

Forging Ideal Muslim Subjects: Discursive Practices, Subject Formation, and Muslim Ethics

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In the fields of Muslim ethics and comparative religious ethics over the past two decades, embodiment and embodied practices have reigned as rich methodological loci yielding numerous illuminating studies on the nature and process of ethical formation, in large part because of the pioneering work of anthropologist of Islam, Talal Asad. But as is often the case with scholarly methodologies, the pendulum has begun to swing back, in this case towards an interest in theological and philosophical reasoning as crucial to understanding how religious and moral selves are formed—for example, in Thomas A. Lewis’s 2016 *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion & Vice Versa*. Presenting himself as standing firmly in the camp of this nascent trend, Faraz Masood Sheikh offers his *Forging Ideal Muslim Subjects: Discursive Practices, Subject Formation, and Muslim Ethics* as a study of both Muslim and comparative religious ethics that takes the power of ideas and reasoned reflection seriously in ethical formation. Sheikh seeks to demonstrate this primarily through an analysis of the thought of two important and understudied

Muslim thinkers, the ninth-century moral pedagogue, al-Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) and the twentieth-century Kurdish Qur'an scholar, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (d. 1960).

Starting off, Sheikh states that his interest is in the nature and formation of “*ideal Muslim subjectivity*” through the lens of al-Muḥāsibī and Nursi (1). In his use of the term “ideal subjectivity,” Sheikh pulls from the work of French theorists Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot along with Jewish and comparative ethicist Jonathan Schofer in order to construe ethical formation as a process of discursive engagement with didactic texts which are understood as “technologies of the self” addressing readers as ideal subjects. In this process, which Hadot refers to as “spiritual exercise,” the reader enters into a dialogical relationship with the text that is grounded in her experience of the world, a hermeneutical relationship that is highly reflective, personal, and praxis-based, and thus one involving the scrutiny, and, if need be, revision, of her most deeply held commitments (18).

Sheikh states that this approach bears two benefits, one for Muslim ethics and Islamic studies more generally and one for an understanding of ethical formation beyond the Islamic tradition. Regarding the former benefit, Sheikh observes that contemporary scholars have relied heavily on the vocabularies and categories of Islamic law, mysticism, philosophy, and anthropology to analyze Muslim ethical discourses, with the legal and mystical being the most prevalent. The challenge presented by the use of such categories is that many pre-modern and modern Muslim thinkers do not easily fit into one or even more of them, including most notably, al-Muḥāsibī and Nursi. Al-Muḥāsibī is alternately referred to as an “ascetic” and “proto-Sufi” while Nursi has typically been understood as a Sufi thinker or modernist Sufi, yet none of these labels, Sheikh asserts, fully capture the force and nuance of their thought. While it is true that al-Muḥāsibī and Nursi drew on legal, ascetical, and mystical discourses and practices, their thought supersedes them; and perhaps more importantly, attempts to pigeonhole them using the above conceptual framework lead to a mistaken focus on the contents of their writings “without adequate attention to the ways those concepts are situated and *deployed* in [their] discourses and the *practical* work that these ideas

ought to do for the person who would engage with them” (7). Bringing the methodological insights afforded by Foucault and Hadot to bear on al-Muḥāsibī and Nursi remedies this. And regarding the latter benefit, employing the conceptual vocabulary of subjectivity as a means to shed light on the moral thought of al-Muḥāsibī and Nursi brings attention to those aspects of ethical formation that entail the moral agent’s reflective agency. Such a position stands at odds with reigning perspectives in the fields of sociology and anthropology which attribute the formation of individuals to ideological structures and bodily practices in ways that marginalize any sense of agency in the process. For Sheikh, there is much to commend in Asad’s conception of Islam as a “discursive tradition” and anthropologist of Islam Saba Mahmood’s analysis of the role of embodied practices in the women’s mosque movement in Egypt; however, he wonders if Asad’s focus on the power of authorized discourses and Mahmood’s emphasis on repetitive bodily practices leaves any room for individual agency in the process of self-cultivation (19-20).

Sheikh organizes the chapters on al-Muḥāsibī and Nursi according to what he terms their conception of “ideal religious subjectivity” and “ideal moral subjectivity,” with the former denoting “the ideal standpoints ... that a religious individual’s psyche ought to engender” and the latter referring to “the manner and mode in which one’s psychic states ought, and ought not, to be consciously and reflectively expressed in everyday lived life and relationships with others” (14). Thus, in chapters two and three, Sheikh discusses both forms of subjectivity according to al-Muḥāsibī while in chapters four and five he does so from a Nursian point of view. According to Sheikh, for al-Muḥāsibī ideal religious subjectivity is ordered around the twin concepts of rights (*huqūq*) and obligations (*wājibāt*), so that the ideal subject is one who properly observes the rights of God (31). In this process, self-examination (*muḥāsaba*) takes on a crucial role because external actions are judged according to whether they are motivated by good or bad “suggestions of the heart” (*inda al-khaṭarāt al-qulūb*). Sheikh discusses a range of “spiritual exercises” or discursive practices which are key to cultivating the ideal religious subjectivity for al-Muḥāsibī, highlighting the pragmatic ways they seek to cultivate reflective agency. These discursive exercises

include contemplating death, reflecting on God's promise of reward and threat of punishment (*al-wa'd wa al-wa'id*), and holding a proper wariness of Satan. Just as with ideal religious subjectivity, Sheikh states that for al-Muḥāsibī, one's internal state is crucial for ideal moral subjectivity (63). Thus, moral actors must both negotiate social obligations to their families, friends, and fellow citizens as well as attend to the self-care that is required to fend off vicious suggestions that arise from those very interactions (65). A failure of vigilance in these social exchanges can lead to a self-aggrandizing attitude, or *riyā'*, which al-Muḥāsibī refers to as a minor form of idolatry, or *shirk*, because it threatens one's capacity to perform actions for God alone (73). Sheikh notes that al-Muḥāsibī's account of the ideal moral subject differs from contemporary anthropological accounts of ethical formation which emphasize habitual embodied action. He points to al-Muḥāsibī's discussion of devotional actions, which urges believers to be on guard from thinking that the ease with which they perform devotional actions necessarily indicates a virtuous state. That is, one might be able to develop proper bodily habits, but this does not extend to *taqwa*, or God-consciousness, because while one may build some capacity for *taqwa*, one may never think of it as a stable, habitual disposition that one has attained (86-87).

In chapters three and four, Sheikh elucidates Nursi's conceptions of ideal religious and moral subjectivity. For Nursi, ideal religious subjectivity is deeply connected to "belief," or what Sheikh calls "practices of belief" (99). Far from being private and fixed in a way that is divorced from one's experience, "belief" here is better understood as a "contemplative perspective" informed by Qur'anically-guided reflections on and engagement with interior and exterior forms of reality. In contrast to "imitative belief" (Tk. *taklidi iman*) which views the Qur'an simply as a repository of divine revelations, Nursi advocated "belief through investigation" (Tk. *tahkiki iman*), a dynamic, Qur'anically-informed reflective belief which treats the Qur'an as a "direct, living, metaphorically rich, potential personal guide for a person's existential needs and questions" (101). He believed appeals to spiritual authority that one often found among Sufi shaykhs failed to speak to modern, thinking individuals or adequately equip them to confront the materialist and anti-religious aspects of modernity. Rather,

he prepared his audience to “enter into a deep and deeply personal and dynamic *studentship of the Quran*” (101). Thus, as Sheikh explains, Nursi approached Qur’anic concepts such as God’s unity (*tawhid*), God’s messengers (*rusul*), life after death (*akhira*), and divine predetermination (*qadar*) not as theoretical ideas per se but rather as reflective exercises that produced certain subjective standpoints. Such “practices of belief” hold numerous implications for intersubjective relations, that is, Nursian ideal moral subjectivity. Sheikh explores these in numerous areas which include social implications for certain conceptions of (eternal) temporality, relationships of social exchange, frugality and environmental ethics, the relationship between individuality and communal ties, the nature and social ethics of gender, and the superiority of a life of service to God over political action that all too often results in *realpolitik*.

Synthesizing much of what he has presented in the preceding chapters, Sheikh concludes by highlighting how reconstructions of Muhasibian and Nursian accounts of ideal subjectivity offer insights not only to the fields of Muslim and comparative religious ethics but also contemporary debates about how best to live out one’s faith commitments in diverse societies. Intriguingly, Sheikh claims that al-Muḥāsibī and Nursi offer ways of being in the world that are post-identitarian and non-perfectionist in contrast to ideologies that equate being Muslim with a social, ethnic, or political identity. That is, for both, ideal subjects are not expected to attain religious or moral perfection but instead are to constantly reflect on the fit between belief and lived experience in a manner that is neither devoid of conviction nor closed off to the revision of one’s moral commitments. As Sheikh writes, “Muhasibi and Nursi show us that the theoretical desire to have unshakeable convictions may be strong and sincere but actual, lived commitments, as subjectively inhabited, will always be fraught—and productive and beautiful for being so” (162). Such forms of subjectivity, Sheikh points out, have much to offer an approach to pluralism that seeks to live in community with those who hold a wide variety of religious and moral commitments without watering down one’s deeply held convictions.

In this study of al-Muḥāsibī and Nursi, Sheikh offers a rich, textured, and compelling account of the thought of two profound and understudied

Muslim thinkers that makes bold interventions in the fields of Muslim and comparative religious ethics. And what's more, he does this not only in descriptive and analytical terms but evaluative ones as well, exploring and making normative judgments about how the insights afforded by al-Muḥāsibī and Nursi might offer solutions to contemporary conundrums of ethical formation and public life. The reader even gets the sense, from time to time, that in his unpacking and elucidating of the ways textual discourses functioned for al-Muḥāsibī and Nursi as "technologies of the self," Sheikh intended for the reader's experience to be one akin to a "spiritual exercise." However, this was also connected to a weakness of the study. That is, Sheikh's wide ranging discussion of the multifarious elements of al-Muḥāsibī and Nursi's thought occasionally felt a bit disjointed and lacking in depth. Numerous times, I found myself wanting Sheikh to further develop a facet of al-Muḥāsibī or Nursi's thought or deepen a point he was making. For example, in his discussion of Nursi's preference for service to God over political engagement, I wish Sheikh would have critically engaged Nursi's seemingly apolitical stance which equated politics with the use of force, or as Nursi put it, "bearing the club." Sheikh briefly notes the problematic aspects of this conception of politics but then quickly moves on (155). For an exposition of Nursi's moral thought, it would seem crucial that such a skewed account of the political receive fuller attention. Nevertheless, Sheikh has produced a compelling study of two moral exemplars of the Islamic tradition that makes critical contributions to the fields of Muslim and comparative religious ethics and offers Muslims and non-Muslims alike a mode of being that embraces both the truth *and* fragility of their religious and moral commitments.

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