

Call for Research Papers

Reconsidering the Manly and the Fraternal in Islamic Virtue Ethics: The Case of *Futuwwa*

4-6 November 2019

The Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE)
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Doha, Qatar

Background Paper

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Background Summary

Recent interest in virtue ethics has led to increased interdisciplinary and interreligious lines of inquiry, moving away from a focus on Aristotelian philosophy to comparative approaches, including the study of Asian religions.¹ In Islamic studies, research in ethics most often centered on matters pertaining to law and meta-ethics (especially in theology), on account of a perception of Islamic virtue ethics as largely a derivation of Greek practical philosophy.² Recent studies on virtue ethics have tried to bridge this gap, and for good reason: Islamic writings on the refinement of human character traits (*tahdhīb al-akhlāq*)

¹ See, for example, Seok, Bongrae, *Moral Psychology of Confucian Shame: Shame of Shamelessness* (London, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).

² See, as a major example, George F. Hourani's *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), which discusses Islamic virtue ethics largely as derivative.

often present original perspectives of great relevance for ethicists today.³ It is, moreover, at the meeting place of the study of gender and virtue ethics that Islamic thought displays a trajectory of development that can inform “world philosophy” more broadly. Especially in its conception of “manliness” (*muruwwa*) or “youngmanliness” (*futuwwa*) as a virtue, one of particular significance to Sufism, Islamic virtue ethics captures the paradoxes of having developed a rich vocabulary of moral perfection applicable in contemporary contexts, while also doing so in ways that fix gender norms.

Often translated as “chivalry,” *futuwwa* has a difficult and sometimes contradictory history of usage in Islamic ethical thought. Originating in the tribal hero, the term sometimes came to refer to a young man who abides by a strict standard of moral conduct and yet engages in illegal activity. Associations with “wild” spaces beyond the threshold of civilization reinforce the sometimes morally peripheral sense of *futuwwa*. Like the *shuṭṭār* or “crafty miscreants,” members of *futuwwa* brotherhoods were once known to gather in hunting lodges and behave roguishly.⁴ As the term became significant in Sufi thought, it acquired layers of spiritual significance and an etiological connection to the prophet Abraham. Within Sufi writings, *futuwwa* became a comprehensive virtue corresponding to the perfection of character traits. In Islamic ethical texts more broadly, *futuwwa* came to represent all that might be noble in a young man: courage, self-restraint, humility, modesty, and honesty. Lloyd Ridgeon and Erik Ohlander have separately described institutional developments in *futuwwa* movements, which became brotherhoods parallel to and often absorbed by Sufi orders.⁵

³ In terms of a reconsideration of Islamic virtue ethics relevant to the topic at hand, see especially the forthcoming monograph by Zahra Ayubi, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

⁴ See Robert Irwin, “‘Futuwwa’: Chivalry and Gangsterism in Medieval Cairo.” *Muqarnas* 21 (2004), 161-170.

⁵ Lloyd Ridgeon, *Morals and Mysticism in Persian Sufism: A history of Sufi-futuwwat in Iran* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010). Erik S. Ohlander, *Sufism in an Age of Transition* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008).

Parallel in many ways to *futuwwa* is the pre-Islamic Arabian value of *muruwwa*, or “manliness.” Ignaz Goldziher’s *Muhammedanische Studien* gave special consideration to this trait, as well as the changes it underwent after Islam, transforming from a mainly Bedouin value that celebrated tribal loyalty, generosity, patronage, and retaliation to an Islamic one that celebrated duty to God, renunciation of the worldly, and forgiveness.⁶ The changes in such traits from the pre-Islamic to the post-Islamic period have also been studied by Toshihiko Izutsu, who investigated ways in which conceptions of “manliness” vary depending on a culture’s definition of “man.”⁷ The two compound virtues, *futuwwa* and *muruwwa*, conceived as a collection of traits that define the honorable man or young man, often resemble one another in Islamic ethical writings. The focus in Sufi texts is more often on *futuwwa*.

Such emphasis on male virtues should not, however, be seen as a distinctively Arabic or Islamic state of language. Indeed, *futuwwa* and *muruwwa* correspond in many ways to the English word “virtue.” “Virtue” is a derivative of the Latin *virtus*, which originally described the qualities of a *vir* or “man,” so that it too numbers among those moral terms that render manhood to be a matter of merit.⁸ Also like *futuwwa* and *muruwwa*, the Roman trait of *virtus* underwent changes throughout its history. Initially describing the ideal warrior, this earlier usage of *virtus* applied to neither slaves nor women. Instead, the quintessential virtue for women was *pudicitia* (“chaste modesty”), until—in the late Roman Republic—*virtus* had become a more general term indicating self-control, that is, a more universal and urban sense of good character.

⁶ Goldziher, *Muslim Studies (Muhammedanische Studien)*, ed. by S.M. Stern, tr. by C.R. Barber and S.M. Stern (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966), p. 1:22-9.

⁷ Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’ān* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), pp. 27-8.

⁸ Myles McDonnell, *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 159-165, as well as p. 10 and p. 71.

The Challenge of Gendered Virtue

The moral dimensions of gendered-normative virtues present us with a challenge. Undoubtedly, the ideal of *futuwwa* came to exist within a patriarchal context, one inclusive of men. While *futuwwa* has—even if rarely—been applied to women, and while other virtues (such as modesty, or *ḥayāʿ*) have been associated with women, the virtue of *futuwwa* often remains in a patriarchal framework. Aside from building on the word’s etymology, Sufi writings emphasize the person of Abraham and the young men (*fitya*) of the cave mentioned in Qur’an 18:13. The patriarchal theme of “great men” that one finds in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures also drives, for example, Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī’s (d. 412/1021) glorification of prophets and saints as exemplars of *futuwwa* in his *Kitāb al-Futuwwa*. Nevertheless, al-Sulamī did present a female version of *futuwwa*, captured in the term *al-niswān* or “female possessors-of-*futuwwa*,” a notion that predates al-Sulamī. They are mentioned in al-Sulamī’s book *Early Sufi Women (Dhikr al-Niswa al-Muta‘abbidāt al-Ṣufiyyāt)*.⁹ The many names and deeds of female ascetics, worshippers, and knowers indicate that women pursued the divine with a vigor no less than that of men, even if they remained mostly unacknowledged. Yet, as Rkia Cornell has argued, even al-Sulamī’s commemoration of great women falls under the category of “exceptionalism,” such that female achievement amounts to a rarity, and male achievement is a universal normalcy.¹⁰ Such exceptionalism is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the case of the hagiographical account of the great female saint and lover of God, Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya, in Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār’s (d. 618/1221) *Memorial of Saints (Tadhkirat al-Awliyāʿ)*. ‘Aṭṭār includes in his chapter on Rābi‘a a careful justification for

⁹ See Rkia Cornell’s comments in al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women (Dhikr an-Niswa al-Muta‘abbidāt al-Ṣufiyyāt)*, ed. and translated with introductions and notes by Rkia Elaroui Cornell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), pp. 66-7. Two female saints—Āmina al-Marjiyya and Fāṭima al-Khānaqahiyya—are counted among those practitioners of the male version of *futuwwa*, *futuwwa*, because of their vows to maintain male Sufi *fityān*.

¹⁰ See Rkia Cornell, “‘Soul of a Woman Was Created Below’: Woman as the Lower Soul (*Nafs*) in Islam” in *World Religions and Evil: Religious and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Hendrik M. Vroom (New York: Rodopi, 2007) pp. 257-80, here p. 266.

including a woman among the “ranks of men,” by commenting that a hadith teaches us that “God gives no notice to your forms”; that two-thirds of Hadith narrations come from the Prophet’s wife ‘Ā’isha; and that “when a woman is a man on the path to God the Exalted, she cannot be called a woman.”¹¹ ‘Aṭṭār’s acknowledgement of the ontological illusoriness of gender aside, this is exceptionalism at its best.

Yet leaving *futuwwa* and *muruwwa* in the fetters of masculinity excludes women from traits considered decisive to human perfection in the Sufi (and sometimes larger Islamic) context. Indeed, according to ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, *muruwwa* must be acquired before one attains *futuwwa*, and *futuwwa* must be acquired before one attains the highest rank in Sufi relationships with God, namely, sainthood (*walāya*).¹² Sa’diyya Shaikh has reassessed Sufi readings of gender, bringing to light traditional Islamic/Sufi grounds for social and ethical gender equality.¹³ According to Ibn ‘Arabī, women possess the capacity for complete spiritual realization, even including the rank of the Complete Human (*al-insān al-kāmil*), but not only in a spiritual sense: Their perfection can even effect ritual imitation and create divine-legal precedence. Ibn ‘Arabī acknowledges the social situatedness of gender, establishing that human perfection is ungendered. Thus, terms such as *futuwwa* or *rijāl* (“men”) can begin in a gendered context, but be reapplied to signify human perfections in ungendered ways. With Shaikh’s argument in consideration, one might use *futuwwa* and *muruwwa*—and the less frequent term for “manliness,” *rujūliyya*—to describe the finest human qualities applicable to everyone, while the terms still remain firmly rooted in Islamic and specifically Sufi ontologies and narratives of creation.

¹¹ *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā’*, ed. Muḥammad Isti‘lāmī (Tehran: Zawwār, 2007), p. 61.

¹² Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 268.

¹³ Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), pp. 82-3.

This seminar will afford researchers with the opportunity to consider *futuwwa* in two contexts simultaneously: Islamic virtue ethics (and its moral vocabulary) and the study of gender in Islamic intellectual history.

Research Questions

- What implications does the contemporary study of gender have for interpreting traditional Islamic virtues, such as *futuwwa* or *muruwwa*?

Drawing from studies of gender, applicants should consider ways in which language is grounded in traditional social relations. Today's virtue ethicists write in an age after the ascendancy of individual agency, especially the agency of those traditionally disenfranchised. Feminist and postcolonialist thinkers have found in virtue ethics a morality that acknowledges unheard voices and considers the particular stories of their lives, since universal norms tend to favor the powerful. How can contemporary Islamic virtue ethics, as an ethics of context and personal narratives, look beyond universal norms and acknowledge increasingly diverse ways of living? Does premodern Islamic virtue ethics simply predate the pluralistic, egalitarian, and inclusive perspectives that gender studies emphasizes today, or can it help us revisit conceptions of justice and character that defy its own masculine gendered terms?

- In what ways does an interdisciplinary perspective alter our view of virtue? Especially in the case of cosmology, how does the way we see the world affect the way we interpret virtuous character traits?

Sufi cosmologies—affected by Neoplatonic cosmologies in early Islamic philosophy—placed the Universal Soul in a subordinate position to the Universal Intellect. The former was associated with the female or the mother, while the latter was associated with the male or the father. The human being as a microcosm had within himself or herself a similar gendered division of faculties, so that base

desires—associated with the soul—are often described as feminine in nature. What implications do gendered cosmologies have for gendered virtue? How do changes in the way we interpret the workings of the universe allow for revisions to the way we think of noble character traits?

- How can the study of psychology help us better understand and even redefine our conceptions of gendered virtue?

To think of Sufi virtue ethics as “moral psychology” one need only consider the attention paid to the minutiae of human intentions, the relationship between the inner faculties, and the care with which masters counseled their pupils, interpreting their dreams and offering devotional prescriptions. Yet contemporary psychology offers a way for us to consider gender relationships as part of the formation of the self. In what ways might psychoanalytic approaches to the study of the subject inform our readings of futuwwa or muruwwa? Considering Luce Irigaray’s criticism of the exclusion of women’s perspectives from psychoanalysis and of the masculine subject’s mere metaphorical interest in the feminine, what challenges might we face in having a gender-equitable framework in which to read Islamic virtue ethics?

- What roles have women played historically that can complicate our understandings of brotherhoods, such as futuwwa and akhī organizations, and other male-dominant orders?

Rkia Cornell’s work on women in futuwwa orders has helped us begin to understand their presence and activism. Yet the historical situation of Islam’s futuwwa orders—which became a salient feature of the medieval city in Western Asia—still remains somewhat in the dark. Applicants can consider the historical dimensions of Islamic virtue ethics in the context of women’s lives. How might they have encountered male brotherhoods? How did such brotherhoods affect the lived realities of those who were not members?

- How might Muslims revere tradition—as well as gendered models of virtue, including the Prophetic *Sunna*—while also acknowledging ways in which women have been silenced or ignored as contributors to communal wisdom?

Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that traditions undergo self-rectification by encountering and engaging with other traditions, so that using the “standards internal to that tradition” the tradition in question can “find the resources to meet future challenges successfully.”¹⁴ The Islamic sciences have recognized, from their inception, that women have certain rights over their male counterparts, their fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, and even strangers. Moreover, women as embodiments of virtue—especially but not exclusively the feminine virtues—form an important theme in Islamicate literatures. Nevertheless, gendered models of virtue have also placed women in secondary positions, or even associated women with the passions and limited reasoning abilities. Applicants should consider ways in which the study of gender might serve as a lens through which Muslims can view their tradition, as a hermeneutical tool with which they can read their tradition.

Relevant Fields of Study

Virtue Ethics, Psychology, Sufi Studies, Islamic Intellectual History, and Gender Studies.

Deadlines and Submission Information

“Reconsidering the Manly and the Fraternal in Islamic Virtue Ethics: The Case of Futuwwa” will be held in Doha, Qatar, during November 4-6, 2019, under the auspices of the Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE). Accepted papers will be published in a peer-review outlet, in collaboration with Brill Publishers. Applicants should keep the following in mind:

¹⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Third Edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007 [1981]), p. 277.

- (a) Please submit a draft of your paper for consideration no later than **October 1, 2019**. Drafts should be 2,000 to 7,000 words in length and written in either English or Arabic. They should be sent to futuwwa@cilecenter.org Please also include a 250-word author biography.
- (b) Participants will receive an invitation by October 10, 2019.
- (c) Costs of travel and accommodation will be covered by CILE.
- (d) Costs of open-access publication in a refereed venue will be covered by CILE, as well as costs of translation from English into Arabic, or from Arabic into English.
- (e) Participants will be expected to offer complete versions of their papers within two months after the seminar, by January 5, 2020. These should be between 7,000 and 10,000 words.
- (f) Questions about the theme or scope of this symposium should be sent to Dr. Cyrus Zargar at zargar@ucf.edu.