

**Guest Editor: Linda Barnes, Boston University**  
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*Tazim R. Kassam, Spotlight on Teaching Editor*

Seven years have passed since Linda Barnes, the guest editor of this issue of *Spotlight on Teaching*, invited me to discuss healing practices in Islam for a session on “Religion and/as Healing.” The aim of that panel was to explore the connections between religions, medicines, and healing from the viewpoint of different religious traditions. Linda argued convincingly that while medical anthropology was a well-established and respected discipline within anthropology, no comparable subdiscipline existed within the field of the study of religion.

Barnes’s efforts to gain formal recognition for such a subfield, and to create institutional academic forums that would give sustained and systematic attention to healing practices within diverse religions in relation to modern biomedical practices, have culminated in several forthcoming publications, a consultation on Religions, Medicines, and Healing at the Annual Meeting of the AAR, the establishment of the [Boston Healing Landscape Project](#) that she directs, and this issue of *Spotlight on Teaching*, which profiles various pedagogical attempts to introduce students to healing traditions cross-culturally.

A range of beliefs and approaches to healing and health can be found in the history of Islamic civilization. It is possible to discern two interdependent spheres of healing and medicine in Islam: a science of medicine that develops on the basis of rational inquiry, observation, and clinical experience; and traditions of healing that evolve from ethico-moral, spiritual, and metaphysical ideas. Within the Islamic ethos, medical practice must be based on humanly

constructed theories, observation, and experimentation — processes given to rational investigation and revision. Healing, however, entails a synchronicity of intelligent human effort through medical science, as well as super-rational, divine grace received through prayer and ethical conduct. Healing in Islam is thus construed within a holistic paradigm of the human being as constituting a complex unity of body, mind, and soul, a microcosm of creation.

Accordingly, an ideal physician must not only be equipped with scientific acumen but also be a person of ethical and spiritual integrity. These multiple requirements of intellectual rigor, humanistic faith, and noble character are stated by the twelfth century author, Nizami-i Arudi of Samarkand (d. 1174) as follows: “And no physician can be of tender disposition if he fails to recognize the nobility of the human soul; nor of wise nature unless he is acquainted with Logic; nor can he excel in acumen unless he be strengthened by God’s aid; and he who is not acute in conjecture will not arrive at correct understanding of any ailment, for he must derive his indications from the pulse, which has a systole, a diastole, and a pause intervening between these two movements.” (Quoted in Seyyed H. Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, 1968: 185).

The central figure of learning and healing in Islam is called *hakim*. Traditionally a person of encyclopedic knowledge, the *hakim* was at once scholar, scientist, musician, physician, and spiritual guide. Many of the best-known Muslim philosophers such as Al-Razi (b. 865), Ibn Sina (b. 980), and Ibn Rushd (b. 1126) were also great physicians. Al-Razi’s famous work, *On Smallpox and Measles*, was translated into Latin and other European languages and went through forty editions between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. His magnum opus, *Al-Hawi* or the *Compendium*, was one of the most comprehensive medical texts written before the nineteenth century and was a standard reference for physicians in Europe. It covered subjects such as surgery, clinical medicine, skin diseases, diet, and hygiene. Al-Razi was also a master of psychosomatic medicine and treated maladies of the psyche and the body. His work *Spiritual Physics* offers prescriptions on how to overcome moral and psychological illnesses that ruin health.

The other towering figure in Islamic sciences, Ibn Sina, came to be regarded as the greatest Muslim writer on medicine. His encyclopedic work, *Al-Qanun* or the *Canon* encompassed anatomy, diseases, hygiene, disorders of the limbs, and herbal compounds and other medicines. Together with Al-Razi’s

*Compendium*

, Ibn Sina's

*Al-Qanun*

"was used as a basic text in Europe's medical schools almost until the beginning of modern times." (Howard Turner,

*Science in Medieval Islam*

, 1995: 136). Ibn Sina also did pioneering work on the psychological aspects of illness.

Perceiving the integral relationship between the environment, emotional states, and physical health, he advocated vigorous exercise and listening to music for maintaining good health. Ibn Sina's greatest treatise on healing, however, was a religio-philosophical work called

*Kitab al-Shifa*

, or the

*Book of Healing*

. The focus of this metaphysical work was to show how to cure the soul of its diseases of ignorance that alienate it from true self-knowledge and God.

In sum, healing in the Islamic tradition has the following characteristics: it applies to every level of human existence from the physical to the spiritual; it is incumbent on Muslims to understand the nature of the cosmos, including the human body, and to apply this knowledge to secure health and well-being; and finally, healing has an ethico-moral precondition: a true physician cannot be a healer without trustworthy conduct and spiritual wisdom.