



The Qur'an, Islamic Traditions and Notions of Unborn Life

Lecture by Tyolumun Kinga-Upaa, University of London

Images of the foetus and ideas of unborn life are quite actively represented in classical literature from antiquity to the medieval period. These notions are spread across scientific writings of an era in which various aspects of the human culture always intersected. Early Muslim literature beginning with the Qur'an and going through the tafsir and hadith right down to medieval Muslim scientific treatises have all picked up and sometimes redefined these notions. This has given rise to the idea that early Islam developed a science of embryology that emerged out of the Qur'an; an idea that sometimes presents these notions as deliberate response to the other scientific traditions contemporary to the period of the rise of Islam. My research so far disproves of any hypothesis that early Islamic religious texts developed a consistent notion of embryology or any medical understanding of forms of unborn life. And in this presentation I argue the contrary to claims that the Qur'an consciously developed a notion of embryology that either stands in sharp opposition to or close proximity with those of early Greek philosophers and medical scientists. I conclude that the Qur'an's discussion of unborn life, like that of the other early Islamic religious traditions, fits into a general model of late antiquity. Any nuances with the other religious and scientific traditions are, therefore, only a feature of the methods used by this period for self-definition by emerging religious/confessional groups and the construction of social identities within their developing communities.

Tuesday, September 27 2016, 1:30 pm

Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 Ost, Room 232, 20146 Hamburg

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