

**READING AND REMEMBERING SABA MAHMOOD:
ISLAM, GENDER, AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF TRADITION**

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Saba Mahmood's untimely passing on March 10, 2018 at the age of 56 was a tragic loss to family, friends, and colleagues, as well as to cultural anthropologists inspired by her scholarship over the past two decades. Her influence has been no less far-reaching in contemporary Islamic and gender studies. It is against the backdrop of her legacy that the editor and editorial board of *Contemporary Islam* have taken the opportunity to dedicate this virtual issue of *CI* to the memory of Mahmood and her scholarship. This introductory essay aims to pay critical homage to Mahmood as an anthropologist of Islam, gender, and ethics, and to reflect on where, in the aftermath of her contributions, these important fields seem to be going.

FROM ASADIAN TRADITION TO FOUCAULDIAN ETHICS

Mahmood's intellectual ascent in the late 1990s and early 2000s was an index of sweeping changes taking place in those years at the intersection of Islamic studies, feminist theory, and the anthropology of ethics and subjectivity. The late 1980s and early 1990s had witnessed a shift in cultural anthropology away from the interpretive and symbolic anthropology of previous decades, not least that associated with Clifford Geertz, arguably the most influential cultural anthropologist of the age. Criticisms of Geertz were varied, but the most substantial centered on claims that Geertz's models of culture were insufficiently attentive to questions of power, gender, and the distributional heterogeneity of culture itself. Scholars in subfields as varied as anthropological postmodernism, psychological anthropology and the Anglo-Norwegian school of social anthropology pioneered by Fredrik Barth (1993) and Unni Wikan (1990) took

exception to what they regarded as the totalizing representation of subjectivity and meaning said to be implicit in Geertzian approaches. In Islamic studies, Geertz was faulted for taking modern Islamic reformism as the standard for determining which practices and doctrines are legitimately “Islamic” and which are not (Woodward 1989:1). Others took exception to what they saw as a tendency in works like *Islam Observed* to favor a culture-and-personality approach over a more sustained analysis of the politics and practices of culture and subjectivity.

A lifelong mentor to Mahmood, Talal Asad was among the earliest and most influential of Geertz critics, and the one who paved the way for portions of Mahmood’s program. Well in advance of the anti-Geertzian wave, Asad (1983) published an influential essay on the category of “religion” in anthropology. Along with a later article on Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s 1962 *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Asad 2001), Asad’s essay played a pivotal role in the late twentieth-century reorientation of *both* religious studies and the anthropology of religion. The central claim of both essays was that, contrary to Geertz’s famous essay, there is no “universally viable” definition of religion (Asad 1983: 238), because “power constructs religious ideology, establishes the preconditions for distinctive kinds of religious personality, authorizes specifiable religious practices and utterances, produces religiously defined knowledge” (Asad 1983:238).¹ These claims were to be the point of departure for Mahmood’s scholarship as well.

¹ Although his broader point with regard to religion and power has merit, Asad’s characterization of Geertz as an “intellectualist” who regarded “cultural symbols and meanings” as “*sui generis*” and “an a priori totality” (Asad 1983: 251) is seriously mistaken. In his 1983 critique, Asad relied exclusively on Geertz’s “Religion as a Cultural System,” making no reference to works like *Religion of Java* (Geertz 1960) or even other chapters in the *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). On the question of how social action relates to cultural meanings and subjectivity, the young Geertz drew heavily on two authors, neither of whom is at all intellectualist: his graduate-era mentor, Talcott Parsons, and the English philosopher of language and mind, Gilbert Ryle. From Parsons, the young Geertz borrowed the notion that cultural “symbols” develop what coherence they have, not as a result of a *sui generis* holism, but through their recursive projection and enactment in the “informal logic of everyday life.” However imprecise its elaboration, this

Two other features in Asad's pioneering program also figured in Mahmood's intellectual project. The first was the idea that, rather than reflecting a trans-cultural essence, the modern category of religion is the path-dependent product of the ascendance of the epistemic categories of the "secular" and "secularism" in the post-Enlightenment West. This theme of the co-construction of the categories of "religion" and "secularism" played a secondary role in her *Politics of Piety* (2005), but was at the heart of the project to which Mahmood dedicated her final years, on the discourse and practice of religious freedom, a theme she addressed as co-editor in *Politics of Religious Freedom* (Sullivan et al., 2015) and in her final book, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* (2016), among other works.

strikingly pragmatic formula – that it is through social action, not mentalist cogitation that "symbol systems" acquire whatever coherence they have – was one that Geertz repeatedly invoked to distinguish his mode of cultural analysis from that of the American anthropologist, Ward Goodenough, and Claude Levi-Strauss's structuralism (Geertz 1973: 10-11,354). No less significantly, this same, action-in-the-world approach to cultural meaning explains Geertz's enthusiasm for the "language practice" perspective on mind and meaning associated with Gilbert Ryle. In Anglo-American language philosophy in the post-war period, Ryle was well known for his unstinting critiques of what he described as the "Cartesian myth" of the "ghost in the machine," with its assumption that "the workings of one mind" are private not public and social (Ryle 1949: 11, 15). Ryle appealed for scholars of language and meaning to shift their analytic gaze focus from "unwitnessable mental causes" (33) to "skills," "dispositions" and "competences" shaped, not in unknowable Cartesian minds, but in "practice" and "intelligent performance" (26). As illustrated in his criticisms of "privacy theories of meaning" (1973:12, 58-59), and his ambitious but ultimately incomplete effort to explain the genesis of "dispositions" in social life (Geertz 1973:95), the young Geertz's views on language philosophy show, not only a debt to Ryle, but an approach close to that Asad (1983:240) rightly identifies with the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Both emphasize that cultural meanings are not *sui generis* but "conditioned by social relations" (Asad 1983:240). The affinity undercuts Asad's claim that Geertz's concept of religion displays a "modern, privatised Christian" privileging of interior belief over public practice. Where Asad gets it right, however, is in his observation that Geertz was not consistently true to his own Rylean principles on matters of authoritative meaning. This was particularly apparent in one of Geertz's most problematic claims with regard to religion: that "The acceptance of authority that underlies the religious perspective... flows from the enactment of the ritual itself" (1973: 118) rather than from a decentered array of social powers, disciplines, and aspirational identifications (see Hefner 1985: 18-22).

The second and no less pivotal theme on which Mahmood drew was Asad's foregrounding of the concept of "tradition" and, with it, his practice-oriented approach to culture and religion. There were hints of Asad's engagement with the concept of tradition in his 1983 essay, but the concept received its first sustained elaboration in his 1986 article, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam" (Asad 1986). In this and later publications, Asad called for anthropologists to examine Islam "as a discursive tradition that connects variously with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledges" (Asad 1986: 7). These too were to become foundational themes in Mahmood's scholarship. Several pages on in the same essay Asad provides an important addendum on his understanding of tradition, declaring that, "A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history"; he added that "it will be the practitioner's conceptions of what is *apt performance*...that will be crucial for tradition, not the apparent repetition of an old form" (Asad 1986: 14-15). In other words, rather than "tradition" consisting of the unthinking re-enactment of practices inherited from the past (as some Weberian accounts had long implied), Asad emphasized that "Reason and argument are necessarily involved in traditional practice..." (Asad 1986:16). In these and other characterizations of tradition, Asad acknowledged his debt to the British Catholic ethical philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, and especially his *After Virtue* (1984), one of the most influential anti-liberal tracts in ethical philosophy of the late twentieth century (see Asad 1986:21, n. 26). As James Laidlaw (2014:75) has shown, Mahmood's concept of tradition drew on these same MacIntyrean and anti-liberal precedents.

While acknowledging her debt to Asad with regard to religion, secularism, and discursive traditions (see Mahmood 2012: 225), Mahmood went well beyond Asad in several important respects. Although Asad had invoked Foucauldian models of power and knowledge to urge anthropologists to attend to morality and subject formation, he never elaborated a comprehensive theory of either. Moreover, and as Mahmood (2012:236) herself observed, notwithstanding his reliance on certain concepts developed by the young Foucault, Asad did not reference Foucault's late-life engagement with Aristotle's ideas on the ethical "care of the self" and the ways in which actors use reflexively habituated practices to shape a moral character. Instead, as illustrated in his *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003), Asad's theoretical preference was to analyze ethical subject formation, not by way of experience-near observation of habituating ethical practices, but by way of epistemic categories of ostensible civilizational scope, like secularism, religion, and citizenship – epistemes that Asad viewed as linked to the hegemonizing powers of Western modernity. On this point, Asad's post-structuralism shared little of Jean Francois Lyotard's (1984) conviction that the primary feature of our "postmodern condition" is the loss of grand narratives. Asad's modernity is replete with metanarratives, the most important of which he characterizes as totalizing in both their societal scope and the degree to which they penetrate and "construct" the subject.

As was apparent in her 2016 *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*, Mahmood was not averse to invoking the structuring presence of culture-strong discourses, including those of secularism, religion, and liberalism. However, to judge by the reaction of her peers in the anthropology of Islam, the most widely appreciated theoretical insight from her *Politics of Piety* had less to do with grand-sweep genealogies of the latter sort than with her highlighting of the micro-social ethical practices whereby women in the Egyptian piety

movement aim to reconstruct their bodies and minds to “uphold, a discursive tradition that regards subordination to a transcendent will (and thus, in many instances, to male authority) as its coveted goal” (Mahmood 2005: 2-3).

In this last regard, Mahmood’s female pietists offered a striking variation on what was, once again, a MacIntyrean theme: speaking back against the “liberal” assumption “that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them” (Mahmood 2005: 5). In short, what Mahmood had put in play was not just a theory and method for the study of ethical piety, but a challenge to the liberal “naturalization of freedom as a social ideal,” and, not coincidentally, to a feminist theory for which, Mahmood claimed, “freedom is normative..., as it is to liberalism” (2005:10).

LIBERALISM AND THE FEMINIST SUBJECT

Mahmood was not the first anthropologist to problematize the naturalization of liberal freedom in discussions of human agency and ethics. Years earlier Lila Abu-Lughod had expressed similar reservations, questioning the pervasiveness of a human agency defined in terms of the will to resist domination (1990:40; see also Abu-Lughod 2013). Building on a theoretical legacy that went back to studies of social hierarchy in the 1950s and 1960s, anthropologists of South Asia had long rejected the notion that liberal ideals of autonomy and freedom were somehow endemic to all cultures or human subjectivities (van der Veer 1994; Shweder and Menon 2003). What made Mahmood’s intervention more distinctive, however, was that she linked her arguments on pietist subjectivity, not just to the ideals and practices of Muslim ethical subject formation, but to two other theoretical projects: a Foucauldian analysis of

the technologies of the self whereby pietist women assiduously cultivate their religious subjectivities, and a critical analysis of Western feminism and the Kantian liberal ethics of unfettered “autonomy” to which, Mahmood claimed, it was irretrievably bound.

Mahmood’s insights into these latter topics had an immediate and far reaching impact on discussions of gender, subjectivity, and Islam, an illustrative sample of which was seen in the pages of *Contemporary Islam*. In one of the earliest published responses in *CI*, Julius Bautista praised Mahmood for denaturalizing the aspiration for freedom and challenging Western liberal “normative assumptions about Muslim female docility, complicity, resistance or freedom” (Bautista 2008:75). He went on to emphasize that “Mahmood’s scholarship encourages scholars from the non-West to liberate themselves from endemic forms of academic dependency” (Bautista 2008: 81), not least those universalizing Eurocentric models of subjectivity.

Drawing on field research among pious middle class women in urban Bangladesh, Sami Huq (2011) also praised Mahmood for drawing attention to Muslim ethical self-fashioning. Huq pushed back against critics who, she argued, had wrongly accused Mahmood of being too singularly focused on the formation of pietistic subjectivities, to the exclusion of practical politics and alternative formations of the ethical self (Huq 2011:269). The benefits of Mahmood’s approach, Huq argued (endorsing but also qualifying the Mahmoodian model), are most effectively realized by repudiating one-size-fits-all models of piety, so as to delve “into particularities of subject formations. and the different trajectories through which religiosity makes it mark on the public space” (Hug 2011:282).

Other contributors to *Contemporary Islam* showed that Mahmood’s scholarship had not just opened a new field of research but generated heated theoretical debate. Santi Rozario (2011) applauded Mahmood for demonstrating that women in conservative religious movements are

fully capable of exercising agency and “making conscious and deliberate decisions about the course of their lives” (2011:285). But she went on to observe that left to itself Mahmood’s message “runs the risk of over-emphasizing the role of individual agency in such choices”; the model must be balanced by the recognition that pietists’ lives “are crafted, as with all human lives, in a space between social determination and voluntary choice” (2011:286). The sociologist and Indonesianist, Rachel Rinaldo, expressed a similar concern about a too-voluntaristic reading of ethical subject formation and a too unitary portrayal of pietist subjectivity. Drawing on her research among Indonesia’s moderately Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), Rinaldo pointed out that the subjectivity enacted by these educated, middle-class activists embodied not just a *telos* of piety but “a new kind of middle class habitus that distinguishes women by class and approach to religion” (Rinaldo 2008: 29). The habitus’s aspirations included not just piety but companionate marriage and professional careers for women. A hybrid rather than the product of an exclusively Islamic ethics, this “habitus is produced by and embodies highly specific social structures,” whose core habitus “characterizes modern middle classes around the world” (Rinaldo 2008: 35).

These early commentaries were but the beginning of what soon became a far-reaching debate in the anthropology of Islam over ethics, subjectivity, and freedom. One of the most widely-cited examples of this theoretical ferment was the publication in 2010 of a volume (based on a 2009 special issue of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*) edited by Filippo Osella and Benjamin Soares on *Islam, Politics, Anthropology*. Although they sought to provide a general reassessment of anthropology’s “long and not unproblematic engagement with the study of Islam” (Soares and Osella 2010:1), the volume’s focus on everyday politics led several contributors to revisit Mahmood’s arguments on piety, politics, and subjectivity. In a thoughtful

introduction to the collection, the editors applauded Mahmood for her “very compelling critique of Western liberal notions of agency,” and the misrepresentations of Muslim women to which it gave rise. They also praised her for pioneering new methodologies for the study of piety and Islamism, observing that this “is anthropology at its best” (Soares and Osella 2010: 10). But the editors sounded a word of warning as well. They noted that Mahmood’s focus on ethical self-fashioning risked reducing politics to “micro-politics” and neglecting the need to situate Islamists and piety movements “in relation to others, including secularists” (ibid.). They also urged anthropologists to complicate their understanding of Muslim subjectivities by exploring the relation of piety to other modes of Muslim intellectual, ethical, and affective engagement. Even the most fervent pietists, they rightly observed, may at times aspire to other ethical aims.

The latter theme of the ambivalence and heterogeneity of ethical subjectivity is one that had become the focus of attention in the new wave of psychological anthropology that emerged in North America in the 1990s. Katherine Ewing (1990) was among the first to make a sustained argument in support of the idea that, rather than being seamlessly consistent, human subjectivity is prone to aspirational plurality and experiential inconsistency. A related theme figured in the writings of the other psychological anthropologists, including Brad Shore (1990), William Gregg (1998), or, more recently, Gregory Simon (2015). These authors differ on the question as to whether, beyond the situational variation seen in the presentation of self in everyday life, there is an underlying “infra-subjectivity” that retains some measure of executive continuity or cohesion across an individual’s experience of different life worlds. On this point, Ewing’s psychoanalytically-inflected model of what we might call agonistic subjectivity is the most radical, arguing that the idea of “personal continuity of a pre-symbolic, cohesive self that is a unitary center of experience is illusory” (Ewing 1990: 258). By contrast, although Gregg

emphasizes that “self-representational systems normatively consist of multiple discourses, defining contrasting and often contradictory identities,” he also argues that typically “an individual embraces one discourse as his or her true or authentic self, and elaborates it more fully than others” (Gregg 1998: 147). No less significant, the fact that a human subject is capable of identifying one performed-selfhood as more resonant or “authentic” than another even as she makes “quantumlike shifts” (1998:146) between different representations of self suggests that, in Gregg’s view, there is a psycho-dynamic core to subjectivity. In his study of Islam and subjectivity in Minangkabau, Sumatra, Gregory Simon offers a third opinion on this question of the degree of infra-subjective coherence maintained in the course of plural ethical practices. He notes that “Minangkabau people are drawn into the management of tensions between seemingly conflicting yet simultaneously culturally celebrated visions of moral selfhood.... [S]elves are often imagined as essentially and most properly constituted by their integration with others, united and made perfect in submission to God; yet they are also imagined as essentially and most properly autonomous” (1). Importantly, however, Simon notes that, rather than individuals developing “completely different selves in each sphere...Tensions between values and experiences follow them” (Simon 2015:5-16), and certain psycho-cultural capacities of the self “work to more or less integrate different systems and information into the living of particular lives in an ongoing process of self-formation” (Simon 2015:7).

Although psychological anthropologists have led the way in this discussion of the deep structures of human subjectivity and identity-cohesion, this interest in the plurality of aspirations and identities in “Muslim” societies has also become a focus of research in the new anthropology of Islam. Not by any means in response or opposition to Mahmood’s work, but more or less coincident with her ascent in gender studies and the anthropology of Islam, anthropologists of

Islam like Adeleine Masquelier (2007), Benjamin Soares (2005), and Magnus Marsden (2005) provide ethnographies of everyday life in Muslim-majority societies that, even while highlighting pietist revivalists, also emphasizes the diverse ways of being a person and a Muslim. Although these authors do not necessarily share psychological anthropologists' concern with determining the degree of subjective continuity across a person's life world, their portrayals of Muslim agents consistently highlight the related theme of the heterogeneity of "Muslim" aspirations and self-identifications. In other words, these studies argue that Muslim ethical subjectivities are coherent, but not in a way that is either aspirationally unitary or, least of all, exclusively "Islamic." This same theme, that even observant Muslims are "not just Muslim," has in recent years figured prominently in sociological studies of modern Muslim societies (Bayat 2013; Zubaida 2011).

As much as any single researcher, the Berlin-based anthropologist, Samuli Schielke, has played a leading role in bringing these insights together into a comprehensive research agenda, one that self-consciously engages Mahmood's scholarship. Schielke has called for an anthropology of ethics and subjectivity that joins with Ewing in emphasizing the agonistic plurality of subjectivities and in repudiating "the illusion of wholeness" (see Ewing 1990). Schielke develops this latter theme, however, less in cultural-psychological terms than in relation to an existential anthropology whose primary is to ask "what it means to live a life," a life seen as "made up of reflective and un-reflected moments, different ways of being moral (and not so moral), and the experience of greater powers and an unpredictable destiny" (Schielke 2015:89). Consistent with this project, Schielke interprets Ewing's reference to the inconsistent self to mean, among other things, that we anthropologists must aim "to account for views that are neither clearly nor consistently in line with any grand ideology, and lives that are full of

ambivalence – not only between moral and amoral aims, but also between different, at times mutually hostile, moral aims” (Schielke 2010: 25; cf. Schielke 2015).

Lara Deeb and Mona Harb (2013) have made a related point in a vivid and subtle ethnography of youth leisure and moral norms in South Beirut. The authors demonstrate that, in pursuing interests that might be seen as diverging from authoritative religious norms, individuals reflect back on and transform the ways in which those norms are experienced. As Deeb has noted in a recent theoretical intervention, the pattern here is not one of an incoherent “everyday life” uninformed by Islamic norms in opposition to a hyper-coherent pietist ethics; it is instead one in which “normative religiosity, moral norms, and everyday life infuse one another” (Deeb 2015:95). One could add here that for more than a decade a related theme of normative “imbrication” has figured in discussions of shari‘ah law and Muslim ethics in the fields of Islamic ethical studies (Hefner 2016). This research has shown that, when Muslims seek to understand and apply the principles of shari‘ah “law” to real-world circumstances, they do so by drawing on pre-textual sensibilities concerning the hermeneutics of how one should understand authoritative discourses, as well as contextual affordances that, in each moment of hermeneutic engagement, highlight certain potentialities within the normative tradition as opposed to others (Ahmed 2016; cf. Hefner 2016; Moosa 2001).

In short, in these and other studies, Mahmood’s call for scholars to put aside liberal presuppositions and explore a variety of ethical subjectivities has had a richly generative but also pluralizing impact. Mahmood’s highlighting of pietists’ efforts to organize their lives around a totalizing ethical program has encouraged other scholars of Islam to emphasize the plurality and ambivalence of “Muslim” ethical subjectivities. Mahmood’s critique of the modern ideal and practice of religious freedom has had a similarly complex effect. Some authors have endorsed

her characterization of religious freedom as an instrument of liberal governance premised on the privatization and marginalization of the religious – which is to say, ultimately, a denial of freedom itself (Shakman Hurd 2015). Other researchers, however, have responded to Mahmood’s critique by emphasizing that even in the “liberal” West the ideal of freedom has assumed varied, even contradictory forms. As the American ethical philosopher, Michael Sandel, has brilliantly argued, the Kantian ideal of freedom, with its stipulation that autonomy requires a human subject to be free of “tradition” and any other identity encumbrances, was always just one of the “West’s” ways of imagining freedom. Non-Kantian ethical democrats like Sandel himself urge us to recognize ethical experience as a process of reflexive social engagement thoroughly “entangled” (Lempert 2013:273) with a broader way of life, and experienced not in the solitude of an autonomous individual but by a human subject “encumbered” by an identity acquired in the course of “a way of life with which my identity is bound” (Sandel 1984:94).

In these and other discussions, we are reminded that Mahmood’s pioneering critique of the Kantian model of ethical liberalism has led anthropologists and others to emphasize that a variety of freedom different from that invoked by Mahmood has also figured in the shaping of modern “Western” societies and subjectivities. Other scholars have argued even more boldly that such a non-Kantian freedom may even be a condition of the possibility of ethical subjectivity (Decosimo 2018; Laidlaw 2014).

RELIGIOUS (UN)FREEDOM IN A SECULAR AGE

In the years following publication of *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood dedicated herself to varied scholarly and public intellectual projects. However, no topic occupied her attention as much as the question of religious freedom and social difference in our late modern age. Here

again, Talal Asad's interventions fifteen years earlier had laid some of the foundation for Mahmood's inquiry. In particular, she grounded her anti-liberal project on the Asadian premise that the modern category of secularism has less to do with the decline or disappearance of religion, as once forecast by secularization theory, than it did the emergence and hegemonization of new concepts of "religion," ethics, "and "liberal" state politics (Asad 2003:2-3). "Modernity is a *project*... that certain people in power seek to achieve," Asad had written (2003: 14-15). And the key feature of that project is that, "The secularist concedes that religious beliefs and sentiments might be acceptable at a personal and private level but insists that organized religion, being founded on authority and constraint, has always posed a danger to the freedom of the self as well as to the freedom of others" (Asad 1999: 181).

The *Politics of Piety* had already invoked some of these Asadian themes. Her first book touched directly on these issues, for example, when it proclaimed that the Egyptian piety movement had emerged "in response to the perception that religious knowledge, as a means of organizing daily conduct, had become increasingly marginalized under modern strictures of secular governance" (2005: 4). However, what was a secondary theme in the *Politics of Piety* became primary in her *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (2016). From the latter book's opening pages, Mahmood signals that her concern is with the ideal and reality of freedom, and in particular "the increasingly precarious situation of non-Muslim minorities in the modern Middle East" (2016:1), not least with regard to Coptic Christians in Egypt. "In the postcolonial period Coptic Christians have come to be treated as second-class citizens and have come to suffer various forms of social and political discrimination" (ibid.). However, whereas some analysts might attribute the deteriorating situation of religious minorities in countries like Egypt or Iraq to the divide-and-conquer tactics of authoritarian rulers or, alternately, extremists

fanning the flames of sectarianism for the purposes of anti-system mobilization (Hadiz 2016), Mahmood places most of the blame for anti-minority violence on the “counterintuitive effect” of secular governance. In particular, rather than damping religious tensions, “modern secular governance has contributed to the exacerbation of religious tensions in postcolonial Egypt [and much of the global south], hardening interfaith boundaries and polarizing religious differences” (Mahmood 2016:1). The reasons for this had to do with the hidden cunning of the secularist episteme:

“Secularism has an inescapable character that emanates... from the structure of the modern liberal state, which promises to demolish religious hierarchies in order to create a body politic in which all its members are equal before the law....[I]ts claim to religious neutrality notwithstanding, the modern state has become involved in the regulation and management of religious life to an unprecedented degree, thereby embroiling the state in substantive issues of religious doctrine and practice....[D]espite the commitment to leveling religious differences in the political sphere, modern secular governance transforms... preexisting interfaith inequalities, allowing them to flourish in society, and hence for religion to striate national identity and public norms” (Mahmood 2016:2).

Several things stand out from this bold statement. The first is that the manner of discursive analysis deployed is strikingly different from the experience-near portraits of pietist hope, speech, and action so exquisitely presented in the *Politics of Piety*. In other words, the focus is not reflexive deliberation and virtue-ethics action, but grand-scheme meta-discourses constructing state, society, and subjectivity on the hither side of reflexive awareness, in a manner closer to that James Laidlaw (2014:5) associates more with a Bourdieu-ian “science of

unfreedom” than with the reflexive freedom highlighted in the late-life writings of Michel Foucault, writings on which Laidlaw draws for his anthropology of ethics.

Second, portrayed as a made-in-the-West discourse projected across the global south, the characterization of secular governance as uniform in its disciplinary effects differs profoundly from the research findings on secularism presented by scholars as varied as Alfred Stepan (2011), Rajeev Bhargava (2011), and Ahmet Kuru (2011). In a comparative analysis of “multiple secularisms,” Stepan speaks for all of these authors in arguing that the form state-society-religion relations take in different societies is heterogeneous because locally contingent; there is no “fixed normative model” (Stepan 2011:114) governing secularism and subjectivities around the world – not least one premised on religion’s privatization behind a high wall of secularist separation (cf. Fox 2008).

The third and equally striking feature of this passage is that, by placing such causal weight on a putative governing discourse in the modern nation state, the analysis adopts a state-centric and totalizing approach to power and discourse that overlooks the ways in which political and ethical contestations in society may feedback on and subvert official discourses. A related theme of the ability of “uncivil” trends in society to challenge and transform the foundational normativities of the late-modern “democratic” state has figured prominently in analyses of sectarianism and majoritarian violence in formally democratic societies like India (Hansen 1999) and Indonesia (Hadiz 2016), and in analyses of the ascent of Islamophobia and right-wing populism in Western Europe and the United States (Mouffe 2005).

CONCLUSION: LEGACY TENSIONS

One of the trademarks of path-breaking scholarship is that it is as important for the theoretical controversy it generates as the conclusions it offers. Mahmood intervened brilliantly in the fields of Islamic studies, feminist theory, and the anthropology of ethics and subjectivity at a time when the long-regnant truths of Geertzian anthropology had been put aside. While building on the pioneering scholarship of Talal Asad, Mahmood wove these concerns together into her own highly original theoretical project.

Like many great analysts, however, Mahmood's scholarship was torn between different ethical and epistemological visions. The most striking had to do with the tension between, on one hand, the fine-grained ethnography of human hope and aspiration at the core of her analyses of ethical subject formation among Egyptian pietists, and, on the other, broad-stroke analyses of disciplines and powers assumed to be totalizing, freedom-denying, and pan-civilizational in their reach. Foremost among the latter was her analysis of political secularism, conceived as "the modern state's sovereign power to reorganize substantive features of religious life, stipulating what religion is or ought to be, assigning its proper content, and disseminating concomitant subjectivities, ethical frameworks, and quotidian practices" (Mahmood 2016: 3).

Readers of Saba Mahmood will reach their own conclusions as to which of these theoretical visions is likely to be the most enduring. But all involved in the study of contemporary Islam are in Mahmood's debt for the range and depth of her scholarship, and the ways in which she wove diverse fields – gender theory, the anthropology of Islam, theories of identity and ethical subjectivity – into a brilliant intellectual program.

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