



## EDITORIAL

### ONE BOOK, MANY GAINS: ON SAEMI'S MORALITY AND REVELATION IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND BEYOND

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Over the past twenty years, many scholars have argued that the analytic philosophy of religion is unhealthy for the following reasons, among others: Most analytic philosophers of religion are Christian theists or are significantly influenced by Christianity more than by any other religion. Most of the field's central problems have arisen through engagement with Christian beliefs. Most philosophical theories developed in defence of religious belief are proposed from a Christian perspective, and most arguments against religious belief are primarily targeted at Christianity. Until very recently, all the leading journals in the field were Christianity-oriented, and most of the major funded research projects centred on themes inspired by or formed in reaction to Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, a collective awareness has emerged among analytic philosophers of religion that the aforementioned biases and lack of diversity are prevalent in the field. Although there is no consensus on how harmful these issues are to the field, many philosophers of religion believe that change is needed anyway. Even if there is no agreement on its precise *extent*, it seems indisputable that the field should be *more* diverse. The field is, to a debatable – though not dismissible – extent, sick and in need of urgent treatment.<sup>2</sup> However, bringing about any progressive change in this regard is challenging. And this is partly because it requires sympathetic collaboration among various parties, including the funding bodies (many of which have not previously been interested in non-Christian philosophy of religion), the Christianity-inspired majority of philosophers of religion, and the minority primarily influenced by non-Christian religious traditions.

Funding bodies must be receptive to projects planned to run from non-Christian perspectives. The Christianity-inspired majority should be open to the development of approaches that do not focus primarily on Christianity, whether in support or opposition, and must foster opportunities for such growth (e.g., by welcoming presentations inspired by underrepresented traditions at major philosophy of religion conferences, dedicating special issues of leading journals to papers on these traditions,

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Zarepour (2021, p. 4) regarding the number of papers directly relevant to Islamic philosophy and theology during the 65-year history of the journal *Religious Studies* (1955–2020).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of these issues and a detailed list of relevant references, see Mizrahi (2020).

publishing reviews and hosting symposiums on books written mainly from non-Christian viewpoints, and offering opportunities for philosophers inspired by different religious traditions to discuss similar topics from various perspectives).<sup>3</sup> Finally, philosophers primarily focused on non-Christian traditions should, among other things, seize such opportunities and make the most of them by producing high-quality philosophical works, not only to highlight the rights and merits of the traditions they represent for being philosophically discussed, but also to demonstrate that embracing diversity is vital for enriching the field, and that even Christianity-inspired philosophers can benefit from the addition of new non-Christian perspectives. The stance and practices of each of the three parties influence the other two.

The present symposium on Amir Saemi's book, *Morality and Revelation in Islamic Thought and Beyond: A New Problem of Evil*, has been put together with such concerns and motivations in mind. Saemi – who is mainly an analytic ethicist – has authored an excellent and thought-provoking book on a complex philosophical problem that, as we will soon observe, arises primarily within Islamic philosophy and theology but can, in principle, challenge adherents of other religions as well. Leading ethicists and philosophers of religion, with diverse religious attitudes and philosophical views, have found the book worth discussing and have kindly accepted my invitation to contribute to a symposium on it. And, last but not least, in its receptivity to non-Christianity-oriented approaches in the philosophy of religion, *Agatheos* – a newly launched journal, already showing potential to become a leading publication in the field – has offered to host the symposium. Therefore, the symposium embodies a truly collaborative effort to diversify our cherished discipline of the philosophy of religion.

This much, I believe, is enough to demonstrate the symposium's importance. The insightful critical remarks by Imran Aijaz, Farbod Akhlaghi, Robert Audi, and Lara Buchak, along with Amir Saemi's detailed responses to them, stand on their own and clearly reflect their depth and significance. They are needless to my further comments. Nonetheless, before concluding this editorial, I would like to say a few words about the importance of Saemi's book, without reviewing its content in detail or discussing my agreement and disagreement with his arguments.<sup>4</sup>

Saemi's book aims (1) to highlight a problem that arises when considering verses of the holy texts that issue divine commands and/or permissions, which appear to conflict with our strong moral intuitions (e.g., verse 34 of chapter 4 of the Quran, which apparently states that the wives must be obedient to their husbands, and that when the husbands find their wives rebellious, the men are permitted to beat their wives)<sup>5</sup>, and (2) to offer a solution to this problem. The problem, which Saemi describes as "a new problem of evil", arises from the apparent conflict between the following theses:

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<sup>3</sup> Global Philosophy of Religion Projects 1 (2020–2023) and 2 (2024–2027), funded by the John Templeton Foundation and hosted by the University of Birmingham, serve as good examples of initiatives designed to offer opportunities for philosophers inspired by underrepresented traditions. Additionally, the articles in Nagasawa and Zarepour (2024) illustrate how philosophical issues in the philosophy of religion can be discussed and debated from various Christian and non-Christian viewpoints, demonstrating the potential richness of such debates.

<sup>4</sup> For two recent reviews of Amir Saemi's book, see Ali (2025) and Hadisi (2025).

<sup>5</sup> See Saemi (2024, p. 12).

*Divinity of Scripture.* Scripture is the words of an omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God.

*Existence of Seemingly Prescribed Evil.* There are some actions prescribed or permitted by the best interpretation of a Scriptural passage which seem immoral, according to our independent moral judgments.

*Reliability of Our Independent Moral Judgments.* Our independent moral judgments reliably represent moral values, moral duties, and moral permissions.<sup>6</sup>

If *Divinity of Scripture* and *Existence of Seemingly Prescribed Evil* are true, then an omniperfect God has actually prescribed or at least permitted actions that are immoral according to our independent moral intuitions. On the other hand, if *Reliability of Our Independent Moral Judgments* is true, then those actions are indeed immoral. This means that an omniperfect God has actually prescribed or at least permitted actions that are indeed immoral, which is extremely absurd. This is the core idea of Saemi's new problem of evil.

This problem is probably more challenging for Muslims than the followers of other religions for at least two reasons. First, *Divinity of Scripture* is taken more seriously by Muslims. The majority of Muslims believe that the Quran includes the literal words of God, without any distortion or alteration (*tahrif*).<sup>7</sup> Thus, the expectation that all the actions prescribed or permitted in the Quran must be morally admissible is widely and strongly held among Muslims. Second, many people believe that *Existence of Seemingly Prescribed Evil* can be more easily justified by looking at the Quran than the scriptures of at least other monotheistic religions. This perfectly explains why a philosopher who cares about Islam's teachings should naturally care about the problem in question. Nevertheless, Saemi's subtle discussions in the book and the papers in this symposium, particularly those by Audi and Buchak, demonstrate that the issue extends well beyond Islam and is, in some way or another, pressing – though perhaps to varying degrees – for anyone who endorses the cited theses concerning moral intuitions and the God, and scripture(s) of the religious tradition(s) they care about. Therefore, Saemi's book is a notable example of a philosophical contribution that begins from an Islamic viewpoint but extends beyond Islamic philosophy of religion by presenting a general issue relevant to both Islamic and non-Islamic perspectives. In a sense, the now-popular practice of projecting problems and issues of the Christianity-oriented philosophy of religion onto a non-Christian religious tradition and seeking answers from that tradition is reversed in Saemi's book. This book shows how a significant problem, carefully formulated by reflecting on Islamic tradition, can be promoted as a general problem in the philosophy of religion, inviting contributions from scholars inspired by traditions other than Islam, including Christianity-inspired philosophers of religion.

Exploring the strengths and weaknesses of various possible solutions to the problem in Question, Saemi considers the views of a broad range of medieval Muslim

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<sup>6</sup> These theses are quoted from Saemi (2024, p. 23).

<sup>7</sup> For a philosophical defence of the idea that the Quran can be the literal words of God, see Zarepour (2022).

scholars on ethics, the reliability of revelation, and the compatibility of reason and revelation. Using the theoretical tools of analytic philosophy, Saemi reconstructs and evaluates the relevant ideas of various Ash'ari and Mu'tazili theologians and philosophers inspired by the Greek tradition. So, he puts contemporary analytic philosophy into dialogue, on the one hand with the contemporary mainstream understanding of Islam's teachings and, on the other hand, with crucial components of the intellectual history of the Islamic world. And through this, the book offers instructive models of how analytic philosophy can be employed in engaging with the history of medieval Islamic philosophy and theology, and how the latter can serve as a valuable source of insights for tackling current issues in the former.

Finally, Saemi's book represents an important step towards addressing a long-standing weakness in the work of Muslim thinkers. The history of Islamic philosophy and theology has been shaped mainly by inquiries into physics, metaphysics, and logic, while ethical questions have received considerably less philosophical attention. Saemi's book aims to highlight this aspect of philosophical inquiry, often undervalued by Muslim thinkers, reminding those interested in the Islamic tradition that it faces significant ethical challenges which cannot be solved solely by relying on a philosophical heritage heavily obsessed with metaphysics. To address these challenges, we must certainly draw on the rich history of Islamic philosophy and theology, but we also need to recognise that this alone is not sufficient; much more work remains to be done.

These observations confirm that Saemi's book yields several remarkable gains. They are, I believe, sufficient to highlight the book's overall importance and encourage philosophers of religion, ethicists, and scholars of (the history of) Islamic philosophy and theology to engage with it. However, they do not capture the subtleties of the book's arguments and their philosophical strength and significance. I am confident that these latter things will be evident to anyone who reads the book – or at least the papers collected in this symposium.

I thank Amir Saemi for writing this valuable book, and I also thank him, Imran Aijaz, Farbod Akhlaghi, Robert Audi, and Lara Buchak for their contributions to this symposium, all of which are thought-provoking and open up avenues for further development of the ideas in the book. The preparation of this symposium would not have been possible without the openness, patience, and support of Francis Jonbäck, editor of *Agatheos*, throughout the process of preparing the papers, and I am deeply grateful to him as well.

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