

Interview

Interview¹ mit Mutaz al-Khatib

Eingeleitet von Jasser Abou Archid

Das folgende Interview in englischer Sprache behandelt mehrere Themenfelder im Bereich der Hadith- und Ethik-Studien, welche aufgrund ihrer theologischen Bedeutung und Praxisbezogenheit Gegenstand aktueller Diskussionen unter Wissenschaftlern sind. Aufgrund seiner intensiven und langjährigen Lehr- und Forschungserfahrungen in den beiden erwähnten Bereichen wurde Mutaz al-Khatib als Gesprächspartner für dieses Interview eingeladen.

Al-Khatib ist derzeit Assistenzprofessor am Research Center for Islamic Legislation der Hamad Bin Khalifa Universität in Katar und arbeitet zugleich am College of Islamic Studies, welches derselben Universität angehört. Er ist Autor zahlreicher Abhandlungen sowie Artikel zu Themen rund um die Hadith-Kritik, Ethik, Ideengeschichte, Islamisches Recht (darunter *maqāṣid aš-šarī'a*) und wirkt als Gutachter für mehrere renommierte Zeitschriften in Malaysia, USA, Katar und im Libanon. In Katar war er Gründungsmitglied des Intellectual Forum for Innovation, welches 1999 ins Leben gerufen wurde. Zudem wirkte er zwischen 2004 und 2014 an der Gestaltung der Sendung „*aš-Šarī'a wa-l-ḥayāt*“ mit, welche bis 2014 auf dem Sender „al-Jazeera“ ausgestrahlt wurde. Von 2003 bis 2008 war er zudem Chefredakteur der Rubrik „Islam and Contemporary Affairs“, welche über das Webportal „IslamOnline.net“ betrieben wurde. Auf internationaler Ebene war er Gastwissenschaftler in Berlin und Beirut sowie Referent an mehreren Universitäten weltweit.

Hikma: Mr Al-Khatib, thank you very much for your readiness to talk to us and answer a few questions. Since you hold the position of Associate Professor for Methodology and Ethics at Hamad Bin Khalifa University and specialise in Quran and Hadith studies, I would like to focus on topics related to the Hadith studies on the one hand and ethics on the other. To begin, I would like to ask the following question: As you know, Jonathan Brown mentioned in his book “Hadith. Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World” that the modern academic efforts in the field of Hadith

1 Dieses Interview mit Dr. Mutaz al-Khatib führte Jasser Abou Archid (M.A.), wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter am Institut für Islamische Theologie der Universität Osnabrück, im Sommer 2020 in Form einer Online-Konversation.

are mainly focused on two major aspects: 1) The evaluation of authenticity, respectively the reliability of prophetic traditions; and 2) The place of Hadiths and the Sunna in understanding Islam. How can these two aspects be handled in a balanced way in the light of the many different approaches observable today among modern authors?

Mutaz al-Khatib: I agree with Jonathan and to be more accurate, this reflects mainly modern Western scholarship. But over the last two decades, especially in Arabic scholarship, new approaches to Hadith have emerged. Three of these approaches can be mentioned here. Firstly, studying the methodological developments of traditionists with focus on the difference between the “methodology of early traditionists” and the methodology of “late traditionists”. The work of Ḥamza al-Malibārī can be given as an important example here. Secondly, studying the differences between the “Hadith Criticism” of traditionists (*muḥaddithūn*) and that of jurists (*uṣūliyyūn*), specifically in how each analyses the chain of transmission (*isnād*) and the text (*matn*). Numerous differences, evident in the literature of *muṣṭalaḥ al-ḥadīth* and *uṣūl al-fiqh*, demonstrate two distinct methods of “Hadith Criticism”, namely in how each analysed and criticised the chain of transmission and the text of traditions. I myself have dedicated two books to demonstrating this conclusion. And thirdly, analysing Hadith. As you know, Hadith interpretation was not exhausted in Western scholarship, because the question of interpretation comes second after the question of authenticity. It is the same case when we look at the Western scholarship on Qur’anic studies, but finally there was a turn within the Qur’anic studies to Qur’anic interpretations. Now, only a few new studies on Hadith commentaries are noticeable for example, and I organised, at the Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics, an international seminar on “Hadith and ethics” and its results will be published as an edited volume. I also designed a specialised course entitled “Scriptural ethics: ethics in Qur’an and Hadith” for MA students in the Applied Islamic Ethics program at the College of Islamic Studies at Hamad Bin Khalifa University. However, all these efforts reflect new approaches to Hadith other than the two focuses mentioned in your question. Furthermore, I would classify the different approaches to Hadith as follows: 1. The authoritativeness (*ḥujjiyya*) of Hadith, 2. methodology and Hadith criticism, and 3. Hadith content and interpretation. I believe that these categories are interrelated, and they make Hadith, as a discipline, much richer than it was conceived in modern scholarship. It also covers multiple disciplines, including history, ethics, jurisprudence, and theology. Furthermore, this multi-disciplinarity will impact on our perspective of Hadith criticism because it will make us explore the methodological diversity in the Islamic tradition and it will offer us a deeper understanding of the historical developments of Hadith studies, especially Hadith criticism.

Hikma: Thank you for the detailed and nuanced answer. I would like to focus a little bit on the second aspect you mentioned. In the context of the reliability of the Hadiths, some Western authors – especially Orientalists – assume that the premodern Muslim Hadith scholars limited their evaluation of Hadith authenticity on the *isnād* without the *matn*. However, as you mentioned in your answer, in your books “*Radd al-ḥadīṭ min ḡihat al-matn. Dirāsa fī manāhiḡ al-muḥaddithīn wa-l-uṣūliyyīn*” and “*Qabūl al-ḥadīṭ. Dirāsa fī manāhiḡ al-muḥaddithīn wa-l-uṣūliyyīn*” you explain the different criteria established by classical scholars of *uṣūl al-fiqh* and Hadith for either rejecting Hadiths because of a lack in the *isnād* **and** *matn* or acceptance of it. What is the reason in your opinion that some Western authors remain unaware of the elaborations you treated in the above books?

Mutaz al-Khatib: Two key reasons can be given here. Firstly, there is the narrow scope of Orientalist studies which focused only on the traditionists, while the Islamic legal theorists (*uṣūliyyūn*) and Muslim jurists also addressed Hadith and provided important contributions to Hadith criticism. Second, Hadith criticism in the formative period was a practice not a theory and this is why we can hardly find a methodological introduction for the major sources of Hadith such as al-Bukhārī and others. Muslim is an exception here. So, the difficult question here is: how to analyse the methodology of the early traditionists? Studying their practice and relying on the early sources is absolutely essential here but the majority of the contemporary studies relied on the late sources, and these do not accurately reflect the early practice of Hadith criticism. Orientalist studies also did not capture the key difference between the “critics” who practiced Hadith criticism in the time of transmission and the Hadith scholars who engaged in theorising Hadith studies later. The works of the early critics had only a minor place in the contemporary studies on *matn*, which focused more on the works of the Hadith scholars. That is why I depended in my books on the concept of *ta’līl* as a central tenet for the traditionists, the critics and for the jurists, and I intensively relied on primary sources by critics. By consulting the works of Hadith critics, it becomes clear that judging the transmitters interacted with judging the *matn*. Judging the transmitters functioned in two ways: starting from the transmitted texts and comparing them with other texts to finally judge the transmitter; and the other way around, starting with the transmitter and then moving to the transmitted text.

Hikma: Thank you. I would now like to talk about a point that partially affects the third aspect of Hadith interpretation you mentioned in your first answer, namely the relationship between the Qur’an and the Sunna in its epistemological and methodological, respectively hermeneutical aspects. Do you

think that there are significant differences between the two sources of Islam in these aspects?

Mutaz al-Khatib: In my book entitled “*Radd al-ḥadīth*” I classified the classical opinions about the relationship between Qur’an and Hadith in three categories: 1) they are equal. This opinion can be attributed to al-Shāfi‘ī and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal; 2) the Qur’an has primacy over the Hadith. This can be attributed to Mālik and Abū Ḥanīfa; and 3) Hadith has primacy over the Qur’an. This can be attributed to some traditionists like Yaḥyā b. Abī Kathīr. Each group has its arguments to demonstrate its position, but I think this dispute is based on different hermeneutical approaches to the Qur’an and Hadith for seeking the divine will, especially in religious matters (*al-ta’abbudī*). But the key issue here is how to define the divine will in both cases: if there is a general divine command/forbiddance or if there is no revelation at all. In the first scenario most of the Muslim jurists give the primacy to the specific text (*al-naṣṣ al-khāṣṣ*) because they think it is the more direct way to reflect the divine will and it is certain, while the general text is ambiguous and has only high probability. This issue can be approached from two perspectives: if we approach it from the perspective of the authenticity, we have to give the Qur’an the primacy over the Hadith; and if we approach it from the perspective of the quality of the speech (*al-dilāla*), then the Hadith will have the primacy over the Qur’an because of its detailed and specific discourse. In modern studies, more emphasis has been given to the Qur’an because of its general discourse, which in turn gives more space for interpretation based upon its moral principle and universal discourse. The modern approach opens the Qur’an to new horizons beyond the limitation of the traditional discourse, which was dominated by legal concerns.

Hikma: Regarding the field of Hadith studies in this interview I have a further question: Could you please briefly explain the difference between the terms “Sunna” and “Hadith” as they have been defined among pre-classical and classical scholars? The diversity of definitions of both terms has induced contemporary scholars like Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) and Adis Duderija (Griffith University, Queensland/Australia) to consider the Sunna as a system of ethical conduct rather than a primarily legal source. Often this approach interacts with a critical view to the classical standards of Hadith criticism and interpretation. How do you evaluate this point of view?

Mutaz al-Khatib: These two terms are problematic terms for a number of reasons. Muḥammad b. Ja‘far al-Kittānī, for example, mentioned three opinions about the relation between Hadith and Sunna, namely: 1. They have the same meaning; 2. Hadith is general (*a‘amm*) while Sunna is specific

(*akhaṣṣ*); and 3. The opposite, i.e. Sunna is general while Hadith is specific. Al-Kittānī was speaking about the classical positions, and I think that the key issue here is that the way you define both terms determines the way you identify the relation between them, so the concept is central. It is clear from early sayings attributed to some critics that there was a difference between “Hadith” and “Sunna” during the early centuries. This differentiation can be referred to two elements: first, the interdisciplinarity of the term Sunna, thus, the context will impact the definition of the term. e.g. Sunna will take different meanings in theology, Hadith discipline, *fiqh*, and *uṣūl*. Second, the historical developments had an impact on these two concepts. In the early stage, the distinction between Hadith and Sunna was almost clear and practical, but after Hadith canonisation this relationship between the two terms became more complex and not easy to differentiate. How are you going to know Sunna in the sense of “practice” when the practice itself became “Hadith” and was transmitted in the form of a saying. I think this question was the key one in the dialogue between Mālik and al-Shāfi‘ī. In my opinion, Sunna reflects the practice (*al-‘amal*) and what represents the ideal model (*mā rusima li-yuḥtadhā*); it defines the moral model but this is not the case with Hadith, which is general and consists of different aspects, including historical, social and metaphysical aspects, and it is not necessary to be binding and idealistic to guide our conduct. In the course on “scriptural ethics” I teach, I usually focus on this difference because it is very essential to the field of ethics.

Hikma: As you have now moved on to ethics, could we proceed to the other topical field for this interview, namely the status of ethics in Islamic Studies and its importance for practical matters. Could you first please give us an overview of the definition of ethics in the Islamic tradition and its contemporary understanding.

Mutaz al-Khatib: Classical Islamic philosophical thought defined ethics as a condition, or a well-established characteristic of the soul, that drives the actions of the body. Following the Greek philosophical sources, these types of writings were inclined to describe the nature of the soul and its characteristics, in addition to defining the virtue and its divisions. However, this early perception limits ethics to Greek philosophy only, whereas the modern concept of ethics has witnessed two developments. Firstly, it went beyond the classical concept through its transition to normative sciences (i.e. logic, epistemology, and ontology), which comprehensively study human behaviour and thus make ethical judgements the outcome of knowledge accumulated from studying human behaviour. Secondly, the possibility of ethical evaluation is no longer an axiomatic issue, given the complexity, expansion and multiplicity of knowledge. This has led to research in meta-ethics, i.e. the

study of ethical systems from an external perspective, and thus the attempts to understand their differences, similarities, and operational mechanisms. Ethics addresses the goals of human acts, and what it is to lead a good life. On this basis, it is more comprehensive than the dualistic conception of *ḥalāl* (permitted) vs. *ḥarām* (prohibited), or the dualistic concept of righteousness vs. wrongfulness. Consequently, the concept of ethics is complex because the studies, disciplines, and sciences that address human conduct at all levels are so numerous. I have explained the concept of ethics and its historical development in some of my works and lectures and I am writing a separate article on the concept.

Hikma: Thank you for this clarification. Why do you think we need ethics for our daily life?

Mutaz al-Khatib: As the Moroccan philosopher Taha Abdurrahman said, the human being is a moral being and without morality there is no humanity. So, we need ethics to be humans and to define the virtues that make us virtuous persons. We also need ethics to set our priorities and to take the right course of action, aware of its justifications, and this makes us consistent and allows us to conform to our conscience, all of which enable us to live in a moral society with others, bound together by and committed to upholding the same values and principles. Ethics enable us to identify the ideal life that deserves to be lived, the moral values and principles that govern our actions. However, human beings cannot live without defining right and wrong and having the rationale to decide if something is right or wrong. Furthermore, behavioural and institutional changes require ethical justification.

Hikma: In several of your articles you mention how ethics affect the religious interpretation of current matters. Good examples of this today are the question about the legitimacy of closing mosques due to the Corona pandemic or, from the same context, the question as to who has the primary right to medical treatment when the hospitals are overfilled with patients. Could you please explain the connection between ethical and religious aspects in dealing with these subjects?

Mutaz al-Khatib: Ethics is an interdisciplinary field, and the pandemic is an important example that demonstrates the interdisciplinarity of ethics. As I mentioned, ethics is wider than *fiqh* because of its disciplinarity and interlinking to a multiplicity of disciplines. For example, the pandemic leads to discussions regarding the performance of religious rituals and congregational prayers, the closure of mosques and moral debates to determine the optimal behaviour in such a situation, whether for the individual, the community or the state. With ethics there is a need to provide an ethical jus-

tification for a certain action or policy, as well as the political and economic consequences that the pandemic may have. *Fiqh* is central in ethics but it alone is not enough and this is why there is an interconnection between *fiqh* and ethics. During the current pandemic for example we are dealing with a whole set of conditions relating to several principles, such as saving lives, the public interest and balancing them in times of conflict and moral responsibility towards oneself and others. Such pandemics and crises raise questions about the right approach to addressing these situations – not only in terms of medicine, but also from the point of view of Islamic ethics and bioethics in relation to infectious diseases – and governing, guiding, and assessing human actions and behaviours, such as prioritising treatment when there are scarce resources, and whether measures such as travel restrictions, the closure of airports and mosques, and social isolation and quarantine measures are ethically justified. And if they are justified, how do we ensure that people are receiving their basic needs in this case? How do we prevent the stigmatisation of people infected by a virus? What are the virtues that individuals should uphold during epidemics, whether in their movements, their consumption and storage of goods, their willingness to volunteer and support healthcare providers, or their adherence to government instructions?

Hikma: Thank you for these explanations. In this interview we have been able to shed light on important topics related to the field of Hadith studies and ethics. For detailed information on the issues we have touched upon in this interview; I would urge readers to consult the pertinent publications of Mr al-Khatib, whom I would like to greatly thank for this inspiring conversation.

Mutaz al-Khatib: My pleasure. Thank you for your invitation.