

Introduction to special issue. Islamic ethics embodied: premodern discourses of medicine, law, affect, and philosophy

Joseph Leonardo Vignone

This special issue of *Body and Religion* convenes five scholars of premodern Islamic ethics, a prolific literary tradition encompassing Persian and Arabic works of belles-lettres, jurisprudence, politics, and devotion. Arriving from the fields of philosophy, law, cultural history, and *hadith* studies, our articles interpret this wide-ranging ethical tradition through its most essential point of reference – the human body. In particular, we engage with the contested scientific concepts, religious priorities, and political theories that Islamic scholars used from the tenth to fourteenth centuries to render the human body both knowable and governable in their intellectual societies. More specifically still, we contend that the premodern Islamic philosophers, moralists, pedagogues, and jurists to be studied below justified this ethical investigation and regulation of the human body through vividly affective, gendered, and medical forms of reasoning.

Our articles follow important, recent developments in the more general study of Islamic societies. The past 15 years of this scholarship have witnessed especially profound scholarly investment in the human body as an analytic point of departure. The highly generative collected volume by Babayan and Najmabadi (2008) have demonstrated that newer, even queer

Affiliation

Gonzaga University, Spokane, USA.

email: vignone@gonzaga.edu

readings of premodern sources can help us to recover genders, sexes, sexualities, and other forms of embodied practices that have been overlooked or ignored by modern historians. Although they may not always employ queer methodologies as such, studies that followed this important volume have productively read the premodern body not as a stable, transhistorical object whose nature is broadly conceded in the political, religious, and intellectual discourses of the Islamic world, but rather as a fluid, multiple, and highly contested grounds for debating, enacting, and constituting those discourses themselves. Notable monographs in this vein have included those by Bashir (2011), Richardson (2012), Reid (2013), Kueny (2013), Ragab (2018), Ayubi (2019), and Verskin (2020), as well as collected volumes about and beyond premodern Islam, such as those by Wolfe and Gal (2010), Carrera (2013), Buskens and van Sandwijk (2016), Strocchia and Ritchey (2020), Howe (2021), and Kreil, Sorbera, and Tolino (2021). By privileging the diversity of the body's iterations through history, viewing such iterations as part of the intellectual production of the societies under study, and attending to how such iterations helped to construct relations of power in those societies, these studies have called for broader scholarly engagement with the affective, gendered, and medical dimensions of premodern Islamic ethics.¹

The contributors to this special issue seek to answer this call. In 'Classical Islamic philosophy and the gendered perfection of bodies and minds,' Raissa von Doetinchem de Rande investigates how Islamic philosophers of the tenth to twelfth centuries drew on Greek antecedents to conceive of full political and rational agency in relationship to physically perfect masculinity. Studying the political philosophy of such pivotal thinkers as al-Fārābī, Ibn Ṭufayl, and Ibn Rushd, von Doetinchem de Rande challenges the simple interpretation of their thought as uniformly and categorically excluding women from political roles. While each philosopher envisioned the ideal human society as a hierarchy, they meaningfully differed on how that hierarchy should be organized. Committed to the existence of humoral natures (*tibā'i*) that make individual bodies more or less suited to political leadership, the Central Asian philosopher al-Fārābī held that only certain philosophically adept men – and seemingly only men – were suited to such roles. In the later Andalusian context, Ibn Rushd's elevation of reason (*'aql*) as the determinative qualification in this hierarchy led him to admit properly educated women to political leadership. Curiously, Ibn Rushd is both the most open to the possibility of female rationality and political leadership *and* the most elitist. For in his view, society should seek to rid itself of naturally undesirable persons such as the incurably ill or incapable. As something of an outlier, Ibn Ṭufayl, also working in the

Andalusian context, believed that rational and philosophical perfection required the alienation of the philosopher from wider society. Most importantly, and unlike the sources underlying his work, Ibn Ṭufayl eliminated all female characters from his famed political allegory, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*. In light of their complex considerations of physical perfection, gender, and leadership capacity, von Doetinchem de Rande cautions against simplistic engagements with these figures for contemporary political purposes.

In the North African and Andalusian context, Sara Verskin's article recounts the lack of uniformity and centralization that characterized premodern Muslim women's experience of the law – an institution often described in secondary sources as subordinating female forms of authority to their male counterparts. In 'Midwives as advocates,' however, Verskin uses collections of legal questions pertaining to female litigants (e.g., findings of virginity, menarche, and pregnancy, as well as remarriage after divorce or widowhood) to show that midwives were important legal actors tasked with rendering female bodies legible to the courts. Yet, rather than simply serve these patriarchal courts as dispassionate informants and investigators, Verskin documents how midwives worked with the women they examined to secure advantageous legal outcomes. Verskin argues that historians should thus consider midwives as intermediaries, who used their legal expertise and authority to help women chart a course through a court system they otherwise had little ability to navigate, and advised them about how best to overcome the precarity of their sexual status within the confines of the law. Such a perspective grants us a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which Islamic jurists sought to regulate and accommodate the bodies of women in the premodern era.

Dana Lee investigates how legal reasoning about the inviolability (*ḥurma*) of the body in cases of necessity changed across the medieval period in her article, 'The inviolability and value of the human body and the corpse in the Islamic legal tradition.' Lee argues that medieval jurists did not simply comment on the legally relevant vulnerabilities of human bodies, but offered sophisticated arguments about the circumstances under which these vulnerabilities triggered legal exceptions by virtue of necessity. The highly discursive writings of Sunnī jurists held that the preservation of the human body's dignity was one of the law's most fundamental purposes. Nevertheless, a finding of necessity would permit otherwise illegal violations of that dignity in situations where such violations would prevent the undue loss of life and limb. Using the paradigmatic case of whether the starving person should be permitted to inflict bodily harm, commit food theft, or engage in cannibalism, Lee shows that in the decidedly plural legal contexts of the medieval era jurists differed in both their

methods and their estimations of concepts relevant to this case, including evidence, value, reasonableness, fairness, entitlement, and protection from harm. According to Senturk (2012), two schools of thought emerged from discussions of these concepts – the communalistic and universalistic. The first centered on the inviolability secured by membership in the political or religious community, and the second on the inviolability guaranteed to all individuals by virtue of being human. Although the methods and operative principles even within these two schools were diverse, Lee demonstrates that jurists consistently invoked medical and affective reasoning about the human body to explore the moral limits of the law and define its hierarchy of social goods.

Concern for maintaining the integrity of bodies manifested in late medieval treatises of professional and pedagogical ethics as well. In ‘Refresh your hearts so they might better remember,’ Joseph Leonardo Vignone describes how the Islamic intellectual elite (*ulema*) associated the health of the heart (*qalb/del*) and concupiscent spirit (*nafs*) with positive scholarly outcomes in this literature from the tenth through fourteenth centuries. The education and scholarly activities of the ulema in this era required that they committed many dozens of texts to memory. For this reason, they were greatly interested in medical strategies believed to condition the body for this arduous task, and in ways to keep it in good health for the remainder of their careers. Secondary scholarship has typically depicted the ulema’s ethics as prescribing severe forms of abstinent piety to accomplish these goals, especially in the wake of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s (d. 1111 CE) highly influential writings on the topic. Vignone reexamines the ulema’s ethical tradition before and after the lifetime of al-Ghazālī, in order to contextualize the role his recommendations played in the ulema’s formation as a class. Although they remained a popular touchstone, the ulema generally favored ethics that reasonably accommodated carnal desires arising in the concupiscent spirit, viewing a more indulgent scholarly lifestyle not only as more realistic for students, but in fact as a necessary concession to the faculties of the body that work together to accomplish the tasks of learning. Vignone’s article underlines the relevance of such affective literacy to the Islamic intellectual elite, particularly as it relates to the emergence of a normatively masculine, scholarly body in the premodern era.

Likewise focusing on affect, Arafat A. Razzaque’s article, ‘Disgust in early Islamic thought,’ explores how Islamic traditionalist literature invoked emotions responding to the smell, taste, and sight of putrefying flesh as a means of encoding moral aversion to sinful behavior in early medieval ascetic discourse. Razzaque draws on recent scholarship in the fields of law, psychology, and moral philosophy to unpack the

culturally and historically conditioned affect of disgust – an emotion that has received scant attention from historians of the premodern Islamic world. This is despite the florescence of the renunciant *zuhd* movement in this era, which prescribed ritual purification, fasting, and other ascetic forms of disciplining the body as a matter of piety. Disgust proved an apt metaphor for explaining the odiousness of sin among advocates and practitioners of *zuhd*, who wielded its lurid vocabulary of putrefaction for both moral injunction and exhortation. The ascetic idiom of disgust was put to such varied uses as citing carrion to reflect on the transience of the material world, comparing the repulsive nature of backbiting to rotting flesh, and declaring the bodies of women to be more disgusting than decayed corpses. Far from constituting a transhistorical reality, Razzaque shows that the affect of disgust was theorized and deployed by medieval Islamic moralists for ends specific to their own societies, and it therefore warrants our attention for what its uses can tell us about the hierarchies, prejudices, and anxieties of those societies.

Our quintet of articles examines discourses of the body at the intersection of law, devotional literature, political philosophy, theories of the mind, histories of affect, and changing conceptualizations of gender and sexuality across the temporal and geographical boundaries of the Islamic world. Moreover, this highly synthetic, interdisciplinary special issue broadens the only recently opened avenues of research into these areas of inquiry within medieval Islamic cultures, promising to inform much needed future research on the construction and valuation of the body within them.

Acknowledgments

With the exception of Sara Verskin's contribution, the articles in this special issue were presented at a panel I organized for the 2023 meeting of the Society for the Study of Muslim Ethics in Chicago, Illinois, moderated by Juliane Hammer. Each contributor would like to express their gratitude to the Society for its early support of our research, as well as to the editors of *Body and Religion* for the same.

Note

- 1 See Geissinger (2021) for a more comprehensive methodological summary of these and other important entries in the field of Islamic studies.

References

- Ayubi, Z. (2019) *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society*. New York: Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/ayub19132>
- Babayan, K., and Najmabadi, A. (2008) (eds) *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bashir, S. (2011) *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam*. New York: Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/bash14490>
- Buskens, L., and van Sandwijk, A. (2016) (eds) *Islamic Studies in the Twenty-First Century*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048528189>
- Carrera, E. (2013) (ed.) *Emotions and Health, 1200–1700*. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004252936>
- Geissinger, A. (2021) Applying gender and queer theory to pre-modern sources. In J. Howe (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Gender* 101–115. New York: Routledge.
- Howe, J. (ed.) (2021) *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Gender*. Oxford: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351256568>
- Kreil, A., Sorbera, L., and Tolino, S. (eds) (2021) *Sex and Desire in Muslim Cultures: Beyond Norms and Transgression from the Abbasids to the Present Day*. London: I. B. Taurus. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781838604110>
- Kueny, K. (2013) *Conceiving Identities: Maternity in Medieval Muslim Discourse and Practice*. New York: SUNY Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book27400>
- Ragab, A. (2018) *Piety and Patienthood in Medieval Islam*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351103534>
- Reid, M. (2013) *Law and Piety in Medieval Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511843532>
- Richardson, K. (2012) *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748645084>
- Senturk, R. (2012) Sociology of rights: 'I am therefore I have rights': human rights in Islam between universalistic and communalistic perspectives. In A. Saeed (ed.) *Islam and Human Rights: Key Issues in the Debates* (vol. 1). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Strocchia, S., and Ritchey, S. (eds) (2020) *Gender, Health, and Healing, 1250–1550*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048544462>
- Verskin, S. (2020) *Barren Women: Biology, Medicine, and Religion in the Medieval Middle East*. Boston: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110596588>
- Wolf, C., and Gal, O. (eds) (2010) *The Body as Object and Instrument of Knowledge. Embodied Empiricism in Early Modern Science*. Dordrecht: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-3686-5>