

BOOK REVIEW

FORGING IDEAL MUSLIM SUBJECTS: DISCURSIVE PRACTICES, SUBJECT FORMATION, & MUSLIM ETHICS

Sheikh, F. M. (2020). *Forging Ideal Muslim Subjects: Discursive Practices, Subject Formation, & Muslim Ethics*. Lexington Books.

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What brings together the ninth-century Baghdadi mystic, al-Harith al-Muhasibi (d. 857), and the twentieth-century Ottoman-cum-Republican Kurdish scholar, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (d. 1960)? In *Forging Ideal Muslim Subjects*, Faraz Masood Sheikh claims it is their attention to processes of subject formation through the use of various theological and moral “discursive practices” aimed at inculcating correct belief as well as proper sensibilities in the subjectivity of the ideal Muslim. Reading widely and diachronically across geographies, social-political contexts, and time periods, Sheikh demonstrates in great detail how both scholars posed the question of the “ideal” as an ethical project rooted in both belief *and* practice that cannot be explained or categorized by reducing them to expressions of juridical principles or mystical practices—two normative registers that scholars have frequently invoked to describe Muslim practices of ethical self-cultivation. Across four chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, *Forging Ideal Muslim Subjects* traces the development of what the author calls “religious subjectivity” and “moral subjectivity.” This distinction between the religious and the moral is invoked as a heuristic to “dissemble each thinker’s ideal subject...to better understand what the subject is made up of and how it puts itself together, with the help of...religious discourses” (13). In short, Sheikh differentiates between these two *modes* (my word, not his) of subjectivity in order to draw out how the ideal subject operates in relation to “inner religious commitments” as well as “external expressions of those psychic

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standpoints.” In marking these two modes, he is not trying to instantiate a clearly delineated break between the religious (or theological) and the moral (or ethical). He notes that neither al-Muhasibi nor Nursi subscribe to a stark differentiation between the theological and the moral as autonomous realms of psychic and social life. Instead, he points to the ways in which the interiority of the individual believer as an ideal Muslim subject is also intimately tied to that subject’s social and political relations and forms of life.

Sheikh is quick to warn his reader—ideal subjects are not *perfect* subjects. Forging ideal subjects is not a game of ethical perfectionism. In striving to “properly observe the rights of God” (31), as in the case of al-Muhasibi, or in developing “practices of belief” that can semiotically read the natural world as unified (although still differentiated) expressions of God’s divine names, as with Nursi, one must nevertheless remain vigilant against one’s own tendency towards complacency and moral self-approbation. An ideal Muslim for both of these scholars (and it seems for Sheikh as well) does not *merely* amount to an act of obedience to a rule, divine or otherwise. Nor is the ideal Muslim abstracted away from the conditions of their existence, but, rather, is rooted in and entangled with other subjects and contingent forces that shape how discursive technologies of the self—proper listening, repentance, contemplation of death, etc.—are actualized and manifested in social interactions. Thus, Sheikh emphasizes that al-Muhasibi and Nursi’s theological anthropology of the Muslim believer “does not shelter the person from the vulnerabilities that attend social life. Instead, the theological angle intensifies and multiplies these vulnerabilities and makes them components of *discursive practices* of subjectivation” (15). Engaging the work of Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault, and Talal Asad, Sheikh defines discursive practices as “deliberate, voluntary intellectual and emotional exercises that a person consciously undertakes and performs...in order to affect a change in their subjective standpoint” (22). Furthermore, the ideal Muslim subject always reckons with the possibility of failure, so while the cultivation of affects, sensibilities, and modes of pious comportment might contain promises of reward, the ideal subject must also be aware of the risks they bring. Values and virtues cannot be passively accrued at zero cost. As Sheikh says, “there is no respite for an ideal subject...” (36).

And yet, at times, it becomes difficult not to read Sheikh as drawing too stark a heuristic difference between religious psychology and moral anthropology, only to reassemble them later. This becomes clear when he attempts to distinguish his own project from recent works in the anthropology of Islam, which have emphasized the centrality of

the “docile” or “teachable subject” (Asad, 2015, p. 176) who engages in ritual practices aimed at embodying proper virtues rather than as symbolic acts to be interpreted for the range of meanings they might signify or social functions they might explain (Asad, 2012, p. 37). At the heart of this anthropological intervention in the study of religion pioneered by Talal Asad (and invoked sympathetically by Sheikh) is the rejection of religion as primarily an issue of belief defined as an autonomous individual’s wholly internalized, private assent to transcendent truth claims. Sheikh rejects this liberal conception of faith and belief from the outset, yet he also claims that the theological-ethical positions of al-Muhasibi and Nursi remain illegible within the current state of anthropological literature on religious subject formation. While contemporary anthropologists such as Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and Charles Hirschkind have emphasized Islam as a “discursive tradition” lived through embodied practices which shape and organize religious sensibilities, their work, according to Sheikh, has overemphasized corporeality which has incidentally resulted in suspicion towards “practices of belief,” even those practices which cannot be reduced to dominant liberal conceptions like that of al-Muhasibi and Said Nursi. Thus, it seems that for scholars in Islamic Studies and Religious Studies writing in the wake of Asad’s interventions, attention to bodily practices of comportment and corporeality in line with Islamic authoritative discourses have obscured the rich tradition of Islamic ethics and technologies of the self that aims at the heart, the soul, and the “ideal Muslim subject”—in a word, spiritual exercises which make up the rich, internal life of the believer (17-21).

This sympathetic, yet critical, engagement with contemporary anthropology of Islam remains the most prominent theoretical intervention of *Forging Ideal Muslim Subjects*. Yet, it remains unclear whether Sheikh’s emphasis on spiritual practices and technologies continually taken up by al-Muhasibi and Said Nursi’s ideal Muslim subjects are, in fact, as illegible as Sheikh suggests or whether Asad’s embodied practices are as dismissive of the Foucauldian technologies that Sheikh endorses. Sheikh is correct to draw out the differences between Asad’s teachable subject and Foucault and Hadot’s spiritual practitioner who takes him or herself as an object of critical revision. It is this theoretical space that *Forging Ideal Muslim Subjects* opens up for debate in a most welcome fashion, and I suspect will generate genuine interest and fruitful discussion from scholars across disciplines. Overall, Faraz Masood Sheikh has written a readable and theoretically robust book, which invites the reader to carefully consider dynamic Muslim discursive practices in conversation with a wide-ranging body of work

in Islamic Studies, Religious Studies, Anthropology, and Comparative Religious Ethics. I highly recommend *Forging Ideal Muslim Subjects*. It is a most welcome contribution to a growing body of careful studies of Islamic thought and practice beyond the stale dichotomies of reason and revelation, tradition and modernity, body and mind.

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