CHAPTER 44

Al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277) on Kissing and Handshaking

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1 Introduction

While the English term "handshake" indicates, lexically, a fairly loose, casual gesture, the corresponding Arabic term, *muṣāfaḥa* ("putting surfaces against one another"), has a different, more visceral sense.[1] As anthropologists have observed, in certain cultural and linguistic contexts, handshaking is not just a neutral, "communicative" gesture, but an "expressive" one (Wierzbicka, 226). Touching rituals such as handshaking, or handclasping, are important building blocks of systems of non-verbal communication, both within cultural formations and in the encounter between them.

In their efforts to regulate the human sensorium, medieval Muslim jurists generally argued that whatever people are not allowed to see, *a fortiori* they must not touch either. In the view of these jurists, in other words, looking and touching are related closely.[2] A look, certainly a stare, is a form of touch. At the same time, they considered touching to be more momentous (*ashadd*) than looking (see below, § 2). Permission to look does not imply permission to touch (see Hsu, 76–7). For example, a man may look at the hands of a female stranger (*ajnabiyya*), at least according to most schools of law in Islam, but it does not follow that it is permissible for him to touch (or, indeed, to shake) them.

Below, we translate three short chapters on kissing and handshaking from a well-known work by the Syrian *ḥadīth* scholar and jurist Abū Zakariyyā Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), entitled *Ḥilyat al-abrār wa-shiʿār al-akhyār fī talkhīṣ al-daʿawāt wa-l-adhkār* (*The Adornment of the Pious and the Sign of Godly People in Summarizing Prayers and Remembrances*). This sprawling work, commonly known by the shorthand *al-Adhkār* (*Remembrances*), functions first and foremost as a collection of various prayers and pious formulas: what to say to a bereaved person, what to say to comfort a sick person, what to say when

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2 See *ISH*, vol. 2, ch. 42.

offered food, and so forth. In addition, *al-Adhkār* also provides sundry rules of pious etiquette and manners (*ādāb*): of reciting the Qur'ān, of sneezing, of treating relatives, among other things.

Al-Adhkār illustrates al-Nawawī's way of weaving ethical discourse (*akhlāq*) into jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The bulk of *al-Adhkār* consists in narrations (*ḥadīth*s) about the Prophet Muḥammad, gleaned from well-known collections, such as those of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), Muslim (d. 261/875), al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/889), Ibn Māja (d. 273/887), and Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795). However, al-Nawawī also adds his own commentary, in order to draw out the legal and ethical implications of a certain *ḥadīth* and to relate how the scholars of his legal school, the Shāfiʿīs, pronounce on an issue. *Al-Adhkār* enjoyed, and continues to enjoy, great popularity. This is evinced by that fact that it sparked several epitomes and commentaries, including those by Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449), al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), and Ibn ʿAllān (d. 1057/1647), and that it is available to modern readers in (albeit incomplete) English, French, Persian, and Urdu translations. "Sell your house and buy the *Remembrances*!" (*biʿ al-dār wa-shtari l-Adhkār*), runs a well-known Arabic maxim.

As a general rule, according to al-Nawawī and the *ḥadīth*s that he quotes, handshaking is part of polite greeting; it offers a good middle way between the more intimate kissing and hugging and the more formal bow. Kissing the cheek of another person, however, is not completely forbidden according to al-Nawawī: one may do so with children, or when greeting a friend after a long journey. As regards handshaking or kissing of cheeks between the sexes, al-Nawawī does not have to issue a prohibition, as it goes without saying that men and women meeting each other must refrain from both.

The scenario that troubles al-Nawawī is, rather, that of an adult man shaking hands with, or kissing, a beautiful unbearded youth (*amrad ḥasan*). As al-Nawawī states, even to look at a beautiful unbearded youth is forbidden—demonstrating, again, the intimate nexus between looking and touching in Islamic aesthetics. The practice known as *shāhid-bāzī* (Pers. "playing the witness"), "gazing at the form of young males in order to witness the inner, divine presence" (Ridgeon, 3), belongs to the context of mystical Islam, or Sufism.[3] While in many cases, it is difficult to know to what extent and in what form gazing at beardless boys was practiced by medieval Sufis, there can be no doubt that the very notion of *shāhid-bāzī* was laden with symbolism and as such, highly contested. Just a generation before al-Nawawī, the defense of *shāhid-bāzī* by the widely traveled Sufi master of Baghdad, Awḥad al-Dīn Kimānī (d. 635/1237–8), had given rise to renewed inner-Sufi controversy (see Ridgeon). It may well be that when drawing attention to the issue, al-Nawawī is reacting to this particular historical background.

3 On gazing at human beauty, see also *ISH*, vol. 2, ch. 39 (Saʿdī).

Another question that al-Nawawī highlights in regard to handshaking is whether one should shake hands after communal prayer. Although there are no *ḥadīth*s that indicate that the Prophet practiced this form of handshaking, Muslims developed a habit of doing so. Some, however, wishing to protect Islam against all forms of "innovation" (*bidʿa*), argued against it. In certain instances, the handshake after the communal prayer became a marker of confessional difference in Islam. The Ottoman polymath Kātib Chelebī (d. 1067/1657) relates that in the Ottoman Empire, certain preachers condemned post-prayer handshaking as a "heretical Shiʿite practice," but adds that after the Friday prayer, or at festivals, the practice is generally tolerated or even encouraged (Kātib Chelebī, 101). One may also mention in this context that *muṣāfaḥa* was an element in Sufi rituals of initiation (Pers. *dast-i bayʿat*, Turk. *el almak*), as well as the name of a specific type of *ḥadīth* works in late medieval and early modern times, given to collections of *ḥadīth*s that had been passed on, after their inclusion in an authoritative compilation, by ritual handshaking rather than by adding the names of transmitters to the chain of transmission (*isnād*).

Today, Muslim handshaking (or the refusal to engage in it) has lost nothing of its symbolic import. In modern and postcolonial contexts, handshaking between Muslims and non-Muslims, men and women, and between Muslim men and non-Muslim women in particular, has become a prominent bone of contention (see Deeb, 110; Fadil).

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2 Translation

Muḥyī l-Dīn Abū Zakariyyā Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Ḥilyat al-abrār wa-shiʿār al-akhyār fī talkhīṣ al-daʿawāt wa-l-adhkār*, ed. ʿAlī al-Sharbajī and Qāsim al-Nūrī, Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1412/1992, pp. 425–9.

[*p. 425*] [*§ 1*] ***Chapter*** [***on Kissing Someone's Cheek***]

[§ 1.1]

There is no harm (*lā baʾs*) in kissing the cheek [lit., the face] of a righteous dead person (*mayyit ṣāliḥ*) in order to seek blessing, nor in a man's kissing the cheek of a friend when he arrives after a journey, and in other such situations.

[§ 1.2]

In al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, from ʿĀʾisha, who said, in a long narration about the passing of the Messenger of God: "Abū Bakr entered [the room in which the body of the Prophet was kept]. He uncovered the face of the Messenger of God, leaned over it, and kissed it. Then he cried."

[§ 1.3]

In al-Tirmidhī's book, from ʿĀʾisha: Zayd b. Ḥāritha came to Medina. He went to visit the Messenger of God, who was in his house, and knocked on the door. The Prophet, grabbing his dress, rose to [greet] him, then hugged and kissed him.

Al-Tirmidhī stated that this *ḥadīth* is fair.[4]

[§ 1.4]

However, hugging and kissing the cheek of a person who is not a child nor is arriving from a journey is discouraged (*makrūh*). Abū Muḥammad al-Baghawī

4 There are three basic levels of trustworthiness of *ḥadīth*: "sound" (*ṣaḥīḥ*), "fair" (*ḥasan*), and "weak" (*ḍaʿīf*). See Pavlovitch.

[d. 516/1122] and other scholars of our school have determined that it is discouraged. The following also indicates this.

[§ 1.5]

In al-Tirmidhī's and Ibn Māja's books, from Anas: A man said, "O Messenger of God, if one of us meets his brother, or a friend, must he bow to him?" He answered, "No."—"And must he embrace and kiss him?"—"No."—"Must he take his hand and shake it?"—"Yes."

Al-Tirmidhī stated that this *ḥadīth* is fair.

[§ 1.6]

What we have stated here regarding kissing and hugging—that is, that there is no harm in it in the case of a person who arrives after a journey and the like, and that it is discouraged otherwise, to protect probity—does not apply to beardless, beautiful young boys (*al-amrad al-ḥasan al-wajh*). It is forbidden, in all cases, to kiss a beautiful unbearded male, regardless of whether he arrives [p. 426] after a journey or not—and obviously, hugging is like kissing, or close to kissing. It does not matter whether the kisser and the kissed are righteous or profligate, or whether one of them is righteous, or both. According to us, the correct opinion is that [even] looking at a beautiful unbearded male (*al-naẓar ilā l-amrad al-ḥasan*) is forbidden, even if one looks without desire and even if there is no danger of temptation (*fitna*). It [looking at him] is forbidden just like [looking at] women is, for he [the unbearded youth] falls in the same category.

[*§ 2*] *Chapter on Handshaking*

[§ 2.1]

Know that this is an agreed-upon custom (*sunna*) when people meet.

[§ 2.2]

In al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*: Qatāda asked Anas, "Did the Companions of the Prophet shake hands?" He answered, "Yes."

[§ 2.3]

In the *Ṣaḥīḥ*s of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, in the *ḥadīth* of Kaʿb b. Mālik, in the story about his repentance [from Kaʿb]: "Ṭalḥa b. ʿUbaydallāh hastened to stand up and greet me, so as to shake my hands and hug me."[5]

5 See Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *k. al-tawba* 9. Kaʿb b. Mālik (d. 50/670 or 53/673) was one of the poets supporting the Prophet Muḥammad. He momentarily fell out of favor with the Prophet because

[§ 2.4]

In the *Sunan* of Abū Dāwūd, from Anas: When the people from the Yemen arrived, the Messenger of God said, "The people of the Yemen have come to [visit] you. They are the first to have brought handshaking."

[§ 2.5]

In the *Sunan*s of Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī, [p. 427] from al-Barāʾ: the Messenger of God said, "When meeting each other, Muslims will be forgiven [their] sins before they depart, if they have shaken hands."

[§ 2.6]

In al-Tirmidhī's and Ibn Māja's books, from Anas: A man said, "O Messenger of God, if one of us meets his brother, or a friend, must he bow to him?" He answered, "No."—"And must he embrace and kiss him?"—"No."—"Must he take his hand and shake it?"—"Yes."

Al-Tirmidhī stated that this *ḥadīth* is fair. There are many *ḥadīth*s on this topic.

[§ 2.7]

In the *Muwaṭṭaʾ* of Imam Mālik [b. Anas], from ʿAṭāʾ b. ʿAbdallāh al-Khurasānī: The Messenger of God said to me, "Shake hands, so as to drive away antipathy; exchange presents, so that you may love each other, and so as to eliminate enmity."

I say: This is a loosened (*mursal*) *ḥadīth*.[6]

[§ 2.8]

Know that handshaking is recommended (*mustaḥabb*) at every meeting [between men]. However, regarding the kind of handshaking that people have taken a habit to after the morning and the afternoon prayers, the way it is done

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he remained in Medina during the expedition to Tabūk in 9/630, but was soon forgiven (cf. Q 9:117–18). In the long *ḥadīth* related in Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Ṭalḥa b. ʿUbaydallāh (d. ca. 36/656), an early Companion of the Prophet, is the only one among a group of Companions to get up and greet Kaʿb, despite his repentance. Apparently, misgivings about Kaʿb's behavior lingered. In his *Commentary* (*Sharḥ*) on Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, al-Nawawī notes that the story shows that it is "commendable to get up to shake hands with the people who arrive in order to show them respect, and to make haste to meet them, in order to demonstrate cheerfulness and joy." See Nawawī, *Sharḥ*, 9:82.

6 A "loosened" (*mursal*) *ḥadīth* is one in whose chain of transmission (*isnād*) a link is missing. See Pavlovitch.

has no normative basis in the Law (*sharʿ*). However, there is no harm in it. Essentially, handshaking is a custom. […]

[§ 2.9]

The shaykh and imam Abū Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām [d. 660/1262] has explained in his *Rules* (*Qawāʿid*) that there are five kinds of innovations (*bidaʿ*): necessary, forbidden, [p. 428] discouraged, recommended, and neutral. He has stated that handshaking after the morning and the afternoon prayer is an example of a neutral innovation.[7] God knows best.

[§ 2.10]

I say: One has to guard against shaking hands with beautiful beardless boys. Looking at them is forbidden, as we explained in the previous chapter. The people of our school teach that all objects that one must not look at are also forbidden to touch, or rather, touching [such objects] is more momentous (*ashadd*). For example: it is allowed to look at an unrelated woman if one has the intention of marrying her, or when one is selling or buying, or in [other] commercial situations. However, in none of these situations is one allowed to touch her. God knows best.

[*§ 3*] *Chapter* [*on the Etiquette of Handshaking*]

[§ 3.1]

It is recommended that, when shaking hands, one should smile, invoke God's forgiveness, and do other such things.

[§ 3.2]

In Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, from Abū Dharr: The Messenger of God said, "You mustn't hold a single custom (*shayʾ min al-maʿrūf*) in contempt, even were your brother to be without a smile on his face when you meet him."

[§ 3.3]

In Ibn al-Sunnī's *Kitāb*,[8] from al-Barāʾ b. ʿĀzib: The Messenger of God said, "When two Muslims meet, shake hands, smile at each other, and give each other good counsel, their sins are dispersed [i.e., invalidated] between the two of them."

7 See Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām, 2:337, 339.

8 Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Sunnī (d. 364/975) was a judge in Rayy and author of a well-known work entitled *ʿAmal al-yawm wa-l-layla, sulūk al-nabī maʿa rabbihi* (*Habits of the Day and the Night, How the Prophet Wayfared with His Lord*).

[§ 3.4]

According to another version [the Messenger of God said]: "When two Muslims meet, shake hands, praise God, and say, 'I seek God's forgiveness,' God forgives their sins."

[§ 3.5]

[p. 429] In the same book, from Anas: The Prophet said, "When two servants [of God] love each other in God, and when one of them greets the other, shaking his hand, they will not depart from one another without their former and future sins having been forgiven."

[§ 3.6]

In the same book, from Anas: When the Messenger of God took the hand of a person and then departed from him, he would say, "Great God, give us good tidings in this world and the next, and spare us from the torment of Hell!"