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Ritual and Rationality in Islam: A Case Study on Nail Polish

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Abstract

This article examines an ongoing controversy in Islamic ritual law concerning the effect of nail polish on one's ritual purity. Ritual law serves as the canvas on which some of the most intriguing debates on Islamic theology, rationality and legal reasoning are sketched out as rival conceptualizations of the nature of God – as a rational and merciful agent or as supra-rational being – generate rival sets of jurisprudential and legal doctrines. The study of ritual law also reveals key fault lines in contemporary Sunni Islamic legal and theological thought, particularly the ways in which scholars expressing varying degrees of sympathy with Salafism – from the South Asian Ahl-e Ḥadīth tradition, the Ahl al-Ḥadīth tradition and the Ḥanbalī tradition – create new positions in Sunni law while continuing to champion principles and precedents valorized in Salafism and making their arguments legible in Sunnism.

Keywords

Ritual law – rationality – theology – secularism – Salafism – *fiqh* – law – Sunnism.

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'It's hard for me to believe that God cares if a husband hands his menstruating wife the car keys or not. It's hard for me to believe that he's such a pedant.' ...

'You don't call it pedantic,' Carol said, 'when your surgeon is concerned about giving you exactly the right dose of anaesthetic, or when a scientist concerns himself with minute differences in the measurement of a

chemical reaction. Why should small actions not have large consequences in matters of spirituality?'

ZOË HELLER, *The Believers*.¹

"Your Prophet has taught you everything. Even how to shit." Islam's earliest critics were not alone in expressing bewilderment and bemusement at the idea of a transcendent and exalted God concerned with something as mundane and earthly as the bodily functions of men and women.² Similar attitudes towards Islamic ritual law persist in modern times, as attested in the smug³ and alarmist⁴ headlines of articles that discuss Islamic notions of purity. In 2011, a commentator writing for the professedly secular⁵ British newspaper, *The Guardian*, referred to the "bizarre mental universe" of Muslim clerics who take it upon themselves to discuss how nail polish might affect one's state of ritual purity. Legal discussions of nail polish, the commentator says, speak of "a mind preoccupied by frivolous and mundane matters" that should be of no concern to men of God. Such discussions are, she insists, a "trivialisation of religion."⁶

The dismissal of ritual as an object of intellectual derision and a 'trivialisation' of true religion has an illustrious pedigree in Western secular and post-Reformation thought. Peter Burke points out that the parodying of ritual in Western culture was part of the iconoclastic impulse that accompanied the Reformation. For many Protestants, the inefficacy and powerlessness of

¹ Zoë Heller, *The Believers* (London: Penguin, 2009), 208.

² Jonathan Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad* (London: Oneworld, 2013), 76.

³ <<http://rt.com/news/247857-turkey-muslims-toilet-paper/>>; <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article3030041/Islamic-fatwa-decrees-toilet-paper-halal-DirectorateReligiousAffairs-says-wiping-acceptable.html>> (accessed 5.4.2015).

⁴ <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/6094450/Prison-spends-17000-on-foot-baths-and-toilets-for-Muslims.html>>; <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/how-aboutthat/3073768/London-2012-Olympic-toilets-will-not-face-Mecca.html>>; <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1061051/Londons-Olympic-Park-toilets-turn-away-Mecca-respect-Islamic-law.html>>; (accessed 5.4.2015)

⁵ <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/19/guardian-values-charlie-hebdo-cartoons-muhammad>>.

⁶ Nushin Arabzadah "Why are Imams telling us about nail polish?" *The Guardian* (30 December 2011), available at: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2011/dec/30/imams-muslim-womens-rights>>.

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