

Editorial Note

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This issue of the *American Journal of Islam and Society* comprises four main research articles, each shedding light on the diverse ways in which the Islamic legal and theological tradition has shaped and intersected with premodern and modern societies. To start closer to home: Sam Houston's contribution entitled "The "Metaphysical Monster" and Muslim Theology: William James, Sherman Jackson, and the Problem of Black Suffering" places American Muslim scholar Sherman A. Jackson's important monograph *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* in conversation with the work of American pragmatist philosopher William James and suggests that Jackson's account parallels James's account of religion in that it speaks of the "practical effectiveness" of the "web of beliefs" constituting Islamic doctrines of God. Theology, therefore, becomes not only an account of the revealed truth but also a praxis of inculcating certain habits of seeing and acting in the world. For Jackson, the monumental theodical challenge of black suffering becomes a site to explore, and teach, the wide and diverse terrain of Islamic theological reflection. This exploration allows Houston to meditate on the category of "experience" itself and its role in the verification of belief. In Houston's estimation, Jackson exposes the uncritical role played by "experience" in Black philosopher of religion William R. Jones's thought. This critique,

incidentally, can be extended to the thought of James as well. This allows Houston to highlight the theoretical as well as practical dimensions of the work of an American Muslim theologian.

Our next article explores the practical engagement of the official ulama as spokespersons of the Islamic legal and theological tradition in a different field: post-2011 Egypt. In his article entitled, “Ideals and Interests in Intellectuals’ Political Deliberations: The Arab Spring and the Divergent Paths of Egypt’s Shaykh al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyib and Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa,” Muhammad Amasha calls into question the commonplace generalizations about the ulama as being either pro-revolution or pro-regime by examining the politics of two prominent members of the pro-establishment ulama class. Whereas Ali Gomaa’s Arab Spring politics, Amasha argues, “can be seen as an effort to cater to those in power to protect his religious authority, either through struggles to attain official religious positions or by obstructing revealing information harmful to his religious legitimacy,” by contrast the Shaykh al-Azhar’s Ahmad al-Tayyib’s politics “fluctuated between accepting the status quo and being critical of those in power.”

Syamsuddin Arif in his “Rethinking the Concept of *Fiṭra*: Natural Disposition, Reason and Conscience,” turns our attention to an understudied dimension of Islamic psychology: the role of innate human nature, or *fiṭra*, in the motivation behind human action. Drawing on recent Western as well as Islamicate scholarship, it attends to the biological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of this Qur’anic concept, suggesting that it be treated not only as the natural tendency for humans to act or think in a particular way, but specifically as the religious, ethical, and rational instinct.

Finally, Fateh Saeidi’s “The Early Sufi Tradition in Hamadān, Nahāwand, and Abhar: Stories of Devotion, Mystical Experiences, and Sufi Texts” explores the history of the development of early Sufism in Hamadān, Nahāwand, and Abhar through an analysis of three significant but understudied early Sufi texts: *Karāmāt Sheikh abī ‘alī al-Qūmsānī* by Ibn Zīrak al-Nahāwandī (d. 471/1078), *Ādāb al-fuqarā’* by Bābā Ja‘far al-Abharī (d. 428/1036), and *Rawḍat al-murīdīn* by Ibn Yazdānyār

al-Hamadānī (d. 472/1079). This study thus makes valuable contribution to our knowledge of the development of Iraqi Sufism from the third/ninth to the fifth/eleventh century.

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