

THE POLITICS OF ISLAMIC ETHICS

Fundamental to Islamic thought is the idea that there is a way that human beings simply are, by nature or creation. This concept is called *fiṭra*. Rooting her investigation in two central passages in the Qur'an and hadith literature, where it is asserted that God created human beings in a certain way, the author moves beyond discussion of the usual figures who have commented on those texts to look instead at a group of classical Islamic philosophers rarely discussed in conjunction with ethical matters. Tracing the development of *fiṭra* through this overlooked strand of medieval thinking, von Doetinchem de Rande uses *fiṭra* as an entrée to wider topics in Islamic ethics. She shows that the notion of *fiṭra* articulated by al-Fārābī, Ibn Bājja, Ibn Ṭufayl, and Ibn Rushd highlights important issues about organizational hierarchies of human nature. This, she argues, has major implications for contemporary political and legal debates.

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‘Raissa von Doetinchem de Rande offers here a careful examination of human nature in pre-modern Islamic philosophy, which is a foundational issue in articulations of Islamic ethics. Her book is essential reading for anyone studying Islamic ethics or laying claim to its traditions.’

—*Zahra Ayubi, Associate Professor of Religion, Dartmouth College,*
author of Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics
of the Self, Family, and Society (2019)

‘This valuable study brings together substantial material on the discourse of *fiṭra* and its genealogy to consider its development among different philosophers. The author’s decision to opt for a contextual approach to explore the concept of *fiṭra* in Islamic thought is commendable, and dovetails with new trends in Islamic studies to capture the dynamic and discursive view of Islamic intellectual thought while rejecting attempts to essentialize or unify religious discourses on ethics. I found compelling von Doetinchem de Rande’s critique of certain readings that try to link the notion of *fiṭra* to natural law discourse in the Western context. Also praiseworthy is her commitment to cover both primary and secondary materials, and the use of different languages including secondary material in Arabic – something that is not always fulfilled by scholars in the West.’

—*Feriel Bouhafa, Associate Professor of Islamic and Arabic Studies,*
Julius Maximilian University of Würzburg

‘What is *fiṭra*? Is it a primordial disposition towards knowledge of God, or humans’ inborn first intelligibles? Is it the same in all humans, or does it vary among them? What is its ethical content, and can individuals or society shape this? What does the concept of *fiṭra* contribute to discourses on religion, philosophy, political philosophy or society’s normative socio-political order? Does *fiṭra* promote social hierarchy or equality? And why has the concept held the attention of so many important thinkers? In this probing and fascinating examination of the writings of the *falāsifa* al-Farābī, Ibn Bājja, Ibn Ṭufayl and Ibn Rushd the Grandson, as well as Muslim exegetes, Raissa von Doetinchem

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de Rande takes up these and countless other seminal questions. Her expansive and deeply penetrating treatment canvasses the various responses put forth and the tensions between them. Henceforth, no serious discussion of this topic will be able to dispense with this rich and insightful text.'

—*Sherman A. Jackson, King Faisal Chair of Islamic Thought and Culture, The University of Southern California, author of The Islamic Secular (2024)*

“New Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought” combines philosophical clarity, historical scholarship, and ethical inquiry into the study of religion, considering such questions as: What does a properly critical approach to “religion” or to particular religious traditions, practices, and ideas involve? What concepts might such an approach employ and how should these be understood? What are the political implications of taking such an approach – for religious studies and for the people studied therein? How should attention to race, class, gender, sexuality, capital, empire, and domination inform our assessment of religious traditions, institutions, and practices? The answers offered, while diverse in their methodologies, topics, and conclusions, are intended alike to be clear, precise, and historically attuned investigations of important subjects or figures in the study of religion and critical thought.

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*The Politics of
Islamic Ethics*

Hierarchy and Human Nature in the
Philosophical Tradition

Raissa A. von Doetinchem de Rande

University of Chicago



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*In loving memory of my brothers,
Carlos Alexander (1994–1998)
and
Claudio Dietrich (1980–2021)*

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Conventions

Unless otherwise noted, Qur’anic passages follow M. A. S. Abdel Haleem’s *The Qur’an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

For transliterations, I generally follow the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. I do not transliterate common English terms such as Qur’an, hadith, or Sufism. I transliterate legal and theological affiliations only minimally.

I note death dates in *hijrī*/CE format.

Finally, I use “ET” to indicate an English translation I consulted and “Ar.” when referencing the Arabic text which I translated myself.

I also note when I modify existing translations.