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Islamic *Ars Moriendi* and Ambiguous Deathbed Emotions

Narratives of Islamic Saints and Scholars on the End-of-Life

Pieter Coppens

1 Introduction

In the master course “Theory of Islamic Spiritual Care,” I have my students read Lev Tolstoy’s (d. 1910) classic *The Death of Ivan Iljitsch*. Through this work students become acquainted with the types of life questions someone may be confronted with in the crisis of an approaching death. Together we analyse how a spiritual caregiver may be of assistance in navigating the complex emotions provoked by these questions, often theological. Iljitsch poses penetrating questions about the meaning of his suffering, wonders whether it is a form of divine punishment, feels abandoned by God, and is plagued by anxiety, anger, and sadness. He also finds a form of happiness, however, in his friendship with his simple-minded servant. The picture Tolstoy offers of the thoughts and emotions attached to the end-of-life are rather raw and honest, and do not seem to reflect specific religious values. He is not presenting a religious or civilisational ideal to the readers, not what one *ought* to feel on one’s death bed. He rather tries to offer what *is* the case for many, and shows the full scale of highly ambiguous and unstable emotions and attitudes, sometimes even blasphemous, towards dying one can encounter on one’s deathbed. The genre of the novel is of course very suitable for this: the author can “hide” one’s own not always socially acceptable thoughts behind the characters. The tumultuous inner life of characters can be described with an honesty and depth that one is unlikely to encounter in real life due to social conventions and religious and cultural expectations.

Why do I have Muslim students, specifically aspiring to become Islamic spiritual caregivers, read a classic from Russian literature, shaped by struggles with tenets of faith of Russian Orthodoxy and cultural expectations of Russia’s nineteenth-century upper class and nobility? First, I consider this an important training in empathy and interreligious and intercultural sensitivity. An Islamic spiritual caregiver in the Netherlands seldom gives care to fellow Muslims only, but is expected to give care to anyone demanding it, especially in health care

(Liefbroer et al. 2019). One may thus encounter people on their death beds with very different religious and cultural expectations concerning their emotions and meaning-making when coming to terms with their approaching death. Secondly, an Islamic equivalent of Tolstoy's masterpiece is hard to find in a language accessible to students. No novel from the modern or contemporary Islamicate world is thus far available to us in a European language that deals with the topic of end-of-life in a similar manner, with such honesty about the emotions as well as religious and meaning-making questions involved.¹

The field of Islamic Spiritual Care is still very much in development and, some notable exceptions aside (Isgandarova 2019; Ghaly 2014), suffers from a significant lack of theory to build one's practice on. This is also the case in the context of terminal care. In contrast, Christian spiritual caregivers can appeal to a long tradition of literature and theological reflection on *ars moriendi* (the art of dying) that even until this day plays a significant role in models of palliative care (Leget 2007; 2017; Vermandere et al. 2015). Islamic spiritual caregivers at the moment mainly have to improvise when confronted with end-of-life care, and do not yet have a body of sophisticated theory to refer to, other than a set of primary sources. Although attitudes towards death and dying do play a role in early renunciant literature, mainly *kutub al-zuhd* (books on renunciation) (Yaldiz 2016), a similar genre of literature as the *ars moriendi*, that is equally specific in teaching believers how to die and how to behave and manage their emotions on their death beds, is not available. With this contribution I aim to offer historical reflection on repertoires of resilience when confronted with the end-of-life in Islamic traditions, that may contribute to the development of such specific literature on *ars moriendi* in an Islamic context that is also suitable for an interfaith context.

In his work on the application of values from the Christian *ars moriendi* tradition in contemporary spiritual care in a secularised and plural context, Leget (2007; 2017) has opted for a balance between the values and vices propagated in it. The medieval tradition warned against the temptations of loss of faith and confidence in salvation, clinging to this-worldly life, lack of endurance of pain and suffering as well as pride, and stimulated the dying person towards the virtues of faith, hope, patience and humility. The normative choice was clear and typical for a theist worldview. Leget states that in the current secularised and plural context, that lacks an overarching view on death and dying, it is better for spiritual caregivers to recognise that both poles are present within

1 This does not mean it does not exist of course. It is rather a problem of reception in European languages, which shows how important it is that world literature keeps being translated.

the “inner space” of the person. The task of the spiritual caregiver, then, is to help the dying person navigate these conflicting emotions and values, through focus on five tension fields: autonomy, pain control, attachment and relations, guilt, and death and the afterlife. Do Islamic ideas on *ars moriendi* as presented in this chapter offer starting points for a conversation on the possibilities for Islamic spiritual caregivers to make a similar move towards the “inner space” with clients, and to assist them in exploring their ambiguous emotions and attitudes towards death and dying? Is such a move even necessary? Was it perhaps not already present in premodern sources, and is the loss of tolerance for ambiguity (*Ambiguitätstoleranz*) (Bauer 2011; Ahmed 2015, 81–82, 171–173, 219–220, 521; Kateman 2020; Coppens 2021) and the strict regulation of deathbed emotions perhaps rather a modern phenomenon?

The objective of this chapter is thus twofold, combining engaged practical theology with religious and cultural history. On the one hand, it offers material for further normative reflection on end-of-life care in the field of practical theology, more specifically Islamic spiritual care. On the other hand, it invites to deeper reflection on the history of deathbed emotions from the perspectives of the humanities and religious studies. The discipline of history of emotions is thriving and gaining in importance (Scheer 2012; Matt and Stearns 2014). The field of Islamic studies does not participate in that development sufficiently yet, with some notable exceptions (Bauer 2017; Osborne 2019). I aim to show how the theories articulated in this discipline may enrich the study of Islamic ethics in particular, as well as Islamic studies in general.

2 History of Emotions and Hagiographic Sources

One of the main premises of the academic discipline of the History of Emotions is that, beside an evolutionarily determined universal “hard-wired” bottom layer, emotions are partly constructed: not only the way feelings are expressed and performed, but also the feelings themselves are partly learned in interaction with one’s social, religious and cultural environment (Scheer 2012; Rosenwein 2015, 1–3; Plamper 2017, 1–39). As stated by Barbara Rosenwein in her seminal *Generations of Feelings*,

there is a biological and universal human aptitude for feelings and expressing what we now call “emotions.” But what those emotions are, what they are called, how they are evaluated and felt, and how they are expressed (or not) – all those are shaped by “emotional communities”.

ROSENWEIN 2015, 3

When one accepts this premise, this has consequences for the way one analyses the emotions generated and expressed at the end-of-life in an Islamic context. They contain performative aspects, are shaped by implicit and explicit normative expectations, and thus, most importantly, vary through the ages depending on certain historical variables, also in an Islamic context (Scheer 2012).

To understand the formation and maintenance in the Islamicate world of what Rosenwein calls emotional communities with “their own particular values, modes of feeling, and ways to express those feelings” (Rosenwein 2015, 3), the attitudes expressed by the Islamic scholarly class may be a rewarding resource. The class of scholars (‘*ulamā*’) and “friends of God” (*awliyā*) may be considered narrowly delineated emotional communities in themselves throughout Islamic history. These had an exemplary function for other classes within society in the regulation and performance of emotions. Islamic biographical and hagiographical literature contains many stories of Islamic scholars and sages on their deathbeds. Many of these stories contain normative tropes that resurface throughout Islamic history, like repentance (*tawba*), steadfastness (*ṣabr*), trust in God (*tawakkul*) and contentment with His decree (*riḍā*). There may however also be emotional elements specific to certain ages and regions. Which elements of continuity and change do these deathbed narratives contain throughout the centuries? What does that teach us on the construction of emotions concerning the end-of-life in Islamic societies?

This chapter pays specific attention to biographical dictionaries on Islamic scholars and sages in late nineteenth/early twentieth century Damascus (‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Biṭār’s (d. 1335/1916) *Ḥilyat al-Bashar fī Tārīkh al-Qarn al-Thālith Ashar* (“The Ornaments of Humanity on the History of the Thirteenth Century”) and Muḥammad Muṭī‘ al-Ḥāfiẓ (b. 1359/1940) and Nizār Abāza’s (b. 1366/1946) *Tārīkh ‘Ulamā’ Dimashq* (“The History of the Scholars of Damascus”)), in comparison to Islam’s formative period, represented mainly by related stories in Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī’s (d. 430/1038) *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’ wa-Ṭabaqāt al-Aṣfiyā’* (“The Ornaments of the Friends of God and Generations of Pure Persons”) and Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī’s (d. 465/1072) *Risāla fī l-Taṣawwuf* (“Treatise on Sufism”). We juxtapose these early sources to the late nineteenth/early twentieth century era specifically, because this latter era is at the verge of a perceived “Islamic modernity,” in which emotionally ecstatic forms of Sufism, that can be abundantly found in al-Iṣfahānī’s *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’* (al-Iṣfahānī 1932–1938), became more and more discredited, and certain “rational,” “sober” and “purist” conceptions of Islam are said to have gained more ground due to the rise of Islamic reform (Bauer 2011; Ahmad 2016). Can a shift indeed be witnessed in the type of deathbed stories shared in this literature, the emotions expressed

both by the dying persons and their loved ones in this age? How are these deathbed narratives employed to shape normative expectations concerning end-of-life emotions? Can we draw conclusions from this sample on shifts in these normative expectations in Islamic history? The study of religion and emotion can be typified by a spectrum with “the role of ambiguity and mystery at one end and the importance of clarity and meaning on the other” (Corrigan 2014, 157). This study aims to shed light on this whole spectrum.

Taking the narratives as presented in biographical and hagiographical literature of scholars and sages as point of departure makes this study vulnerable for the criticism of proponents of a focus on popular religion, who generally hold that the field of religious studies has long been plagued by a bias towards “orthodoxy.” These sources obviously focus on a learned elite in society in that period, from a hagiographical perspective. The descriptions of deathbed emotions should thus be considered normative in its core, and not necessarily an example of lived religion among the common people. The material presented here is thus not so much about how people died in reality, but rather about how it was perceived and how one *ought* to die. Still a lot can be learned from that, especially in this early stage of exploring Islamic traditions from the perspective of emotion studies.

3 Deathbed Emotions in the Formative Period

Descriptions of deathbeds appear to be rich and diverse in this particular period. Two themes emphatically stand out: (1) that wishing for death and refusing medication and nutrition was quite common out of pious considerations; (2) that emotions could be very ambiguous, sometimes even within the same person, from anxiety to joy, from sadness to contentment, and that there was not one specific model to follow. However, these emotions were always God-centred and religiously motivated; the emotions may have been ambiguous, the motivation for these emotions were not, as one can expect from hagiographical Sufi sources.

3.1 *Wishing for Death*

Actively wishing for death is a recurring theme in end-of-life narrations of early pious figures. Some Prophetic narrations that explicitly prohibit wishing for death place its prohibition in the context of wishing to end one’s suffering, which is considered a form of weakness. However, they do not forbid it categorically; they do explicitly allow wishing for death if one fears a form of tribulation (*fitna*) in one’s religion (al-Nawawī 2016, 244). The number of sayings

on pious people and renunciants wishing for death are overwhelming, and are indeed mostly motivated by fear of a tribulation in one's religion, either due to the temptation of this-worldly desires, or due to a lack of strength to keep fulfilling one's religious obligations. They thus found scriptural justification in such Prophetic narrations. A third common motivation is a strong desire to meet God and to be close to Him, which Sufi scholars from early on considered a legitimate motivation for wishing for death; they only differed which of three is better: the one who wishes for death to meet God, the one who wishes to stay alive to be able to obey God as much as possible, or the one who does not prefer either of the two and is completely content with God's decree (Gramlich 1994, 2:425–426).²

Both al-İşfahānī's well-known *Hilyat al-Awliyā'* and al-Qushayrī's *Risāla* contain several sayings attributed to pious persons from the first centuries of Islam that express a wish for death at the end-of-life.³ Here I will only mention few of them to illustrate the ideas they contain. Some stories related about early pious figures may still fit within the category of Prophetic narrations of fearing tribulation in one's religion. The reason for wishing for death is often related to a fear of losing one's religion, of sinning, or not being able to fulfil one's religious duties properly anymore. Illustrative in this regard is a statement from Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778), explaining that, if God would ask him about it, he would defend his wish for death towards God by saying: "Because of my confidence in You, o Lord, and my fear of the people." He then recited lines of poetry that stress how death means salvation from trickeries of fellow humans, and safety in the company of God:

I have said to those who praise life excessively,
 Death contains a thousand virtues we don't know about.
 It contains the safety of meeting Him through meeting Him,
 And separation from every companion who is unfair.

IBN 'AJĪBA 2010, 8:43

Moreover, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Maḥdī (d. 198/814) is said to have been asked about a person who wishes for death. He answers that he sees no harm in it, as

2 I owe the reference to this discussion in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's (d. 386/996) *Qūt al-Qulūb* ("Nourishment of the Hearts") to one of the anonymous reviewers.

3 There is a modern edition of *Hilyat al-Awliyā'* in which all sayings are ranked according to theme. One of the themes is *dhikr al-mawt wa-sakarātuḥu* (the mention of death and its intoxicating symptoms) (Habḍān 2005, 849–70). This makes it comfortable to navigate and to see the richness of ideas it contains on wishing for death. Al-Qushayrī has a separate chapter on deathbed stories from Sufi sages (al-Qushayrī 2007, 312–318).

long as it is out of fear for tribulation concerning his religion. It would be wrong, however, to wish it because one is lethally hit, or lives in deep poverty. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān points out how also Abū Bakr (d. 13/634) and ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644) wished for death to befall them. When he was at a funeral, he once said: “I smell the scent of tribulation. I ask God to take me before it occurs.” ‘Amr b. Maymūn (d. 74/693) never wished for death until Yāzīd b. Abī Muslim (d. 102/721), an assistant of the infamous governor al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 95/714), known for his cruelty, put him under hardship and distress. He wished for death so intensely that he supplicated: “Oh God, make me belong to the pious, do not leave me behind with the wicked, and let me drink from the best river” (Habdān 2005, 858, 864).

A deep longing to meet God and a complete detachment from worldly affairs is mentioned frequently as well. These are intertwined: love for death is inherent to longing to meet God and to be a renunciant (*zāhid*) in this world. To speak in the words of the famous renunciant Bishr b. al-Ḥārith (d. 227/841): “Anyone who loves this world, does not love death, and anyone who is renunciant in this world, loves death, until he meets his Lord” (Habdān 2005, 863). According to hagiographical literature people were surprised to find Makḥūl al-Shāmī (d. c.112/730), known to be a sad person, laughing at his deathbed. He explained how happy he was to finally leave the world that he was always so afraid to become attached to, and that he would now finally attain what he always hoped for (al-Qushayrī 2007, 313). There was no complete agreement on this, however. When Salama al-Ghuwayṭī (death date unknown) expressed how he longed for death so that he could meet his Lord, Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d. 215/830) was critical of this. The possibility to obey God would then be taken away as well after all, and one would be imprisoned in the intermediate plane between death and resurrection (*barzakh*), still not capable of meeting God.⁴ It would be easier to figuratively meet God during this-worldly life, through remembrance (*dhikr*) of Him (Habdān 2005, 864).⁵

Weakness to perform pious acts is frequently mentioned as well. On the second Caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, it is related that at the end of his life he supplicated: “Oh God, I have become old, I have become weaker, my herd has spread, so take me to You.” The Companion Abū l-Dardā’ (d. 32/652) expressed his love for three things: death, because he missed his Lord; poverty, because it made him humble towards his Lord; and illness because it would expiate his sins. On the Companion Mu‘ādh b. Jabal (d. 17/639), it is related that on his deathbed

4 On *barzakh* see Tesei 2015; Lange 2016, 122–128.

5 On the idea of *dhikr* as a mean to meet God during this-worldly life, see Karamustafa 2007, 19; Coppens 2018, 14–16.

he stated: “Welcome to death, welcome, long absent visitor, beloved that came in neediness.” Thābit b. Aslam al-Bunānī (d. c.127/744–745) expressed to his friends how he regretted that he was no longer able to pray, fast, and visit his companions for the remembrance of God as he was used to. He then supplicated: “Oh God, since you have imprisoned me from praying as I wish, from fasting as I wish and from remembering you as I wish, do then not keep me in this world one hour longer.” He then passed away (Habdān 2005, 849–850; Gramlich 1995, 1:39–40).

‘Aṭā’ al-Salīmī (d. c.140/757) is said to have combined a cultivation of fear for punishment with a deep wish to die. This was not only on his deathbed, but also during his life in good health, so that he would no longer be able to sin. His fear of Hell exceeded his hope for Paradise, he meditated frequently over death and the grave, and was so anxious before prayer that he would shiver. This attitude of fear for punishment and longing for death that he cultivated all his pious life, reached its zenith on his deathbed. He remained anxiously restless until the very end. When he saw a friend sighing at his death bed, he asked him what was wrong with him. When his friend answered him that it was because of him, he answered: “By God, I wish that my spirit would continuously move back and forth between my uvula and my throat until the Day of Resurrection, because I fear it will only go out in Hellfire.” After his death, someone claimed to have seen him in a dream, finally at rest in the hereafter. He claimed it was exactly his anxious restlessness in this-worldly life that brought him peace in the hereafter (Gramlich 1995, 1:124, 127, 133). Something similar is related about Ḥātīm al-Aṣamm (d. 237/851–852). Three good acts were attributed to him: fleeing from this-worldly life (*dunyā*), compassion for God’s creation, and longing for death, ready and prepared for it (Gramlich 1995, 2:66).

Refusal of medication and nutrition is more common in the death stories of early sages than one would expect given the prevailing attitude among Muslims in our contemporary time to prolong treatment as long as possible (Qureshi and Padela 2016; Muishout et al. 2018; Oueslati 2018). It is a recurring theme, even in the sources describing the fourteenth/twentieth century, as we shall see later. Examples of refusing medication are even ascribed to the Companions of the Prophet and are thus a trope present since the formative period of Islam, related to themes of trust in God, contentment, and gratitude (Khalil 2014, 374).⁶ When al-Rabī‘ b. al-Khaytham (d. c.65/684) was asked whether he wished for a doctor, he allegedly had to think deeply. He pondered a verse on preceding perished peoples (Q 25:38) that clung to this-worldly life, concluded there were doctors and sick people among them as well, but that

6 I owe this reference to one of the anonymous reviewers.

it was of no avail to them: “I see that neither the one giving medicine, nor the one given medicine have remained. They have both perished, so I am not in need of it” (Habdān 2005, 854). On Mālik b. Dīnār (d. c.131/749), it is related that on his deathbed he refused meat offered to him as medication against his stomach-ache. He allegedly said: “O God, You know that I do not wish to stay in this world, neither for the sake of my stomach, nor for the sake of my genitals” (Gramlich 1995, 1:67–69). Abū Muḥammad al-Jurayrī (d. 311/923) was a witness to the attack of the Qarmāṭiyya sect on Mecca when he was over 100 years old, and heavily injured. When he expressed his great thirst, someone brought him water. He refused to drink however, because others were also in need, and that would be a form of greed. He then died right away. He allegedly also refused to pray to God to alleviate the situation, despite his saintly powers. He stated this was a time for contentment (*riḍā*) and forgiveness, not for supplication (Gramlich 1995, 1:490).

3.2 *Ambiguous and Extreme Emotions*

The emotions related to this wish for death are often ambiguous. Sometimes sadness and anxiety are reported, sometimes outright joy, sometimes a mixture of emotions. Al-Qushayrī was well aware of these ambiguities when he wrote the chapter in his *Risāla* specifically dedicated to the subject. He did not consider these varying emotions, among the pious, problematic at all:

Know that the conditions of Sufis at the time of dying vary. Some are overwhelmed by awe (*hayba*), while others experience hope (*raja'*). To others, things are revealed that bring them serenity (*sukūn*) and a beautiful trust [in the favourable outcome in the Hereafter].

AL-QUSHAYRĪ 2007, 312

‘Amr b. ‘Uthmān al-Makkī (d. c.291/903–904) was asked how he was doing on his deathbed, and answered: “I find my head as undecided as water: it neither chooses to leave nor to stay” (Gramlich 1995, 1:353). People were surprised to see how Bishr al-Ḥāfī (d. 227/841–842) did not show joy on his deathbed, while he was known to long for death and to be a renunciant of this worldly-life. Did he suddenly like life after all? He explained that entering in the presence of God was harder than he expected (al-Qushayrī 2007, 313). Ḥudhayfa (d. 36/656) is said to have complained to God that all his life he felt that if death would come to him he would not doubt, but now that it has really come he is left in confusion about his own state (Habdān 2005, 852). The same Ḥudhayfa is also said to have begged God to strangle him on his death bed, so that he could finally go to his Beloved (Gramlich 1994, 2:421). Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778) is said to

have longed for death all his life, but to have found it extremely hard when it finally came. Al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī (d. c.49/669) was said to be crying because of the joyful anticipation of meeting God, because He was still unknown to him. The famous Companion Bilāl b. Rabāḥ (d. 20/640) allegedly argued with his wife on his deathbed over which emotion was appropriate to the occasion: his wife considered his deathbed a painful affliction and cried, while Bilāl showed his joy over meeting his beloved Muḥammad the next day. Some pious men were said to hope for a difficult death bed. To ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 101/720) it is attributed that he wished for his deathbed to be heavy upon him, because it is the very last thing a Muslim is rewarded for and by which his sins are expiated (Habdān 2005, 560). Abū Bakr al-Shiblī (d. 334/945) was in ambiguity between appreciating two “winds” of God, His grace (*lutf*) and His power (*qahr*), ultimately embracing both. Considering the comprehensive nature of divine unity, he understood that they are both from his beloved God:

When the wind of grace blows over someone, he reaches the goal. When the wind of power blows over him, he is held in separation [from God]. (...) If the wind of grace reaches me, I can bear all this discomfort and misery in my hope for Him. If the wind of power will come blowing, then this misery now will be nothing compared to what I will undergo then.

GRAMLICH 1995, 1:572

Al-Shiblī was not afraid to be humorous on his deathbed, reminding his friends through jokes that in the spiritual sense he was to become alive, while they were all dead. When someone whispered the testimony of faith in his ear, he joked: “A dead man has come to bring a living person back to life.” The same joke he made about death prayers said for him: “How exceptional! A group of dead people have come together, to say the prayer of death over someone living.” His anxiety on his deathbed was ultimately extinguished by a sense of deep love for God. When he was asked how he was doing, he said that he had arrived at his Beloved, and passed away (Gramlich 1995, 1:575).

Even outright ecstasy (*wajd*) is reported to have occurred. Abū Sa‘īd al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899) was so excited about finally leaving this world that he fell into ecstasy (al-Qushayrī 2007, 313). Ecstasy provoked by deep love of God was not only the result of approaching death, sometimes it was even the cause of death. Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī (d. 295/907–908) is said to have walked into a stubble field while in ecstasy after hearing a verse of love poetry and died of his wounds. Another narration of the same incident claims it was after hearing a blind man saying the name of God, with the question “Do you know Him? And if you know Him, will you stay alive then?” (Gramlich 1997, 1:387). Such cases

of extreme emotions causing death are not only related to ecstasy, but also intense sadness or shame. Mālik b. Dīnār is said to have fallen ill after a friend asked him about the face of a pious person who had already passed away. After having answered, he started crying and became aroused. He subsequently fell terminally ill (Gramlich 1995, 1:68). Dāwūd al-Ṭā'ī (d. c.165/781–782) was allegedly so overwhelmed by a particular verse on Hellfire, that he kept repeating it all night. The next morning, he was found dead (Gramlich 1995, 1:290–292).⁷

4 The Sobering Effect of Modernity? Continuities and Changes in the Thirteenth/Nineteenth and Fourteenth/Twentieth Centuries

In the preceding section we have focused on Sufi hagiographies from the formative period, which despite their common origin in Sufi circles painted a very diverse picture of emotions experienced at the deathbed. We will now juxtapose these to fourteenth/twentieth-century deathbed stories as narrated in two biographical dictionaries from Damascus. These sources and the era they represent are too different to validly make an analogous comparison to the formative period that leads to conclusive arguments on the development of deathbed emotions. Juxtaposing them still has value for a different reason. The sources on the fourteenth/twentieth century in Damascus deal with a much more diverse group of Muslims than the Sufi hagiographies of the formative period: beside Sufi figures, they encompass preachers, scholars, and political activists. They thus offer a wider palette of deathbed narratives, covering more diverse segments of Islamic society than the earlier Sufi hagiographical literature. They are thus suitable to see whether a trend of homogenisation and standardisation that is associated with Islamic modernity can be witnessed in these deathbed stories: do they still contain similar tropes despite the heterogeneity of the religious backgrounds of the religious authorities? Although conclusive arguments cannot be made based on this admittedly narrow selection of narratives, it can form a building brick for further *longue durée* analyses that may lead to stronger claims.

⁷ His deathbed stories are a case of ambiguity themselves. Some reports say his deathbed lasted for days, and was extremely heavy for him, due to his fear of Hellfire. He is also related to have died through a heavy heart attack, in which he screamed harder than a raging bull. To his mother it is attributed that he died in deep silence and loneliness, after praying all night. His mother found him in prostration (Gramlich 1995, 1:290–292). There is a whole literary genre of stories of people who found death through heavy emotions when reading the Qur'an, the *qatlā l-qur'an* (those killed by the Qur'an), see Kermani 1999, 376–385.

As late as the thirteenth/nineteenth century, stories of actively wishing death were still quoted with approval. The Moroccan Sufi scholar Ibn ‘Ajība (d. 1224/1809) included some of them in his Qur’ān commentary on Q 62:6 (“then wish for death if you are truthful”), among which earlier mentioned sayings attributed to ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and Sufyān al-Thawrī (Ibn ‘Ajība 2010, 8:43). Something seems to have changed in the fourteenth/nineteenth century, however. When we look at deathbed stories, wishing for death has completely left the stage, no ambiguous or extreme emotions are related, nor excessive anxiety or hardship. Most scholars are reported to have been content with their fate, to have undergone their suffering without complaining or wishing for death, and to have remained steadfast in their pious acts until the very end. A certain sense of sobriety indeed seems to have become dominant, and experiences rather unambiguous. Let us have a look at some examples.

A popular theme in hagiographies from the thirteenth/nineteenth and fourteenth/twentieth century, that is hardly mentioned in the formative period, is remaining steadfast in acts of obedience and teaching until the very end. This is perhaps the most frequently mentioned deathbed narrative even. Where the sages from the formative period, often with an implicit or explicit Sufi background were allowed to have complex emotions, often with an extreme love for God or fear of Hellfire involved, scholars in the hagiographical dictionary on the thirteenth/nineteenth century of ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bīṭār, the central figure of the emerging Salafī-reformist movement of Damascus, were without exception merely supposed to be sober teachers, steadfast in obedience, void of extreme emotions (al-Bīṭār 1993, 7, 13, 45, 95, 176, 179, 183–184, 189, 217, 281, 303). This also pertained to Sufi scholars. In describing the death of a Tījānī *shaykh* from Fes, for example, following the prescriptions of prayer and lying down on the right side as Prophetic practice demands, is central in the narrative, and emotions are not mentioned at all. Al-Bīṭār relates:

He passed away in 1230[/1815] and lived 80 years. His death was on the morning of Thursday 17 Shawwāl[/21 September], after he prayed the obligatory morning prayer in a complete manner. He then lied down on his right side, asked for water and drank from it. Then he lied down again in this condition and his noble spirit rose instantly and ascended to its most sacred abode.

AL-BĪṬĀR 1993, 303

This trope of ritual ablutions, prayer, remembrance of God and lying on one’s right side reoccurs until late into the fourteenth/twentieth century (al-Ḥāfiẓ

and Abāza 2016, 2:817). Steadfastness in prayer and remembrance of God are mentioned frequently, reflecting a sober pious ideal. On ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm al-Afghānī (d. 1326/1908) the following is related:

The night that he passed away one of his students stayed with him. He constantly asked about the call to morning prayer: “Did the call for prayer sound?” He answered him “No.” He then said: “Bring me [water for] ritual ablutions.” He would then make ritual ablutions and pray. That happened several times, then he surrendered his spirit.

AL-ḤĀFIZ and ABĀZA 2016, 1:275

The brothers Ṣāliḥ Kuftārū (d. 1355/1936) and Muḥammad Amīn Kuftārū (d. 1357/1938), both Naqshbandī scholars of Kurdish descent, whose family would rise to prominence in the later Syrian republic, both had a relatively sober death as well according to the reports, remembering God and admonishing others to do so as well. The last words of Ṣāliḥ, who died of the plague, were: “Prepare yourselves to meet God all alone, safely.” His brother kept repeating: “O God, the Highest Companion” (*Allāhumma al-Rafīq al-ʿAlā*) on his death bed, until he gave up his spirit with a joyful expression on his face (al-Ḥāfiẓ and Abāza 2016, 1:579, 601). The deathbed of Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥumṣī (d. 1362/1943) follows a similar trope, stressing his great sense of contentment despite his great pain, and remembering God:

At the end of his life, he used to repeat the noble verse “Peace be upon you for the patience that you have shown. How excellent is the final abode!” (Q 13:24). He did not stop with this until only few minutes before his death, when he started repeating the words “Allāh, Allāh.” On his deathbed he was very patient. Those frequently visiting him asked him whether he was in pain. He answered them “no,” while the fever was making him shake heavily in the beginning of his illness.

AL-ḤĀFIZ and ABĀZA 2016, 1:673

Many scholars are said to have kept teaching until the very end. Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī (d. 1354/1935), for example, was ill for a long time, stayed in bed most of the time, but ignored the advice of his doctor and kept teaching his Friday lessons in the Umayyad mosque until the day before he passed away. The Qurʾān scholar ‘Abd al-Qādir Quwaydir (d. 1369/1950) is said to have kept teaching while he was ill for several months. When he was struck by blood poisoning, he surprised his doctor when he came himself for the results of a blood test: “The subject of this investigation should be in his bed, not able to

move" (al-Ḥāfiẓ and Abāza 2016, 1:569, 2:766, 1279; al-Biṭār 1993, 7, 13, 45, 95, 176, 179, 183–184, 189, 217, 281).

Investing in relations with family and friends until the very end also occurs and dying alone is never mentioned. The famous Salafi scholar, book collector and belletrist Ṭāhir al-Jazā'iri (d. 1338/1920) frequently repeated to his friends on his deathbed that they should all note down the names of everyone who ever stood by them in times of hardship, "so that you do not forget them, and mention them at every opportunity, and be dedicated to them as you are dedicated to the Most Magnificent." Muḥammad al-Uṣṭuwānī's (d. 1354/1925) last words were asking his parents whether they were satisfied with him, and an embrace of the divine decree and his mortality: "Destiny has come, so welcome to the meeting with God. This world did not last for Muḥammad, so who am I compared to him, while he is the master of mankind?" One scholar was so invested in taking care of the dogs on the graveyard, feeding them daily, that one dog even visited him on his deathbed at home every day when he no longer showed up, and followed the funeral ceremony back to the grave yard once the scholar had passed away. In 1971, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Za'im travelled all the way to Beirut one day before his death, despite being very ill and weak, and despite warnings from his doctor, to visit his friends there and ask about their situation (al-Ḥāfiẓ and Abāza 2016, 1:411, 450, 2:909, 2:1187–1188).

Making up one's testament is mentioned frequently as well, as an act of piety when death approaches. Bakrī l-'Aṭṭār (d. 1320/1902), the most influential scholar of Damascus in the thirteenth/nineteenth century, died of the plague. He spent his time remembering God and making up his testament once he realised the medication against the plague was not helping him. 'Abd al-Ḥakīm al-Afghānī (d. 1326/1908), a dedicated teacher with a renunciant lifestyle, distributed all his books and his furniture among his students. The testament of Ṣāliḥ al-'Aqqād (d. 1390/1970) shows great concern with regulations and rituals around his deathbed, forbidding extreme expressions of emotions as excessive sadness, raising one's voice and ripping one's clothes. He does not want to be visited by menstruating women, and people who have abandoned the habit of regular ritual prayer (*tārik al-ṣalāt*), does not want medication, and wants the remembrance of the unicity of God (*lā ilāha illā Llāh*) to be repeated constantly by visitors (al-Ḥāfiẓ and Abāza 2016, 1:225, 275, 293, 2:1193).

When forms of emotions are mentioned, they are either moderately expressed sadness or equally moderately expressed joyful contentment, always in a context of pious acts and remembrance of God. On the deathbed of a preacher from the well-known al-Khaṭīb family, who used to teach and preach in the Umayyad mosque, who passed away in 1303/1886, the following is related: "His last words before he gave up his spirit were "Allāh, Allāh." He then

looked towards another scholar in his company, cried, and turned his head towards him while the tears were in his eyes. His kin, friends and neighbours were all sad about him.” One scholar first felt very sad on his deathbed, but this was soon over when people around him started taking care of him. He then used to say: “God is the one who has given and He is the one who takes.” People around him felt that this was motivated by his great humility, and that he did not want to be a burden to anyone, not even on his deathbed. Lines of poetry from 1309/1891 describe how a scholar who passed away gave up life easily, in anticipation of meeting his beloved Prophet:

In this world, he was a hidden friend of God,
 Today in Paradise, he has become a banner.
 When the inviter of God came to him, he went,
 Rejoicing at the meeting with the modest beloved.

Contentment and not showing sadness or anxiety remained the norm, however. In the 1950s, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Qanawātī (d. 1376/1957) is praised for remaining steadfast during tribulations, being content with the decree of God, neither complaining nor crying. The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Muṣṭafā l-Sibā’ī (d. 1384/1964), is said to have kept smiling on his deathbed, without complaint or grief, while he had severe pain in his entire body and heavy seizures that made his nerves and muscles cramp up. A friend described how he visited him in the hospital to offer him some comfort: “He turned towards me with a yellow face from a night spent in exhausting pain and said: ‘Thank you for offering such good comfort. But if you only knew how content I am’” (al-Ḥāfiẓ and Abāza 2016, 1:64, 125, 2:746, 1049).

Refusal of medication and nutrition as a sign of acceptance of one’s destiny to die reoccurs in this time period as well. None other than Maḥmūd Ḥamza (d. 1305/1887), the official Ḥanafī *muftī* of the city of Damascus with close relations to the Ottoman state, is said to have refused medication. After having seen the Prophet in a dream and reaffirming the testimony of faith with him, he accepted that his appointed time had come. The Sufi scholar ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Khānī (d. 1354/1935) was afflicted by malaria during one of his many journeys abroad. He refused medication and only wanted to drink water with blessings (*baraka*). When his body turned yellow, he kept shouting “*Ḥaqq, Ḥaqq*” (God, God!). His deathbed lasted sixteen days. The grand *ḥadīth* scholar Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥasanī, the most important scholar of Damascus in the early twentieth century, completely stopped eating a week before his death, and only took small sips of milk because a doctor kept trying. The Qur’ān scholar

‘Abd al-Wahhāb Dibs wa-Zayt (d. 1389/1969) is said to have refused medication as well, instead taking refuge in recitation of the Qur’ān and invoking blessings upon the Prophet for pain relief, and to have said: “My medication is not prepared with you, but with my Lord in Paradise” (al-Ḥāfiẓ and Abāza 2016, 1:83, 551, 569, 2:1137).

5 Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, it becomes clear that our – admittedly limited – sample of Sufi narratives from the first four centuries of Islam paint a much more ambiguous picture of deathbed emotions than later Damascene narratives from the verge of an Islamic modernity in the thirteenth/nineteenth-fourteenth/twentieth century. They are thus witness to a fascinating paradox in Islam’s modernity: while the Sufis from the formative period all shared a mystical vision on Islam, the forms this vision took were plural, leading to a great diversity in attitudes towards death and attached emotions. The sample from the fourteenth century is much more diverse with regards to visions on Islam, from textual scholars to charismatic leaders, from Sufis to Salafis, but expresses a larger degree of concurrence in attitudes and emotions expressed. Although further comparative research is needed and this sample has its obvious limitations, the impression that a sense of what Thomas Bauer calls *Vereindeutigung* (disambiguation), typical of Islam’s modernity, at the cost of the alleged *Mehrdeutigkeit* (ambiguity) and *Vielfalt* (pluriformity) of pre-modern Islam (Bauer 2011; 2018), can also be witnessed in the expressed ideal of deathbed emotions. Main differences can be found in the extremity of the emotions expressed: where ambiguity on the deathbed and heavy emotions were not an exception, even considered a form of piety in sources on the formative period, by the thirteenth/nineteenth and fourteenth/twentieth centuries sobriety in emotions, steadfastness and contentment had become the absolute norm.

This chapter has of course only scratched the surface of a much larger history that has to be told from a *longue durée* perspective. The difference between the two epochs are obvious in this particular sample, but still we do not know when and how exactly this paradigm shift took place in the preferred norms and expression of emotions, and whether this is only a regional phenomenon (all examples here are from the MENA region, the modern examples even only from Damascus), or whether they can also be witnessed in other regions of the Islamic world. We cannot exclude the possibility that it was not the exclusive

result of a confrontation with modernity, but that earlier internal movements of discrediting more ecstatic forms of Sufism in favour of more sober understandings of Sufism have played a role as well. More research is needed for this. This modest study may form a first onset for further comparative *longue durée* studies on deathbed emotions.

Let us in conclusion return to the study of Carlo Leget and his concept of “inner space.” Can all these narratives offer fertile ground for the approach that Leget proposes, and is this necessary? I would argue that an adaptation of premodern *ars moriendi* models in the case of Islam is not necessary. It may suffice for spiritual caregivers to realise how recent a phenomenon this sobriety and disambiguation in emotions actually is, and that premodern Islamic tradition offers a vast reservoir of emotions and ambiguities, despite, or perhaps even due to, the very pious milieu from which they emerged. This, in itself, is a humbling realisation. It also shows that the history of religion as a discipline may be a very good training in empathy, since it forces us to place ourselves in the shoes of people that not only have different religious convictions, but even come from different eras and areas altogether. History of religion, I would argue, should therefore be a significant and default part of the education of spiritual caregivers. Practical theology, in itself, is not enough and should always be informed by keen historical consciousness. The same goes for the ethics of end-of-life care: the flexibility shown in historical sources in matters pertaining to medication, nutrition, and preferring to die over prolonging the deathbed, invites to reflection on the ethical norms one proposes and cultivates in Islamic modernity, and whether a certain disambiguation and ethical rigidity alien to premodern norms is not undeservedly upheld.

This chapter initially originated from a teaching reflection in the field of practical theology, aiming to offer Islamic spiritual caregivers a theoretical framework for their end-of-life care. It emphatically aims higher in its ultimate goal, however. Western academia does not only have a rich tradition of reflection on dying in theology and religious studies, also in the realm of the humanities, valuable studies are available, that also reflect upon changing attitudes and emotions towards death and dying in art and literature (Taylor 2007, 65ff; Marchant 2014; McNamara and McIlvenna 2014; Sherlock 2017). Similar studies should also become available on Islamicate cultures in the broadest sense, so that more encompassing narratives of the history of culture and mentality around death and dying in the Islamicate world can become possible. It is about time that the “affective turn” in history and anthropology also fully reaches the field of Islamic studies, and that scholars of Islam become fully integrated in the growing community of emotion studies.

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