

Al-Maqasid: Al-Nawawi's Manual of Islam

*Nuh Ha Mim Keller, trans. and notes
Beltsville, MD: amana publications, 2002, rev. ed. 226 pages.*

Nuh Ha Mim Keller's translation of *Al-Maqasid: Al-Nawawi's Manual of Islam*, is, as advertised, a manual. In fact, it functions much like a manual for electronic machinery: One learns how to use the technology without understanding why the technology works.

In fairness, this is the purpose of *Al-Maqasid*, which was written by a thirteenth-century Hadith specialist, jurist, and an intellectual heir to Imam Shafi'i. *Al-Maqasid* is a *matn*, a short basic text of *fiqh* designed to be memorized by students so that they can give reliable religious answers to commonly asked questions in their community. In this translation, Keller, by adding his notes, enhances *Al-Maqasid's* function: "[t]he goal in rendering the present work has been to provide an English translation that combines the reliability of a famous *fiqh matn* with an explanative style that does not require a specialist to understand."

Keller's audience appears to be novices approaching Islam for the first time, or recent converts attempting to navigate their way through Islamic orthopraxy: Islam's basic tenets (chapter 1), the states of and processes for ritual purification (chapter 2), prayer (chapter 3), zakat (chapter 4), fasting (chapter 5), hajj (chapter 6), and Sufism's role in Islam from a non-perennial perspective (chapter 7). The eighth and final chapter consists of Keller's notes.

This translation will serve a recent convert, especially if he or she follows the Shafi'i *madhhab* (legal school), as it details much of the orthopraxy. However, if novices first approach Islam through this book, they

might gain the mistaken impression that Muslims principally live their faith through fastidious observances of legal rulings that might seem empty, superstitious, or arbitrary without their being tied and related back to Islam's central thesis: God's ultimate oneness.

Moreover, for a recent convert or novice, *Al-Maqasid* fails to address the struggles that a modern mind might have in understanding traditional Islam: namely, how does divine revelation sent down 1,400 years ago regulate people's interactions in the twenty-first century? In chapter 8, Keller uses his notes to explain the logic and rationale behind the *madhhabs*, but does not adequately elucidate how divine revelation may effectively regulate a constantly changing environment. Also, being a proponent of *madhhabs*, the author fails to raise and struggle with some strong criticisms regarding the accepted *madhhab* methodology.

All Muslims, according to Keller, must learn Islam's basic truths and principles from the Qu'ran and the Hadith for themselves. Non-scholar Muslims, however, must follow *madhhabs* for specific details regarding Islamic practice. He uses a divine source to justify his argument that individuals must follow *madhhabs*, quoting the Qur'anic passage that certain members of the community must learn the details of Islam and that others should ask them questions about the religion.

Keller proceeds to show how Islamic legal scholars study their religion and make legal rulings for the community. First, they acquire a breadth of knowledge by memorizing the Qur'an and a great many hadiths, and then gain a depth of knowledge by mastering the *fiqhi* methodology that reconciles any apparent contradictions between the divine source and that fills in any gaps not directly addressed by the divine source. Specifically, Keller explains three methodological rules as a demonstration of scholarly depth in knowledge: a more specific divine verse trumps a more general one, certain subsequent divine revelations abrogate earlier ones, and a prophetic command trumps a prophetic action. In elaborating on the last methodological rule, he points to the contradiction between the prophetic example of the Prophet baring his thigh and the prophetic commandment that the thigh is *`awrah* (nakedness) and should be covered. Keller points out that prophetic exceptions exist due to Muhammad's special role as God's prophet, but that prophetic commandments addressed to the community were clearly meant for the community and must be followed. Therefore, methodologically, a scholar rightly determines that a prophetic commandment trumps a prophetic example.

As Keller is a proponent of *madhhabs*, his defense has certain blind spots or fails to address certain strong criticisms of the *madhhab* methodology. In defending their role, the author makes two points against the criticism that Muslims blindly follow *madhhabs*. First, he points out that all advanced scholars reexamine questions and do not blindly follow previous legal rulings. Second, he argues that it is not possible for every Muslim to know every detail about Islam. For a Muslim to follow an expert religious ruling is no different, according to him, than for a patient to follow a doctor's prescription. Of course, this comparison fails in one key respect: Patients do not practice medicine, whereas non-scholarly Muslims practice Islam.

Keller's arguments suggest that a complete reading of the Qu'ran and the hadiths inevitably leads to *fiqh* methodology as it is currently practiced. His account, however, fails to raise several important questions. For instance, why is there no role for Islamic metaphysics in law? If God's most dominant traits are mercy and compassion, why do these principals not enter into legal reasoning? Must the Qur'anic verse referring to some people learning religion refer to legal learning as opposed to spiritual or metaphysical learning or teaching? Why are other divine sources, such as the verse dealing with community consultation, downplayed in *fiqh* methodology?

Finally, although Keller focuses on how religious legal rulings are derived, he does not discuss how such legal rulings are applied. A study of Islamic legal application, especially regarding rulings between community members, weakens modern claims regarding Islamic law's anachronistic nature and callousness. Such studies may be found in books like Eric Winkel's *Islam and the Living Law: The Ibn al-Arabi Approach* (Oxford: 1997).

As an academic resource, this book may be worthwhile in laying out specific Islamic practices and in elucidating a traditional justification for legal schools. However, the book does so from a proponent's point of view and offers an uncritical approach. Moreover, it fails to provide an integral view of Islam. Consequently, the book should be used only as a complement to others and should not serve as a general introduction to Islam or *fiqh*.

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