

THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF MUSLIM ETHICS

Raissa von Doetinchem de Rande, President | Joseph Leonardo Vignone, Vice President

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Introducing SSME's New Leadership

President Raissa von Doetinchem de Rande, PhD

Raissa is Assistant Professor of Religious Ethics and Islamic Studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School. She received her doctorate from Princeton University's Department of Religion in 2021.

Her first monograph, *The Politics of Islamic Ethics: Hierarchy and Human Nature in the Philosophical Tradition*, will be published this spring with Cambridge University Press. It focuses on the Qur'anic concept of a divinely created human nature and its reception in early Islamic philosophy.



Vice-President Joseph Leonardo Vignone, PhD

Joe is Assistant Professor of History at Gonzaga University, where he studies medieval Islamic medicine, sexuality, embodiment, and scholarly culture. He received his doctorate from Harvard University's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations in 2021.

Joe's upcoming monograph with Johns Hopkins Press, *Remembering Bodies: A Medieval Islamic History of Human Enhancement*, explores premodern scholarly ethics at the intersection of medicine, race, and sexuality.



Dialogue in Chicago

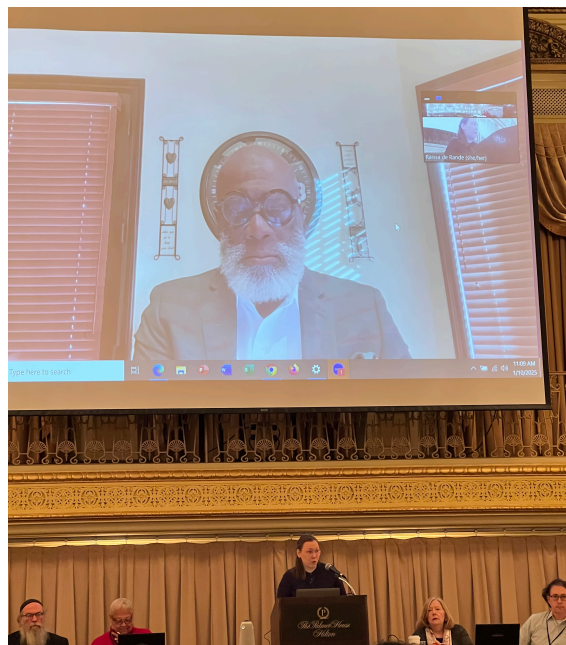
Joseph Leonardo Vignone

As in the past two years, we hosted SSME's annual Conference at the Palmer House in downtown Chicago, Illinois this January, sharing physical, intellectual, and ethical space with our sister Societies of Jewish and Christian Ethics (SJE, SCE).

We were especially thrilled to welcome Dr. Sherman Jackson (USC Dornsife) to deliver comments on Islamic accommodation of and resistance to authoritarianism, as part of a joint inaugural session hosted by President de Ranade and her counterparts Dr. Aryeh Cohen (Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies) and Dr. Emilie M. Townes (Vanderbilt University Divinity School), of SJE and SCE, respectively. As fires tragically destroyed large swaths of Southern California this winter, Los Angeles-based Dr. Jackson was so gracious as to deliver his comments virtually while under evacuation warning. We are grateful for his generosity amid such difficult and fluid circumstances, and keep all those affected by the fires in our thoughts and prayers.

Dr. Jackson was joined on the stage in Chicago by fellow panelists Dr. M. Cathleen Kaveny (Boston College Law School) and Rabbi Dr. Bill Plevan (Reconstructionist Rabbinical College). Each speaker reflected on the historical relationship of their respective religious traditions with both oppressive and emancipatory discourses in general, as well as with authoritarian and liberal political movements in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. The conversation that ensued was heartfelt and intellectually stimulating, helping kick off a wonderfully generative conference jointly hosted by the SJE, SCE, and SSME communities.

We are pleased to include Dr. Jackson's prepared comments on **pages 6-8** of this volume for those unable to attend this important event, and for those whose seating in the Palmer House Ballroom posed audio-visual difficulties during the Zoom presentation.



Dr. de Ranade (**ct.**) introducing Dr. Jackson, flanked by panelists and fellow Society Presidents

SSME Roundtable on Vital Edited Volume

Halla Attallah, Samah Choudbury, Juliane Hammer, Nancy Khalil, & Nadiyah Mobajir

On 11 January 2025, the editors of the open access volume *Sexual Violence in Muslim Communities: Towards Awareness and Accountability* convened a roundtable with three of their fellow contributors to reflect on the

Muslim ethics of care that go into the work against sexual violence. The roundtable was moderated by SSME board member Dr. Sam Houston (Stetson University). Written by advocates, scholars, and scholar-activists, Dr. Juliane Hammer (UNC Chapel Hill) noted that the chapters of the collection shared a central theme: a diverse set of ethics that draw on Islamic ethical traditions and Muslim feminist frameworks aimed at building a world where humans can live free of sexual coercion, violence, and abuse. The volume's chapters include research from the US, the UK, Germany, South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria—all contexts in which Muslims constitute minority communities. Dr. Samah Choudhury (University of Chicago) spoke about the presence and permutations of anti-Muslim hostility that animate discourses surrounding sexual violence while Dr. Halla Attallah (Georgetown University) provided a close textual analysis of the Qur'anic story of Yusuf and Zulaikha, highlighting the importance of reading this as a story of abuse entrenched in codes of power. Dr. Nancy Khalil (University of Michigan) summarized the process of constructing a case study as a tool for academics and community workers to create best practices for responding to disclosures of sexual abuse, and Nadiah Mohajir (HEART to Grow) explored the ways in which spiritual abuse manifests in Muslim communities and the additional layer of harm it causes for many survivors of sexual abuse. Hammer offered additional insights on the parallels in advocacy and patterns of silence found in the fight against SV and activism against the genocide in Palestine.



Islamic Studies and *The Islamic Secular*

Joseph Leonardo Vignone

Almost one year ago Dr. Sherman Jackson published his pathbreaking monograph with Oxford University Press, *The Islamic Secular*. This important book probes the boundaries of premodern Islamic law (*shari'ah*) to locate and describe a tradition of 'the secular' in Islam. Dr. Jackson notably argues that his understanding of Islam's secular tradition is unencumbered by the history of the concept in European thought.

Engaging with classical sources of Islamic jurisprudence as well as the work of Talal Asad (2003), Charles Taylor (2007), Wael Hallaq (2012), and Shahab Ahmed (2015), Dr. Jackson conceives of the Islamic secular as comprised of those human activities which exist beyond the stated interests and purview of the jurists. Muslims have engaged in these activities—which include, *inter alia*, science, literary composition, and

moral reasoning—with the conscious awareness of their being extraneous to the concerns of the law, but nevertheless subject to ‘the divine gaze’ of God.

While seemingly not ‘Islamic’ at the surface, these secular activities powerfully resonated with the religious sensibilities of Muslims who felt that divine gaze. Otherwise put, Islamic scriptural, legal, and theological commitments informed these activities but did not dictate their historical practice. Dr. Jackson theorizes these kinds of secular activities as falling within his analytic category of *mā warāʾ al-hukm al-sharʿī*—or, *what lies beyond the ruling of the law*.

Lauded as “a tour de force” by Dr. Ebrahim Moosa (University of Notre Dame) and as a “thought-provoking map of the forgotten history of the metes and bounds of *sharīʿa*, and a tour through the perpetual space beyond it” by Dr. Intisar Rabb (Harvard University), *The Islamic Secular* signals a new and exciting path forward in the study of the Muslim legal and ethical traditions.

We were thrilled to host a virtual discussion of Dr. Jackson’s monograph and its place in his intellectual trajectory at the SSME plenary session, led by Dr. Ahmed El Shamsy (University of Chicago) and attended by members of SSME, SJE, and SCE. Attendees from all three Societies learned about Dr. Jackson’s formation as a student of the legendary Islamicist George Makdisi (1920–2002), and his later experiences as a highly visible public intellectual in the United States. Drs. Jackson and El Shamsy similarly discussed the complex and daunting—but nevertheless gratifying—nature of teaching classical Islamic ethical and legal texts to newer generations of undergraduates, whose specific academic needs call on scholars of Islam to develop a carefully-considered, compassionate, and rigorous pedagogy.



Drs. Jackson (tp.) and El Shamsy (btm.) discuss their intersecting career paths and shared pedagogical commitments

Looking to the Future: Inviting You to Attend SSME’s Town Hall Meeting

Joseph Leonardo Vignone

On the heels of a successful 2025 Conference, Raissa and I wish to reaffirm our commitment to deepening scholarly investment in the study of Muslim Ethics across the academy. As we strive to meet post-pandemic challenges head-on and work to address downtrends in the availability of funding across the hu-

manities, Raissa and I believe that now is a prudent time to take decisive measures to secure the future of SSME.

SSME is fortunate to have many scholars of conscience, rigor, and accomplishment in its community. Together we help populate a important and vibrant interdisciplinary space. In our ranks we count scholars of ethics and moral philosophy, but also history, finance, law, literature, political theory, anthropology, sociology, gender and sexuality, theology, religious studies, and the history of science.

We are therefore excited to announce a Zoom town hall meeting convening all past and present members of SSME on **Sunday, 23 February 2025 at 1pm EST**. We aim to pool our collective resources and discuss as a community our plans for a capital campaign to secure SSME’s future and expand our already impressive inter/disciplinary reach. We look forward to soliciting and discussing your advice about the variety of strategies we might pursue to preserve SSME’s unique position in the study of Islam and the academy writ large.

In the meantime, we ask that you **start spreading the word** about our upcoming town hall meeting and plans for a capital campaign in your communities and at your academic institutions. As always, SSME’s leadership extends its gratitude to our diverse community for its continuing support.



From top left: SSME founder Dr. Sohail Hashmi (l.) asks Dr. Jackson (r.) a question during the plenary session; Dr. Alexandre Caeiro (r.) presents on traffic law and privacy in the Gulf as Mona Hagmagid (l.) looks on. **From bottom left:** SSME members enjoy our yearly Saturday night business meal at the Berghoff Restaurant; attendees from SSME, SJE, and SCE listen as Dr. Jackson delivers his comments during our joint inaugural session

Dr. Jackson's Inaugural Panel Response

Joseph Leonardo Vignone

At the request of the SSME, SCE, and SJE communities, we reproduce below Dr. Sherman Jackson's remarks, delivered on 9 January 2025 during our joint inaugural panel. SSME, SCE, and SJE leadership asked each of their invited panelists to respond to questions about their religious traditions' complicity in or resistance to authoritarianism. We thank Dr. Jackson for entrusting his response to us for publication here, which has not been edited beyond minor textual formatting. It is presented as such to reflect as faithfully as possible his responses to these questions.

1) *How have our religious traditions been complicit in authoritarianism?*

"I think we get off on the wrong foot if we think of 'religious traditions' as occupying some Archimedean point outside of society and history that empowers these traditions to speak from the position of no one and thus everyone, of nowhere and thus everywhere.

This kind of 'hatred' or 'blindness' towards history can seduce us into as seeing no difference between a Jew who nurses misgivings about the rise of Germany to global prominence and a German who nurses the same sentiments about Jews acquiring power. One's position is based on historical experience; the other's is rooted in rank prejudice. And history and historical situatedness, not religion, spells the difference here.

The fact of the matter is that Islam now lives in a world that was neither its making nor the product of its history. Even the present disaster unfolding in the Middle East right now was largely the product of someone else's history, not a

history sponsored by Islam or Muslims. In this context, whenever Islam speaks to the modern world, it routinely does so from a position of apology, being heard or appreciated almost entirely in terms of how and whether it lives up to some or another Western metric."

2) *How egalitarian is Islam? How liberal? How tolerant is Islam? How democratic? Is Islam a violent religion? Can it accommodate anything secular?*

"All these categories, meanwhile—equality, liberalism, tolerance, democracy, religious violence, the secular—are understood and invoked almost entirely according to their dominant meanings and understandings *in the West*.

The idea that Islam might have its own definitions or ways of engaging with these constructs is routinely either not contemplated or simply not believed.

In this context, it is a bit 'rich' to ask how Islam has been complicit in authoritarianism.

After all, regardless of *how* they might want to do so, the very idea that Muslims want to live according to their own religious law—*sharī'ah*—is routinely looked upon by many in the West as a commitment to authoritarianism.

On this understanding, for many Westerners, if Islam is honest—with itself and the world, it cannot *not* be complicit in authoritarianism.

Let me be clear: My point here is *not* that Muslims are devoid of agency or that they are *not* accountable for the role and status of Islam and Muslims in the modern world. After all, if Muslims are not part of the problem, they can play no role in the solution.

But if we are talking about the overall state of the modern world, it badly misrepresents things—in my view—to assume some kind of functional *equivalecy* between Islam and the dominant religious traditions of the West.

We Westerners simply cannot have it both ways: we cannot look upon the modern West as *the* ascendant civilization in the world and then turn around and insist that the West bears no more responsibility for the state of the world than does Islam or any other non-Western members of the global order.

Yet, to say that Islam does not bear the *same* responsibility as Christianity or Judaism is not to say that it bears *no* responsibility.

And let me say a word here about Muslim complicity with authoritarianism in two contexts: 1) the Muslim world; 2) America.

Regarding the Muslim world, I believe a major contribution to authoritarianism has been the failure on the part of Muslims to disaggregate the historical from the transcendent in Muslim history.

Historically speaking, political power in Islam—as in the rest of the world—was concentrated in the hands of an individual—the caliph, the *sulṭān*, the *amīr*, etc.

Rather than seeing this as a part of Islam's historical *is*, however, Muslims have had a hard time *not* seeing it as part of the religion's transcendent *ought*. In other words, it has been too often taken not as an evolving historical fact but as an unchangeable, transcendent religious dictate.

This has facilitated the attempts and tendencies on the part of autocratic Muslim rulers to 'transcendentalize' their autocracy and place it beyond critique in the name of Islam—even when the ruler himself is not particularly pious. For, Muslim rulers can always play on certain sensibilities that Muslims have inherited from their past,

including the idea that Muslim tradition supports the unchallenged concentration of power in the hands of individuals. From this vantage-point, democracy can be made to look and feel like a threat if not an affront to Islam.

In this light, among the major political challenges confronting modern Muslims is how to disaggregate their religious history into scripturally determined elements, on the one hand, and historically informed elements, on the other, such that the future of Islam and Muslims is not limited to their past.

This is not a novel idea; nor is it one that is limited to Western academics such as myself. The former leader of the notorious *al-Ġamā'ah al-Islāmīyah*, who assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat back in 1981, declared openly as part of their reform effort in the late 1990s: 'Islamic history is *not* an independent source of law in Islam.'

As for America, let me say the following—and here I will also briefly address the second question about what my religious tradition might contribute to democratic institutions in general.

I think that in their zeal to address the political challenges confronting modern Muslims, whether abroad or in the US, the idea of democracy has gained widespread acceptance.

By democracy, however, most Muslims do not mean the right to throw off God's law and go it alone.

But there are numerous areas of life—from speed limits, to national health care plans, from tenure procedures to immigration policy, from how to develop weapons systems to whether or not to sign a particular peace treaty—where God's law, or *sharī'ah*, provides no *concrete, specific* instruction. There is no verse in the Qur'ān that says that Muslims must implement a 55mph speed-limit. There is no Prophetic statement requiring Muslims to adopt a single-payer or a uni-

versal health care system. Nor is there, generally speaking, anything in Muslim scripture that would forbid any of these options.

In the Muslim world, what Muslims want, then, and what they often mean by 'democracy' is for the *community* to be fully empowered to participate in these decision-making processes, and for the community to be free to critique and criticize government policies regarding these and other kinds of issues without fear of reprisal.

Now, in America, of course, this kind of enfranchisement is taken for granted.

But I think the Muslim focus on *process* and *form* has diverted their attention away from the *substance* of what these forms and processes can actually produce.

In other words, Muslims (like many other Americans) have focused more on the 'cracy' in democracy than on the 'demos' in democracy.

And this has blinded them to what Islam could actually contribute *to* our democracy.

If democracy is good, it can ultimately be sustained only by a *people* who are good, at least good enough for democracy. A democracy peopled by thieves, racists, tyrants and murderers is nothing to be hoped for and not likely to last. Muslims must regain their confidence in their ability to speak to the hearts and minds of their compatriots rather than simply settling for politics as the 'great mediator' between Americans as citizens.

This requires, of course, that they find the *language* through which to engage a society whose own religious history has long left it unimpressed by what religion has to offer.

But Muslims should take heart, I think, in the fact that this has never been a quick or easy fix.

Contrary to the popular stereotype that Islam spread by the sword, the central lands of

Islam did not become simple majority Muslim for some 250 years.

And even those who did not convert—and Islam generally had no problem with that—became contributors to a plausibility structure that aided in the preservation of a pluralistic society in which not only the place of Islam but that of religion more generally was secured.

The main resource that Islam has in this context is, I think, the balance it has always sought to strike between living *fully* and living *righteously*. Sex, money, fun and chic are not intrinsically irreligious. Nor does one have to abandon a commitment to religious virtue to partake in them. I think America might have an interest in hearing more about this, especially from those whom some in the Christian community have characterized as the world's 'last badass religion.'"
