

The Story of the Moral: Ottoman Reflections on Economic Mores through a Selection of Anecdotes

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Social and economic challenges made their way into prescriptive literature in the form of emphasis on moral conduct that actual markets lacked. An in-depth examination of representative anecdotes narrated in an unpublished and un-scrutinized anonymous manuscript dated 1697 on Islamic rules of transactions (fiqh mu‘āmalāt), exhibits the divergence between the moral and the actual economy. Consequently, I raise questions on ideals of justice that come across these anecdotes; the concerns with the mundane versus the hereafter; and the choice of settings, characters, and their agency in the stories.

Chapters of the manuscript dwell on commercial transactions regarding travel, the urban market, trickery, usury, unlawful agricultural transactions and ways of business to be avoided, all of which are explained to the public at large, with a straight-forward language in the vernacular. The anecdotes illustrate particular shortcomings of morality from the perspective of Islamic procedure within a wide range of improper, unacceptable or abominable behaviour such as meddling with weights and measures, hoarding, trickery, and theft.

Looking into contemporary political and economic conditions, I contextualize the manuscript within the framework of the ‘long seventeenth century’. I will also locate it among contemporary Ottoman works of economic thought as well as the hisba and fütüvvet literatures regarding economic morality. Finally, exploring the moral injunctions found in the manuscript I ask whether this investigation can contribute to a profounder understanding of the concept of moral economy.