‘Physiology is Theology’: Gendered Bodies in Sufi and Islamic Constructions of the Self

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This special issue of *Body and Religion* examines how discourses of masculinities and femininities are naturalized in Islamic theologies of the self, and consequently impact ritual access in historical and modern Sufi, Salafi-Sunni, and conservative Shi’i spaces. The publication of Zahra Ayubi’s monograph, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society* (2019), generated meaningful discussions among the authors of this issue. Although research on Sufism and the body had clearly delineated the gendered ways bodies are coded in Islam (Bashir 2011; Kugle 2007), Ayubi harnessed this work and earlier critical scholarship on Islam and gender to powerful effect. She brought to our attention the misogynistic logics that underscore many Islamic theologies of the self. We were grappling with these logics in our source materials, and Ayubi established a critical vocabulary through which we could meaningfully discuss our findings. What Ayubi’s research uncovers is the fact that the normative self (the acceptable self and the virtuous self) in Islamic ethics is consistently coded cis-gender, male, and elite. She demonstrates how several foundational Islamic ethicists rendered anyone outside this androcentric norm as inferior and instrumental in the spiritual development of their elite male peers (Ayubi 2019). Moreover, she documents how various intertextual ideas from diverse Islamic theological traditions work together to universalize this gendered paradigm (Ayubi 2020b).

Inspired by the work of Ayubi and others, four of the authors of this special issue, Sara Abdel-Latif, Arpan Bhandari, Garrett Kiriakos-Fugate,
and Rose Deighton-Mohammed, originally convened a panel at the 2020 meeting of the American Academy of Religion to explore the relationship between conceptions of the self, gender, and embodiment. Together with our colleague, Brittany Landorf, who joined us in writing this special issue, we present five articles exploring the connection between gendered bodies and Islamic constructions of the self. Our articles examine written, oral, and digital transmissions of Islamic ethics from different historical periods and geographical locations. This collection includes essays on classical Sufi hagiographies (Abdel-Latif) and ecstatic utterances (Bhandari), modern Moroccan Sufi hagiographies (Landorf), contemporary Salaf-Sunni and Shi’i fatwas (legal opinions) (Kiriakos-Fugate), and the teachings of a living Sufi Shaykha (guide) (Deighton-Mohammed). Our articles examine practices of self-discipline, such as prayer, deliberate emaciation, and self-examination; the cis-heteronormative regulation of communal worship and gendered ascriptions of madness, self-worth, and spiritual ecstasy; and transphobic fatwas concerning gender-reassignment surgeries and body modifications. Together, this research illuminates the multiple contested ways that bodies perpetuate, resist, and transform hegemonic gendered paradigms of selfhood. We offer analyses and critical tools for understanding that theorized and ritualized selfhood is constructed and negotiated in highly gendered and often contradictory ways.

Although four of the articles explore constructions of gendered embodiment and selfhood in Sufi contexts (Abdel-Latif, Bhandari, Landorf, Deighton-Mohammed), while one looks specifically at Salafi-Sunni and Shi’i fatwas about transsexuality, transgender identity, and body modification (Kiriakos-Fugate), our articles are connected and organized around a shared framework for studying bodies and embodiment. Specifically, we explore how Islamic discourses of the self have cemented male normativity into the notion of selfhood by rendering the body, conceptually and corporeally, a spiritual problem. As Sa’diyya Shaikh claims, ‘patriarchal theologies … often hold an excessive focus on elements of God’s distance and transcendence. Proponents of such approaches may also often denigrate materiality and the body and, by extension, women, who are identified primarily with the bodily principle.’ (Shaikh 2012:17). Since the body was simultaneously rendered problematic and coded feminine, its dual valence instantiates elite male selves as the universal human self. These articles document how, in various contexts and different types of sources, non-elite and non-male individuals are expected to contort and conform to that ideal through ritualized and embodied selfhood, or remain deviant and delinquent, incapable of complete spiritual progress. The essays in this collection ask scholars to name this common feature of historical and
contemporary Islamic thought, and acknowledge how the persistence of this pattern has been utilized by those invested in normative patriarchy to invalidate liberative alternatives.

Discourses about the body and the *nafs* (translated as self, ego, and soul) are particularly rich in patriarchal gendered symbolism. Through the application of gender-critical lenses to the study of Islamic law, theology, and Sufism, scholars have documented and critiqued the ways in which cis-heteropatriarchy shapes Muslim definitions of the ideal human self (Ali 2006; Ayubi 2019, 2020a, 2020b; Cornell 2007; Geissinger 2015, 2021; Knight 2020; Kugle 2010; Schimmel 1997; Shaikh 2009, 2013a, 2015; Wadud 1992, 2006). Although several Islamic teachings emphasize the spiritual equality of all human beings, Islamic ethics in the Sufi, Salafi-Sunni, and Shi’i traditions often define core concepts through allusions to cis-heteropatriarchal, binary, and hierarchical constructions of gender. Historical Islamic ethical writings in multiple genres (treatises, biographical dictionaries, hagiographies, poetry, and aphorisms, among others) associate negative human qualities with women as well as queer, transgender, and enslaved people, and others from historically oppressed groups (Abdel-Latif 2020, 2023; Deighton-Mohammed 2020; Landorf 2023; Najmabadi 2014; Schine 2017). Conversely, spiritually positive qualities are often coded as cis-gender, male, and masculine (Ayubi 2019, 2020b; Landorf 2020; Shaikh 2013a, b).

One of the ways our framework supports future projects on liberative alternative analyses of the body and the self is by situating the body as a theological entity. The title of the issue begins with the adage ‘physiology is theology,’ a statement by Lex Hixon (d. 1995), also known as Shaykh Nur al-Anwar al-Jerrahi of the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi order. The adage underpins the theoretical approach of the articles in this collection. In his book, *Atom from the Sun of Knowledge*, Hixon wrote:

> The cardinal secret of Sufism can be expressed in this hermetic formula: physiology is theology. The precious human body demands a spiritual interpretation: an esoteric hermeneutics ... Sufism is not an abstract conceptuality but an intimate knowing, the fruit of direct experience. (Hixon 1993:35)

This phrase emphasizes that bodies tell us about God, describe God, feel, sense, and experience God. The hermeneutics used to examine bodies, to fully illuminate how they exist as theological entities, requires that we acknowledge the social paradigms which shape gendered embodiment. It also demands for us to face the ways patriarchal social paradigms limit how we can imagine God through their delimitation of gendered self-hood and embodiment. Here, we deliberately turn to bodies as faculties of
theological wisdom, which can (and do) challenge the social paradigm of cis-heteropatriarchy that has been inscribed into several Islamic teachings about the self. To study physiology as theology is thus to view the body as entangled in a mutually informing and contesting relationship with the conceptual frameworks that delimit it. This epistemological stance is a distinctly feminist one, because it allows embodied experience to dialectically inform both the theological possibilities available and the critical scholarly lenses through which they can be studied.

The articles in this special issue theorize Islamic conceptions of the self within historically gendered paradigms of embodiment. First, in her article entitled ‘The man-like woman and the menstruating man: gendered discourses of purity and piety in male-authored Sufi writings,’ Sara Abdel-Latif analyzes emaciation and menstruation in hagiographies of Sufi women, in order to illuminate the increased use of female bodies as texts through which to read self-discipline and self-transcendence. As elite male spiritual subjectivity becomes normative in Sufi writings by the tenth century, women’s alteration of their bodies through hunger mediated female spiritual authority. Through a critical textual analysis of male-authored records of female ascetics, she argues that emaciation inscribed piety on female bodies through a loss of femaleness, while male authors simultaneously centered the male personality and not the body in constructions of self-transcendence. Loss of menstruation through emaciation demonstrates how increased visibility of female bodies in Sufi hagiographies also resulted in the use of the body as a site for the shedding of female qualities. By valorizing their transformation into desexualized and infertile women, male authors could cast these women as honorary men and invest them with a liminal authority. Thus, female embodied practices of self-discipline became a way in which women could shed female selfhood and access hegemonic male spiritual idealizations.

Second, and also working in the classical Sufi tradition, Arpan Bhandari offers a gendered analysis of Ḥosayn b. Maṃṣūr Ḥallāj’s (d. 922) infamous saying, ‘I am the truth.’ Bhandari explores the ways in which male privilege shows up in the spiritual possibilities of Sufis. In his article entitled ‘A space for the truth: Maṃṣūr Ḥallāj and deconstructing the masculine body through sound and space,’ Bhandari explores how masculine bodies, bodily assemblages, and homosocial interactions create a narrative regarding the male body as emulative of the divine. Bhandari argues that the esoteric deconstruction of the physical body, which underlies the philosophical declaration Ḥallāj made when he said, ‘I am the truth,’ was only possible because he existed in a cis-gender male body. It is Bhandari’s contention that there is a substantial correlation between the heteropatriarchal social
context in which Ḥallāj lived, his male body, and the structural functions of his esoteric ideas and sayings. Building on Michael Muhammad Knight’s research that connects masculinity and the concept of prophethood in Islam, Ayubi’s gender ethics, and Carl Ernst’s scholarship on Ḥallāj, Bhandari weaves together multiple intersecting threads of Sufi literature and culture, theories of embodiment, and gender-critical analysis of selfhood.

Returning to the hagiographical genre in the context of nineteenth-century Moroccan Sufism, the third article by Brittany Landorf argues that there is a direct connection between conceptions of madness and gendered tropes in this genre of Sufi writing. Her article, ‘Gendering madness: figuring the majdhūba in modern Moroccan hagiography,’ explores how male writers develop the trope of the majdhūba saint to delimit female sanctity in the Sufi tradition. Landorf analyzes how nineteenth-century Sufi hagiographer Muḥammad ibn Ja’far al-Kattānī draws on epithets, tropes, and organizational strategies to construct a composite yet nonetheless hierarchical depiction of sainthood. Her article focuses on the gendered and embodied deviance of the majdhūba, examining the ways in which the trope of the saintly madwoman functions as a foil for normative forms of gendered sainthood, including that of the ‘good Sufi woman.’ She argues that, while some of the behaviors al-Kattānī associated with saintly madwomen could be read as transgressive of gender norms, they collectively function to solidify saintly categories, and create and normalize a gendered hierarchy for spiritual authority.

Fourth, in his article ‘“Be content with the decree of Allah”: the cis-heterosexual nafs in Shi’i and Sunni fatwas on transsexuality and intersexuality,’ Garrett Kirakos-Fugate examines the fatwas of Salafi-Sunni and conservative Shi’i scholars on transsexuality, and how their legal reasoning is limited by the cis-heteropatriarchal nature they ascribe to the self/nafs. Most Shi’i jurists in Iran permit sex-reassignment surgeries, while Salafi scholars forbid them as adulterations to the body, except in the case of intersex persons. Both inherit normative legal reasoning that privileges the able-bodied, adult, free man as normative. They reference premodern rulings on the khunthā (those with ambiguous genitalia) and build upon the criteria developed by their predecessors to determine an individual’s true sex/gender. These scholars also take part in a contemporary world in which the body is medically and psychologically overburdened with gendered meaning. Kiriakos critiques the limits of juristic creativity in addressing the spiritual wellbeing of trans, intersex, and non-binary Muslims under the conditions of this absolutizing cis-gender and binary paradigm.

Finally, Rose Deighton-Mohammed surveys the relationship between patriarchal Islamic theologies of the self and harsh Sufi attitudes toward
the body in her article, ‘Reading the self through a hermeneutic of divine immanence: a case study of Shaykha Fariha al-Jerrahi.’ Through a case study of the current leader of the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order, Shaykha Fariha al-Jerrahi, this article offers alternative approaches to training the self (nafs). The author uses Islamic feminist analysis to cultivate what she calls a hermeneutic of divine immanence, a method for reading, interpreting, and working with the nafs vis-à-vis the body. This hermeneutic grows out of Shaykha Fariha’s teachings about the nafs, which Shaykha Fariha calls the ‘limited self’ in her commentary on the medieval primer One Hundred Fields (Sad Maydān) by Ansari of Herat (d. 1088). I argue that Shaykha Fariha’s emphasis on divine immanence, view of the body as a locus for spiritual growth, and neutral understanding of the nafs are intentional correctives to the patriarchal frameworks that permeate the Sufi tradition. The article draws from written, online, and ethnographic fieldwork data to propose a constructive intervention in the study of Sufism and gender that considers how traditional forms of Sufi training are exclusionary to those outside the prism of cis-heteropatriarchal and elite manhood.

Reading these articles together illuminates the different ways in which patriarchal gendered paradigms come up in embodied experiences of the self. We posit that religious and academic discourses play a significant role in constraining and shaping embodied selfhood. We intentionally collected research that spans historical periods and locations, in order to highlight the ubiquity of the universalization of elite cis-gender male subjects in diverse communities of Islamic knowledge and practice. It is our intention to open-up space to consider whose humanity is rendered partial or fully denied when elite men are imagined as the prototype for the ideal self? We question how this universalization disconnects from broader Islamic commitments to justice, diversity, and human spiritual equality? This special issue is one step in a larger conversation; one that began long ago with the scholarship of earlier gender-critical researchers, and one that will necessarily continue far into the future.

References


