

The Qur'an and affect: Introduction to special issue

Lauren E. Osborne

This special issue of *Body and Religion* explores new possibilities for understanding emotion, affect, and sensation in relation to the Qur'an. The contributions vary in terms of period, methodological approach, as well as theoretical background, in order to focus on the theme of affect in relation to the Qur'an. Research in these areas is scant but developing, and we seek to build a conversation with earlier work, including that which has focused on emotion within the text of the Qur'an (Bauer 2017), affective engagements with the Qur'an in religious practice (Gade 2004), sensation in and around the Qur'an (Hoffmann 2019), as well as affective or emotional reactions to the text's aesthetics (Kermani 2015), to name but a few areas.

In approximately the last 30 years, diverse fields have seen a dramatic increase in attention to the world as it is felt – in terms of sensation, emotion, and affects. Recent works in these areas have debated the relationships between biology and culture with regard to felt experiences and their expressions, and the articles in this issue draw on this background both in terms of emotion and affect. This collection of studies does not seek to take a position in defining affect or emotion, or in describing the placement or existence of a boundary between them. Rather, the authors draw on the discourses of emotion and/or affect theory, in order to seek new possibilities for scholarship regarding the Qur'an.

Scholarship about the Qur'an has historically been dominated by textually driven approaches, but there has been recent growth in two areas: attention to the role of the Qur'an in relation to lived expression of Islamic

Affiliation

Whitman College, Washington, USA.

email: osbornle@whitman.edu

tradition and practices, and the expanded range of approaches that scholars apply to the text. Among this broadening realm and across these articles, our intention is to explore an area that is newly developing in the study of the Qur'an as well as in the broader field of Islamic studies. Our conversation started in a panel presented through the Qur'an Unit at the 2018 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. Through that panel and now in this special issue of *Body and Religion*, it is our aim to encourage and shape more research and conversation around these areas.

The articles presented here are diverse in terms of the understandings of affect, emotion, and sensation across the contributions, as well as the interaction or overlap between these areas. This is very much representative of the broader areas on which these works draw. Relatedly, there is a network of connections running between the four articles included here, which I flesh out in the paragraphs that follow, while also introducing each of the articles.

Two of the contributions consider modes of sensation within the text of the Qur'an: Kathryn Kueny focuses on taste, and Lauren Osborne on hearing and listening. These studies are complementary in terms of examining the rhetorical functions and understandings of sensory perception within the Qur'an, particularly in relation to the broader emotional landscape of the text; however, in terms of interrogating these sensory engagements, the perspectives move in different directions, so to speak. Osborne takes as a starting point the role of recitation and listening in Islamic tradition and practice, but gestures back to the Qur'anic text, in order to examine the specifics of listening that might be found therein. Kueny, in considering taste within the Qur'anic text, asks how the Qur'anic use of taste in its depictions of divine punishment might be functioning within the text, particularly in the ways in which they draw on earlier theories of taste and perception found in classical traditions. Osborne argues that the broader understanding of hearing and listening found within the Qur'an suggests that this mode of sense perception is particularly closely connected to ideas of comprehension, especially in relation to a divine message. Kueny argues that taste in the Qur'an serves the purpose of making a point particularly forcefully, in a visceral way, and this is especially linked to depictions of divine punishment.

The remaining two articles consider affective modes of engagement with the Qur'an as a text, although in different contexts. Joseph Vignone considers how the medieval religious scholarly class – the ulema – employ Qur'anic citation in their works of scholarly ethics (*ādāb*) to establish an affective marker of their professional identity. Key in this discourse is the role of dread (*khashya*), in specifying a particular variety of fear that is

available only to those who have proper elite knowledge of God. Focusing on the work of the fourteenth-century thinker Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, Vignone draws on the affect theory of Sara Ahmed, in order to explore how Ibn al-Qayyim uses affect to establish a social hierarchy, marking which bodies are valued or held to be superior using a set of emotional associations. In his study, Mahdi Tourage also examines affective associations around the text of the Qur'an, although he employs very different types of sources from Vignone's, an approach which also leads him to a contrasting conclusion. Tourage examines two very different contemporary engagements with the Qur'an, a contemporary scholarly text by Muhammad Abdel Haleem and a short story by Mohja Kahf. In comparing these two contemporary engagements with the Qur'anic depiction of paradise, Tourage employs affect theory in demonstrating that interpretations of the Qur'an are contingent in nature, and are always a product of relations between a text that 'haunts' engagements with it, and bodies that are unstable and marked in various kinds of ways.

There are many fruitful points of comparison and contradiction across the articles. The Qur'anic paradise is a common site of interrogation in the contributions by Tourage and Kueny. Varieties of fear can be tracked between Kueny and Vignone. Embodied experience moves across all four articles, with the connection of sensory experience focused in Osborne and Kueny, and socially constructed power relations between different types of bodies focused in Vignone and Tourage. One might also compare the conclusions of Vignone and Tourage (and perhaps all of the studies) in relation to the utility of a sensual/spiritual or body/mind split. Where does such a framework make sense, and where does it not? There are many connections along these lines that readers can explore.

Stepping back a bit, there are two main thematic issues raised by the articles as a whole that I would like to highlight as possibilities for further consideration. First, we might come away from this set of studies with a broadened or at least destabilized understanding of textuality in relation to the Qur'an. This is not to say that everything around or associated with the Qur'an 'counts' as part of the Qur'an; that is a more complex question than can be considered here. But rather, when we look at notions of text not only in relation to the words of the Qur'an, we can see this idea moving in different directions on multiple levels. We might ask about textuality with respect to how the Qur'an discusses itself in relation to embodied experience, but also how it draws on embodied experience as a rhetorical tool; and connected to these, how the Qur'an exists situated in tradition in a way which is constantly shifting in relation to the bodies that encounter it and engage with it, to name but a few possibilities. There is a rich source

of possibilities for understanding the Qur'an's role and use in diverse communities and contexts, and acknowledging that its words are a part of that interplay, but in a dynamic and contingent way. Tourage provides a helpful starting point for such an inquiry when he says, 'the text too can be conceived as a body with margins and borders through which its interaction with the world is negotiated' (2020:59). How might we read this claim in relation to the other articles?

Second, and following on from the first issue, we might also ask how broadening our thinking about emotion, affect, and sensation in and in relation to the Qur'an might lead to a more complex body of knowledge about the Qur'an. What different ways of knowing do we encounter in these articles? How do those ways of knowing relate to the Qur'an and notions of divine truth? What is knowledge and how do humans experience it, react to it, acquire it, or engage with it?

These questions demonstrate some of the broad possibilities for examination and further work beyond the studies presented here, and it is our hope that readers might take these questions, or their own, and continue asking, thinking, speaking, and writing in these directions around the areas of emotion, affect, and sensation in relation to the Qur'an.

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