality and his participation in the very same society led the publishing sector to award him the Peace

Prize of 2015 (*Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels*), to be handed out during the book fair in October 2015. A critical evaluation would note that the negative publicity surrounding the disapproval of the Culture Prize in 2009 is desired to be diminished by awarding the Peace Prize to Mr. Kirmānī. One must say, this decision is not the best solution. Our author is living in the West, where Allah could still solely be named God. However, nobody knows for how long. The socio-linguistic reality of religion is first realized and truly established when the correct terminology begins to be used and is emancipated from nomenclature status. The book *God is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Qur'ān* is a first step in this direction.

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