Introduction

Imagine a group of people from all over the world. Maybe waiting in line at an airport. What do you notice first? The things they all share in common, such as their form, their ability to stand upright, or their commitment to their smartphones? Or do you zoom in on their apparent differences: age, able-bodiedness, ethnicity, gender, race, and so forth? Similarly, when you hear the word "human nature," do you think about human rights, creation accounts, or Darwin's theory of evolution? Our ability to be empathetic or cruel? The possibilities of the human body in the Olympics or the heights of the human intellect in complex mathematics? There is no right or wrong answer here; all of these options (and many more) are valid. Thinking about human nature is complex, elusive, ever-changing, contextual, and above all connected to a myriad of possible issues and concerns. This book, through the lens of the Qur'anic concept of *fiṭra* (pl. *fiṭar*) adds Islamic engagements with the question of the shared and differing aspects of our humanity to this ever-relevant investigation of our existence.[1]

Consider three examples using or defining *fiṭra* in recent years. In June 2022 the hashtag #*fitra* trended on Twitter,

[1] To capture and emphasize the concept's complexity, I consciously chose to not translate *fiṭra* in this book. Usually, the concept is rendered "created human nature" in English; though, as readers will see shortly, there are hardly two publications or scholars who can agree on one translation.

Instagram, Facebook, and Telegram and quickly went viral. Its message: according to Islam, there are only two genders in human nature and homosexuality is an aberration. To underline the kernel of their message, the campaign's organizers chose a poignant visual representation: a banner in two colors – pink and blue – to represent the alleged gender binary. As messages inciting violence against members of the LGBTQIA+ community began to circulate, Facebook banned the account (though it continues to grow on other social media platforms such as Twitter). Across Arabic-speaking countries the campaign received plenty of media coverage and support from people following, reposting, and adopting the banner in their social media profiles and spreading the message of a divinely sanctioned, natural binary as truly Islamic.

Almost exactly a year later a group of prominent Muslim clerics and scholars in North America published a statement entitled "Navigating Differences: Clarifying Sexual and Gender Ethics in Islam."[2] Explicitly not seeking to incite violence, the statement – which quickly attracted a growing list of signatories – claimed to clarify Islam's stance on gender and sexuality, affirming the binary nature of humans. While this statement did not explicitly reference *fiṭra*, the rhetoric of the naturalness of a gender binary and of heterosexual relationships was reminiscent of the previous year's social media campaign, as well as other prominent Muslim clerics' statements on the matter that use *fiṭra* in their argumentation.[3]

[2] https://navigatingdifferences.com/clarifying-sexual-and-gender-ethics-in-islam/.

[3] See, for example, a sermon prominent cleric Yasir Qadhi gave in May 2023 in which he speaks about how "the *shari'a* and common sense, and lived human history and the experience of mankind and the *fiṭra* Allah creates us upon" tell us that there are two genders and they should be embraced and lived out (he repeatedly discusses the "default" of the male/female binary that exists at every single level ("Confronting the Transgender Ideology," www.youtube.com/watch?

Similarly, discussions among Muslims about the "naturalness" or *fiṭrī* nature of gender differences have been ongoing for decades. Often the debates seek to highlight "natural" male or female character traits, the complementarity of the gender binary, and its social utility from professional occupations to childrearing as rooted in *fiṭra*.[4]

Lastly, Jon Hoover representatively summarizes much scholarly opinion on *fiṭra* in its most recent entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. He argues that we ought to think of the concept as "the universal religion of birth."[5] Referencing the scriptural sources of the concept in the Qur'an and hadith literature (which I will discuss in greater detail in Section I.1), *fiṭra* is the reason many Muslims speak not of "converting" to Islam but "reverting," citing the idea that by God's creation or *fiṭra*, humans are made to be Muslims or submit themselves to the oneness of God. A quick Google search will return numerous examples discussing the benefits and pitfalls of speaking of conversion to Islam as a "reversion to the *fiṭra*" that marks humanity in its creatureliness.[6] In either case, what is emphasized in much of the scholarly discourse is the levelling and religious implications of *fiṭra* as a form of basic religiosity that

v = vEKQv04OSCs, 27:00–27:35. In this sermon he frequently speaks of "castration" or the harmful cutting off of genitalia, which strongly evokes the early scriptural commentators' discussion of *fiṭra* and its relation to animal castration.

[4] See, for example, this 2019 article on the "perils" of gender constructionism: https://bit.ly/3TjCe3C. See also this Facebook post on *fiṭra* and natural femininity: https://bit.ly/3TmcxiJ.

[5] Jon Hoover, "*Fiṭra*," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three Online*, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Devin J. Stewart (Brill, 2016) doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_27155. See also Vanessa Walker, "'Natürliche Gotteskompetenz' und *fiṭra* als Ausgangspunkte einer gemeinsamen abrahamitischen Religionsanthropologie," *Hikma* 10, no. 2 (2019): 186–198.

[6] See, for example, https://inspiritedminds.org.uk/2019/12/10/a-return-to-our-fitrah/ or https://bit.ly/4efmu9S.

predisposes all of humanity toward worship of the one God. I call this a *religious* reading in the sense that it emphasizes human beings' inborn disposition toward, or knowledge of, God, his oneness, or a certain way of life (Islam). It is *levelling* in the sense that it posits the universality of this disposition or knowledge; all human beings are created on the *fiṭra*.

Fiṭra, as should be clear from these three examples, is an important term in the study of Islam and one that is often invoked and assumed to have a clear meaning. What is also noteworthy is that in all contemporary examples, *fiṭra* is assumed to be doing levelling work: whether it is extending a perceived gender binary to all human beings, naturally endowing humans with certain, gender-specific characteristics, or providing them with their original religious orientation. *Fiṭra*, as it is explicitly argued or tacitly assumed, simply tells us how God wants *all* humans to be, qua having been created as humans.

Now consider a final example. The classical Islamic philosopher al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) said the following in connection to the human *fiṭra*:

> [T]he limbs and organs of the body are different and their *fiṭar* and faculties are unequal in excellence [. . .]. The same holds good in the case of the city. Its parts are of different *fiṭar* and the dispositions are unequal in excellence.[7]

Here *fiṭra* is used to divide people, to speak of differing excellences among humans that have implications for the political realm or how humans ought to live together. In fact, al-Fārābī speaks of multiple *fiṭar*. There is no mention of all humans here or of gender, sexuality, or religion. I call

[7] Al-Fārābī, *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State: Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī's Mabādiʾ ārāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila: A Revised Text with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, ed. and trans. Richard Walzer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 230f/231f (modified).

this a hierarchical and political reading. *Hierarchical* because its emphasis on difference lends itself to hierarchical organization, assuming differing human excellences. It is *political* because it is frequently applied to issues related to human sociality and how to organize it.

How do we make sense of these different uses and interpretations, moving between gender, religion, or politics, a focus on what is shared vs. one on what makes humans differ? Clearly the topics under discussion between al-Fārābī, a contemporary encyclopedia entry, Muslim missionizing, the North American imams, and the hashtag #*fiṭra* are not the same. How do we explain the concept's disciplinary and topical migration? How did Islamic discourses move from one to the other, from religion to politics or to gender; from levelling readings that say something about all humans qua their humanity to a focus on human difference and back to shared human characteristics?

This book is a study in Islamic ethics that shows that *fiṭra*, or the idea that there is a way that human beings simply are, is an ethical concept that can be used to speak about human hierarchy in a variety of ways. It is not, as often assumed, limited to a certain type of literature or a single interpretation. In the thought of prominent Islamic philosophers who are at the center of this work – al-Fārābī (d. 339/950), Ibn Bājja (d. 533/1139), Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 581/1185), and Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198) – *fiṭra* is neither the same for all humans nor primarily about sexuality or gender but rather about diversity, hierarchy, and politics (among other things). In fact, the philosophers help us see that *fiṭra* has always been inflected and molded by the people who employ the concept. Like potters working with clay, Islamic thinkers across different disciplines have been shaping and reshaping the concept in response to one another and to their particular concerns and contexts. In doing so, they are creating new ways of understanding the term.

The bulk of the book thus draws attention to a group of thinkers who are rarely at the center of the study of Islamic ethics, yet who made use of the concept of *fiṭra*: the so-called *falāsifa*, or classical Islamic philosophers.[8] These are thinkers who engaged with Greek philosophical thought (particularly the works of Plato and Aristotle) in Arabic in the wake of the translation movement of the eighth to eleventh century.[9] Drawing attention to several interrelated *philosophical* engagements with *fiṭra*, I argue that the originally Qur'anic concept of *fiṭra* is marked by an underappreciated diversity of interpretations across disciplines in both use and meaning. These range from a focus on logic to mysticism and the revealed law. At the same time, each of these engagements has clear political implications as thinkers ponder the impact of different human abilities for a shared life and organization of human community.[10] While the philosophers' interpretations – themselves differing from each other – will not solve the current debates over gender and sexuality or innate human religiosity, the depth and breadth of their interpretations of what is often assumed a straightforward concept is

[8] I am fully aware that classical philosophy (*falsafa*) does not represent Islamic philosophy per se but rather its classical form. For an up-to-date discussion of the history of Islamic philosophy see Frank Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 8–10.

[9] See Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsid Society* (London: Routledge, 1998).

[10] As I will explain further in Section I.3, I do not understand "political" solely in the sense of how to govern best or what kind of political formations are most desirable. Rather, I mean the broad realm of questions related to human beings as selves and in relation to others, coming together and organizing their shared life. These include considerations of individual human decisions, an inborn human sociability, the practical need for human sociality, the shape of human social life, the need for and qualifications of rulers, and the distribution of power in human communities.

important and enriching for anyone concerned with Islamic thought.

Representing an understudied part of *fiṭra*'s history, the philosophers bring a host of questions and answers to the issue of our human nature, above all demonstrating the particularity and contingency of our own moment and its appeal to *fiṭra*. Historically, as we will see, *fiṭra* is a sophisticated and messy locus of debate. Attention to the philosophers' engagement with *fiṭra*, for them as for us a place of contestation, cautions anyone today invoking the created nature of human beings in Islam in a simplistic manner. In fact, the intellectual creativity of the Islamic philosophers invites all those working on Islamic ethics to participate in their tradition of seeking to bring enduring questions such as the nature of human beings into their own contexts in creative ways.

At the same time, these philosophical engagements with the concept have implications for not only how we understand *fiṭra* today but also how we think of the place of Islamic philosophy in the larger context of Islamic intellectual history, as well as the history of philosophy simpliciter. When the thinkers I consider in this book used *fiṭra*, they were engaging with scriptural commentators and theologians. Particularly the case of al-Fārābī makes clear that using *fiṭra* might have been part of a larger effort to bring Greek philosophical thought into a register attractive and relevant to his audience. As a result, we cannot just think of these thinkers and their work as Arabic versions of Plato but must instead think of them as constructing a native philosophy that consciously used its own resources, such as the Qur'an. Islamic philosophical thought then ought to be more integrated into current, normative Muslim thought and the study of Islamic intellectual history. As we will see, their engagement with a fundamental concept such as *fiṭra* is meaningful and strategic and makes the

case for the importance of the philosophical tradition for constructive Islamic thought.[11]

My analysis of the philosophical moments as represented by al-Fārābī, Ibn Bājja and Ibn Ṭufayl, and Ibn Rushd push against simplistic appeals to *fiṭra* as a straightforward religious concept that affirms modern claims such as a gender binary or conservative sexual ethics. Rather, the concept has lent itself to a variety of interpretations, including hierarchical and political ones, which should caution any contemporary reader seeking to appeal to one Islamic concept of human nature or *fiṭra*.

I.1 The Scriptural Sources and a Standard Theological Account

Before turning to the philosophers, readers will benefit from a discussion of the scriptural sources of *fiṭra*, as well as their early interpretations by commentators and theologians. The complexity of the scriptural interpretations one encounters in such a brief survey – between a core religious consensus and a diversity of interests – sets up well what follows in the rest of this book: the philosophical engagements with *fiṭra* that forcefully show that created human nature in Islamic thought is a much richer and promising locus of ethical and political questions than often assumed. To best illustrate both the particular contributions of the philosophers and the ways in which their interpretations of *fiṭra* – both individually and as a group of

[11] A contemporary Muslim thinker in the Anglo-American context who makes a case for the importance of the philosophical tradition for contemporary Muslim thought is Hasan Spiker. See Hasan Spiker, *Things as They Are: Nafs al-Amr and the Metaphysical Foundations of Objective Truths* (Abu Dhabi: Tabah Research, 2021) and Hasan Spiker, *Hierarchy and Freedom: An Examination of Some Classical Metaphysical and Post-Enlightenment Accounts of Human Autonomy* (Cambridge, UK: New Andalus Press, 2023).

thinkers – challenge, further, and intersect with the often more dominant, traditional accounts of *fiṭra* as a levelling and religious concept, I take some time now to briefly describe the early commentary tradition on the scriptural sources of *fiṭra*. I provide a more detailed discussion of the scriptural commentaries in the Appendix.

I.1.1 The Scriptural Sources and Their Early Readers

Fiṭra figures in both scriptural sources of Islam, the Qur'an – or God's revelation to the Prophet Muhammad – and the hadith literature – or the authoritative accounts of the Prophet's words and actions. In the Qur'an, the basic meaning of the root *f-ṭ-r* is "to create," as well as "to open" or "to split."[12] As Camilla Adang points out, in most cases in which the root is used in the Qur'an it refers to God creating the heavens and the earth.[13] Some verses, Adang further notes, specifically describe God as creating humanity.[14] Finally, a few occurrences have the sense of breaking something apart.[15] Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311) in his famous dictionary of Arabic expands this second sense,[16] noting that the basic meaning of the root is to "split" or "crack" something. *Fiṭra* is thus something with a crack or fissure.

[12] Geneviève Gobillot notes that the root *f-ṭ-r* exists in all the ancient Semitic languages (Geneviève Gobillot, *La fiṭra: la conception originelle, ses interpretations et fonctions chez les penseurs musulmans* (Damascus: Insititut Francais d'Archéologie Orientale, 2000), 7).

[13] Qur'an 6:14, 79; 12:101; 14:10; 21:56; 35:1; 39:46; 42:11. See Camilla Adang, "Islam as the Inborn Religion of Mankind: The Concept of *Fiṭra* in the Works of Ibn Ḥazm," *Al-Qantara: Revista de Estudios Arabes* 21, no. 2 (2000): 393 n. 6.

[14] Qur'an 11:51; 36:22; 43:27; 17:51; 20:72.

[15] Qur'an 19:90; 42:5; 67:3; 73:18; 82:1. See Adang, "Islam as the Inborn Religion of Mankind," 393 n. 6. Gobillot discusses in some detail all the uses of the root *f-ṭ-r* in the Qur'an (see *La fiṭra*, 10–14).

[16] Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1988), 275.

The specific term *fiṭra* only occurs once in the Qur'an, in verse 30 of *sūrat al-rūm* (the thirtieth chapter of the Qur'an):[17]

> As a man of pure faith, stand firm and true in your devotion to the religion. This is the *fiṭra* God instilled in mankind – there is no altering God's creation – and this is the right religion, though most people do not realize it.

One of the most important Arabic grammarians, Abū Zakariyyāʾ al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822), notes that *fiṭra* is the "*dīn* of Allāh"[18] or "religion" of God.[19] In his explication of the

[17] M. Sait Özervarli notes that Qur'an 2:138, which speaks of the color (*ṣibgha*) from God, ought also to be related to a search for the meaning of the term *fiṭra* (see M. Sait Özervarli, "Divine Wisdom, Human Agency and the *Fiṭra* in Ibn Taymiyya's Thought," in *Islamic Theology, Philosophy, and Law: Debating Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya*, ed. Birgit Krawietz and Georges Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 46). However, the number of commentators that bring up the term *ṣibgha* when discussing *fiṭra* in the context of Qur'an 30:30 or the famous hadith is small. As Gobillot notes, both al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and al-Ṭūsī (d. 459–60/1066–7) offer a list of ancient commentators who connected the two concepts (see *La fiṭra*, 71). I can only add that Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (d. 1979) also discusses the concepts of *ṣibgha* and *ḥanīf* as synonyms of *fiṭra* (see Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, *Fiṭrat* (Tehran: Ṣadrā, 1991), 24–29). For more information on the history of the term *ṣibgha*, see Gobillot, *La fiṭra*, 71ff.

[18] Abū Zakariyyāʾ al-Farrāʾ, *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār al-Surūr, 1983), 2:324.

[19] I am going with the custom of translating and understanding *dīn* to refer to "religion," or way of life. This is not to pretend that the term means the same for the different authors we encounter in this section. For a recent debate of the (contested) equivalence of the two terms, see Brannon Ingram, "Is Islam a 'Religion'? Contesting *Din*-Religion Equivalence in Twentieth Century Islamist Discourse," in *Words of Experience: Translating Islam with Carl W. Ernst*, ed. Brannon Wheeler and Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst (Sheffield: Equinox, 2021), 19–40; and Rushain Abbasi, "Islam and the Invention of Religion: A Study of Medieval Muslim Discourses on *Dīn*," *Studia Islamica* 116, no. 1 (2021): 1–106. See also Ahmet Karamustafa, "Islamic *Din* as an Alternative to Western Models of 'Religion,'" in *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. Richard King (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 163–171; and Rushain Abbasi, "Did Premodern Muslims Distinguish the Religious and Secular? The *Dīn-Dunyā* Binary in Medieval Islamic Thought," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 31, no. 2 (2020): 185–225.