

Book Reviews

Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society

Zahra Ayubi

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Since the 1990s, the field of Islamic studies has seen a veritable flood of scholarship addressing issues of gender in the pre-colonial Islamic past. Some of these contributions, like the works of Amira Sonbol and Judith Tucker, contributed to the reconstruction of the history of women and the family in Muslim-majority societies (a trend that has been continued by work such as that of Yossef Rapaport). More recently, scholars such as Kecia Ali, Mohammad Fadel, Hina Azam, and Behnam Sadeghi have offered deep and ambitious analyses of the gendered logic of legal argumentation in works of *fiqh*. This growing attention to intellectual history has sometimes been accompanied with an overt interest in the ongoing relevance (and potential recuperability) of aspects of the premodern interpretive tradition for contemporary Muslims. With some exceptions (such as Karen Bauer's work on *tafsīr*), the existing literature has tended to treat *fiqh* as the classical Islamic discipline most relevant to the reconstruction of Islamic norms. Zahra Ayubi's new book, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society*, challenges this assumption by proposing that the genre of *akhlāq* is equally crucial, both for the comprehension of Islamic trends in the past and for the formation of a genuinely liberatory understanding of Islam in the present.

Ayubi's work offers a welcome corrective to the existing literature's disproportionate *fiqh*-centric and Arabo-centric emphases by focusing on three influential works of pre-modern Islamic ethics, all of them written in Persian: Ghazālī's *Kīmīyā'-ī Sa'ādāt* (The Alchemy of Happiness), Naṣīr

al-Dīn Ṭūsī's *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī* (Nasirean Ethics), and Jalāl al-Dīn Davānī's *Lawāmi' al-Ishrāq fī Makārim al-Akhlāq* (also known as *Akhlāq-i Jalāli*, Jalalean Ethics). Both in de-centering *fiqh* and in highlighting Persian-language sources dating from the eleventh through the fifteenth century, Ayubi contributes to the re-framing of Islamic studies proposed by the late Shahab Ahmed in his 2016 magnum opus *What Is Islam?* (although her study, which originated in a 2015 dissertation, must have been designed long before the appearance of that work). Rather than relying on received wisdom about the centrality of Arabic-language scholarship or the chronological boundaries of the "classical" period, Ayubi uses information about the manuscript and publication history of these texts to demonstrate that "all three works have come to be celebrated as classical sources of ethics across Persianate lands, including modern-day Turkey, Iran, and India" (49).

Ayubi does not position her analysis of these sources as an account of "Islamic ethics" in the broadest sense, which was a theme integral to various disciplines including "*kalam* (theology), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), [and] *tasawwuf* (mysticism or sufism)" (35). Rather, she locates Ghazālī, Ṭūsī, and Davani as representatives of the *akhlāq* tradition that formed a part of the larger discipline of *falsafa*, the philosophical discourse that engaged with and elaborated elements from Greek thought. She persuasively argues that while much of the discussion of *falsafa* in the western academy has focused on the question of whether it is genuinely "Islamic" or not, these works are "implicitly Islamic" in the sense that (in a phrase she draws from Fatima Seedat) "they take Islam for granted" (34). She successfully displays these works as representing a coherent and continuous tradition, despite the fact that Ghazālī (who in other works overtly distanced himself from the *falsafa* tradition) is not conventionally classed with the other two authors as a representative of philosophical ethics. In chapter one, Ayubi examines the ways in which these authors themselves positioned their contributions to *akhlāq* with respect to the other Islamic disciplines in which they were also active. She shows that they understood philosophical *akhlāq* as distinct from *fiqh* not only in function (the cultivation of personal virtue as opposed to the regulation of interpersonal and social relations) but in audience, with *akhlāq* addressed distinctively to "people with the capacity for deep, cosmic thinking" (39). *Akhlāq* intersects with *tasawwuf* in its concern with the discipline of the individual soul, or *nafs*, a goal that both disciplines articulated in part in the gendered terminology of virtuous

manliness (*muruwwaljavānmardī*), but diverges in that “sufism is centered on withdrawing from the worldly as a means of self-transformation and annihilation in God, while *akhlāq* is centered on managing the worldly as a means of enacting God’s will” (45). Ethicists thus offered guidance for the refinement, rather than the vanquishing, of the *nafs*.

Ayubi’s gendered analysis of her source texts is not limited to those elements of their contents that explicitly address the roles and status of women or of men qua men. Rather, she is attentive to the implicit gendering of the texts’ overall structures and assumptions. Arguing that “the construction of masculinity that the ethicists present is synonymous with the process of becoming ethical” (63)—and, one, might add, vice versa—she shows how the texts’ account of human potentialities and moral traits, as well as of the household and of society, are pervasively structured around the pursuit of ethical perfection by the elite male. Nevertheless, the ideal “ethical masculinity” constructed in these works is defined in contrast with undisciplined and violent “hegemonic masculinity,” such that “*akhlāq* texts provide a corrective discourse against unethical activities that were perceived as manly in premodern Muslim societies” (64, 65).

The central body of the book is devoted to discussions of the powers and virtues of the human soul (chapter two), the management of the household (chapter three), and relationships between males in the wider society (chapter four). This division reflects the internal structuring of the work’s source texts, and focuses attention on the homologies and resonances that their authors perceive between these different spheres of analysis. In chapter two, Ayubi shows how the ethicists’ account of the human *nafs* is suffused by a tension between a formally egalitarian model in which each human *nafs* is characterized by the same faculties and (implicitly) the same potential for perfection, and a pervasive pattern in which the ethical perfection of the elite male *nafs* is nevertheless articulated in contrast with the attributes associated with women and non-elite men. Within this structure it is the valorization of rationality that structures ethical hierarchies; “the ethicists’ focus on the rational faculty is what normatively genders the *nafs* male for them” (77), an association that is given weight and vividness by gendered metaphors of sovereignty in which the human person is likened to a state governed by a king.

In chapter three, Ayubi examines the three works’ accounts of the ethical principles and objectives associated with marriage and the domestic economy. She shows that, unlike the works of *fiqh* that (as demonstrated by Kecia Ali) emphasize sexual availability rather than domestic labor as

the defining function of wives, these works of *akhlāq* focus on the wife's role in the preservation and management of the wealth of the household. This function serves to enable the ethical pursuits of the husband rather than of the wife, rendering the wife's role instrumental. Another contrast with the relevant *fiqh* is the *akhlāq* texts' emphasis on the advantages of monogamy—not as a means to the cultivation of a mutual and affectionate relationship between the spouses, as might be anticipated by modern readers, but as a way of avoiding the disruptions of jealousy. The *akhlāq* texts also demote sexual satisfaction to a subordinate role in their accounts of the objectives and benefits of marriage, in keeping with their general emphasis on moderation and deprecation of excessive indulgence of one's desires.

If the ethicists' model of the household is structured around their concern with the moral development of its male head, the same is true of their account of society beyond the family. Ayubi observes that in their shared vision, "a man becomes fully ethical through association with other human beings in the public sphere" (175), a sphere characterized by homosocial relationships between men. Like that between husband and wife, relationships between men are structured unequally within a society characterized by social and occupational hierarchies. Unlike the relationship between husband and wife, which Ayubi sees as being very little concerned with affection, these homosocial relationships are conceptualized centrally in terms of love. The ethicists' ideal of love is "spiritual and intellectual," and is fully achievable only by elite men. The culmination of this hierarchy of love is the "macrocosmic ethical love" (203) that the ethicists associate with the vicegerency of God (*khalīfah*).

In the closing chapter of the book, Ayubi addresses the potential of *akhlāq* as a resource for contemporary Muslim feminist thought. Emphasizing that these texts continue to be constitutive of Islamic normativity for many believers, she argues that their misogyny—like their elitism—is not a minor and isolable element of their content but is deeply rooted in their ontology and metaphysics. Thus, it is necessary to revisit their most fundamental premises. The problematic content of these texts cannot be bracketed as a function of their historical context; neither should *akhlāq* texts be dismissed as relics of the past, because "feminist philosophers are concerned with the same fundamental question as medieval philosophical ethicists: how to live" (248). The *akhlāq* tradition's emphasis on rationality, human welfare, and justice holds lasting potential, Ayubi argues, but these values require re-articulation to de-couple them from the hierarchical and exclusionary presuppositions within which they are embedded.

Gendered Morality is distinguished by its deft combination of sensitive textual analysis of its sources with vigorous constructive argumentation. It will be an invaluable supplement to the existing literature on gender in pre-modern Islamic thought, and should find eager readers both among those interested in medieval intellectual history and among those concerned in the contemporary re-articulation of Islamic models of gender.

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