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interview

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modern power and the reconfiguration of religious traditions

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Contemporary politico-religious movements, such as Islamism, are often understood by social scientists as expressions of tradition hampering the progress of modernity. But given the recent intellectual challenges posed against dualistic and static conceptions of modernity/tradition, and calls for parochializing Western European experiences of modernity, do you think the religio-political movements (such as Islamism) force us to rethink our conceptions of modernity? If so, how?

Well, I think they should force us to rethink many things. There has been a certain amount of response from people in Western universities who are interested in analyzing these movements. But many of them still make assumptions that prevent them from questioning aspects of Western modernity. For example, they call these movements "reactionary" or "invented," making the assumption that Western modernity is not only the standard by which all contemporary developments must be judged, but also the only authentic trajectory for every tradition. One of the things the existence of such movements ought to bring into question is the old opposition between modernity and tradition, which is still fashionable. For example, many writers describe the movements in Iran and Egypt as only partly modern and suggest that its their mixing of tradition and modernity that accounts for their "pathological" character. This kind of description paints Islamic movements as being somehow inauthentically traditional on the assumption that "real tradition" is unchanging, repetitive, and non-rational. In this way, these movements cannot be understood on their own terms as being at once modern and traditional, both authentic and creative at the same time. The development of politico-religious movements ought to force people to rethink the uniquely Western model of secular modernity. One may want to challenge aspects of these movements, but this ought to be done on specific grounds. It won't do to measure everything by grand conceptions of authentic modernity. But that's precisely the kind of *a priori* thinking that many people indulge in when analyzing contemporary religious movements.

It seems that you are using the term tradition differently here than it is commonly understood in the humanities and social sciences. Even the idea of "hybrid societies/cultures," which has gained ascendancy in certain

intellectual circles, implies a coexistence of modern and traditional elements without necessarily decentering the normative meaning of these concepts.

Yes, many writers do describe certain societies as hybrids, part modern and part traditional. I don't agree with them, however. I think that one needs to recognize that when one talks about tradition, one should be talking about, in a sense, a dimension of social life and not a stage of social development. In an important sense, tradition and modernity are not really two mutually exclusive states of a culture or society but different aspects of historicity. Many of the things that are thought of as modern belong to traditions which have their roots in Western history. A changing tradition is often developing rapidly but a tradition nevertheless. When people talk about liberalism as a tradition, they recognize that it is a tradition in which there are possibilities of argument, reformulation, and encounter with other traditions, that there is a possibility of addressing contemporary problems through the liberal tradition. So one thinks of liberalism as a tradition central to modernity. How is it that one has something that is a tradition but that is also central to modernity? Clearly, liberalism is not a mixture of the traditional and the modern. It is a tradition that defines one central aspect of Western modernity. It is no less modern by virtue of being a tradition than anything else is modern. It has its critics, both within the West and outside, but it is perhaps the dominant tradition of political and moral thought and practice. And yet this is not the way in which most social scientists have talked about so-called "traditional" societies/cultures in the non-European world generally, and in the Islamic world in particular. So this is partly what I mean when I say that we must rethink the concept of tradition. In this sense, I think, we can regard the contemporary Islamic revival as consisting of attempts at articulating Islamic traditions that are adequate to the modern condition as experienced in the Muslim world, but also as attempts at formulating encounters with Western as well as Islamic history. This doesn't mean that they succeed. But at least they try in different ways.

In discussing different historical experiences of modernity, are you suggesting that there are also different kinds of modernities? There is a certain centrality to the project of modernity that scholars like Foucault have described and analyzed. How does one reconcile the European model of modernity, that modernization theorists and their critics alike pose, with different historical and cultural experiences of modernity?

In the first place, given that we are situated in contemporary Western society, and given that we are in a world in which "the West" is hegemonic, the term modernity already possesses a certain positive valence. Many of its opponents-- for example, the so-called postmodernists-- to some extent have a defensive strategy towards what they think of as the central values of modernity. Very few postmodernist critics of modernity would be willing to argue against social equality, free speech, or individual self-fashioning. In fact, the very term "postmodernity" incorporates "modernity" as a stage in a distinct trajectory. So it may be a tactical matter in some cases to argue that there are multiple forms of modernity rather than contrasting modernity itself with something else. In other words, the equation of a specific Western history (which is specific and particular by definition) with something that at the same time claims to be universal and has become globalized is something that to my mind isn't sufficiently well thought out. An ideological weight is given to modernity as a universal model, even when it is merely a form of Westernization.

I think that at one level there is the problem of conceptualizing modernity as a term that refers to a whole set of disparate tendencies, attitudes, traditions, structures, and practices--some of which may be integrally related and some not. At times, people think of modernity as a certain kind of social structure (industrialization, secularization, democracy, etc.), and sometimes as a psychological experience (e.g., Simmel on "The Metropolis and Modern Life"), or as an aesthetic posture (e.g., Baudelaire on "The Painter of Modern Life"). Sometimes modernity is thought of as a certain kind of a philosophical project (in the Habermasian sense) and sometimes as a post-Kantian universal ethics. Do they all *necessarily* hang together? There is an implicit assumption that they do--that just because certain aspects of "modernity" ("modern" science, politics, ethics, etc.) have gone together historically in parts of Europe, all of these things must and should go together in the rest of the world as well. A curious kind of functionalism is actually at work in this assumption. Whereas in other contexts social scientists have become skeptical of functionalism, this doesn't seem to be the case here.

Part of the problem is deciding whether "modernity" is a single tradition, a singular structure, or an integrated set of practical knowledges. And if things go together, then does this mean that what we have is a moral imperative or a pragmatic fit? In other words: what criteria are we using when we call a person, a way of life, or a society, "modern"? Where do these criteria come from? Are they simply descriptive or normative? And if they are descriptive, then do they relate to some immutable essence? If they are normative, then on what authority? Such questions need to be worked through before we can decide meaningfully whether there are varieties of modernity and, if there is only one kind of modernity, then whether it is separable from Westernization or not. I have not encountered a satisfactory answer to this question, either by social scientists or philosophers.

Now, when Foucault talks about modernity, he is speaking quite specifically about a development in Western history. He is really not interested in the history of the non-Western world, of the West's encounter with that heterogeneous world. And he is not interested in different traditions. As you know, his emphasis is on breaks rather than continuities. It is possible to think of these breaks, of course, as occurring in certain kinds of continuities, and to some extent Foucault understood that. Otherwise, he would not have pushed his investigation into modernity back to early Christian and Greek beliefs and practices. This inquiry brought him to a conception of the Western tradition, with all its ruptures and breaks, although he didn't think systematically about "tradition" as such.

You also argue in your book Genealogies of Religion that modernity, by definition, is a teleological project in its desire to remake history, the nation, and the future. You argue that "actions seeking to maintain the local status quo are therefore always resisting the future."[1] Could you please speak to what you meant by this?

I meant that ironically, of course. I think what I said was that actions that only maintain the status quo--to conserve daily life--are not thought of as "making history," however long such efforts take. And movements which could be branded as "reactionary" were by definition trying "to resist the future" or "to turn the clock back." The point is that the advocates and defenders of Western modernity are explicitly committed to a certain kind of historicity, a

temporal movement of social life in which "the future" pulls us forward. The idea is that, in some measure, "the future" represents something that can be anticipated and *should* be desired, and that at least *the direction* of that desirable future is known. The "future" becomes a kind of moral magnet, out there, pulling us toward itself. On the one hand, humans are thought of as having the freedom to shape their own (collective) destiny. On the other hand, "history," as an autonomous movement, has its own momentum, and those who act on a different assumption are thought of as being either morally blameworthy or practically self-defeating--or both. The concept of history-making relates to this grand and somewhat contradictory idea. And all societies--including non- Western ones--are judged by the phrases you quote. I briefly mentioned the frequent derogatory references to the situation in what has happened and is happening in Iran, to cargo cults, etc. My point is not that one should not criticize--or even denounce--what has happened and is happening in Iran, say. My point is that most people who do so are also employing a very peculiar notion of "history" and "history-making."

In discussing the relationship between Western and non-Western experiences of modernity, two different traditions of argument come to mind: the school of dependency theory in the 1970s and post-colonial theory more recently, of which the Subaltern Studies project from South Asia is an important part. It seems that whereas the dependency theorists had emphasized how Western modernity had effected and arrested the development of non-Western societies, post-colonial theorists (like Chatterjee, Prakash, and Chakrabarty) focus on the cultural and historical specificity of non-Western experiences of modernity. Chatterjee, for example, makes the point that privileging the Western-European liberal experience often occludes conceptions of polity and community that are an integral part of non-Western societies but remain untheorized in both radical and liberal analyses of modernity. How do you see the relationship between these two traditions of thought and their implications for understanding culturally and historically specific experiences of modernity?

Well, of course, the West is what it is in large part because of its relationship to the non-West, and vice versa. And if by Western modernity one means the economies, politics, and knowledges characteristic of European countries, then much of this is incomprehensible without reference to Europe's links with the non-European world. In its own way, this point was made by the so-called dependency theorists concerned with Third-World development. But one must not exaggerate this point. What I mean is that there are certain experiences that have nothing to do with the West/non-West relationship. After all, the term "non-West" is simply a negative term. It's important to keep this relationship in mind, but in itself it tells us very little about all the things it covers. There are experiences that have to do with other kinds of relationships, such as the relationship of a given people to a distinctive past.

I think whether certain societies can or cannot develop economically was an argument that was carried on by dependency theorists on the basis of certain economic models that had certain indicators, so that one was clear what the aim was supposed to be. So, many of the people who argued against modernization theorists said that economic development was not possible in the peripheral countries given their links with the core capitalist countries. People who belonged to the dependency tradition tended to argue over whether it made sense to try to break those links, skip the capitalist stage, and go straight for socialist development, or to make a strategic alliance with national capitalists, which was necessary for full economic development. (This was a repeat, of course, of the old Bolshevik/Menshivik dispute.) But the

argument, anyway, was not about *where* all the countries should end up. The common assumption was that there were several roads to Rome but there was, of course, only one Rome. When one got to moral and cultural issues, this assumption became more difficult to sustain.

Whereas in the West political debate *about* liberal-democratic states more or less takes for granted where things are *now*, discussion about the Third World tends to be about where politics and morality *ought to be heading*. This is what needs to be noticed. Even when it is agreed that there are all kinds of changes that would improve conditions in Western societies (urban poverty, racism, etc.), it is usually assumed that this is the best of all possible political systems. The claim seems to be: yes, we do have racism, but where isn't there racism? At least we in the West have a system in which some kind of political fight for racial equality is possible, whereas other political systems don't allow this. The assumption, you see, is that even if the changes needed to eliminate the massive poverty, institutionalized racism, international power-play, etc. were effected, it would still be the same political system. And if a radically new future is desired, it is assumed that this is reachable only through the present Western "modern" system. Western "modernity" is, therefore, thought to be pregnant with positive futures in a way that no other cultural condition is. That wasn't explicit in the old argument about dependency, because the focus there was on the conditions for a productive industrial economy, which would, therefore, increase the possibilities of general wealth and material welfare. That was what "modernity" meant to dependency theorists (or to those who deliberately used this concept). Now it tends to mean a system of government (representative democracy, periodic elections, parliamentary pressure groups, continuous polls, controlled media presentations, etc.) and individualism in morality, law, aesthetics, etc. The emphasis on the individual as voter, moral personality, and consumer--whether of state or market goods--is certainly central to the liberal version of modernity. But so, too, is a faith in a boundless future. (That is not, by the way, the same thing as saying "a faith in limitless growth," which is not fashionable anymore.)

Chatterjee is absolutely right in pointing out that liberal modernity doesn't pay adequate attention to the idea of community. That has been the complaint of socialists (and of conservatives, of course). Even some liberals who were influenced by Hegel argued against unfettered contractarian individualism (Green and Bosanquet, for example). But I think we need to historicize the idea of community. At any rate, we shouldn't allow ourselves to be locked into the binary "individualism versus communitarianism" argument. This confrontation of principles sounds fundamental only because the language of liberalism has already acquired a hegemonic status.

Are different options really possible in this matter? Or will today's powerful countries force the rest of the world to adopt the only "sensible" and "decent" model--i.e., political, economic, and moral liberalism? I don't know. It's one thing to say that we ought not to accept their definition of "modernity" as binding on us. It's another thing to claim that we possess the material and moral resources to resist effectively and to create our own options--regardless of whether we wish to call these options "modern" or not.

In studying specific cultures, you have emphasized the necessity of using theoretical concepts that are relevant to

the practices and assumptions of those cultures. Your work on religion, in this regard, is similar to the subalternist historian Dipesh Chakrabarty's work on Indian working-class movements, insofar he has criticized the concept of class consciousness in its inability to account for non-liberal solidarities and alliances that are not hegemonically structured by the ideology of liberal-humanism. To what extent do you think the task of analyzing politico-religious movements (such as Islamism) is hampered by a similar problem of deploying inadequate conceptual categories?

One of the valuable things that post-modernism has done is to help us be skeptical of "grand narratives." Once we get out of the habit of seeing everything in relation to the universal path to the future which the West has supposedly discovered, then it may be possible to describe things in their own terms. This is an eminently anthropological enterprise, too. The anthropologist must describe ways of life in appropriate terms. To begin with, at least, this means terms intrinsic to the social practices, beliefs, movements, and traditions of the people being referred to and not in relation to some supposed future the people are moving towards. These "intrinsic terms" are not the only ones that can be used-- of course not. But the concepts of people themselves must be taken as central in any adequate understanding of their life. This is why Chakrabarty rightly criticizes the use of categories, such as class-consciousness, where they don't make sense to the people themselves.

I repeat: That's not to say that we should *never* employ terms that don't immediately make sense to the people being studied. The trouble with using notions like "class-consciousness" for explanatory purposes is that you take for granted that a particular kind of historical change is normative. Political opposition, political activity is "more developed" if it is organized in terms of class-consciousness and "less developed" if it is not. Marxism tends to see class politics as essential to modernity and "modernity" as the most developed form of civilized society.

Once we set that grand narrative, that normative history, aside, we can start by asking not, "What should such-and-such a people be doing?" but, "What do they aim at doing? And why?". We can learn to elaborate that question in historically specific terms. This certainly applies to our attempts to understand politico-religious movements, especially Islamic movements. It is foolish, I think, to ask: "Why are these movements not moving in the direction History requires them to?". But that is precisely what is being asked when scholars say: "What leads the people in these movements to behave so irrationally, in such a reactionary manner?".

Given our discussion about polity and community, in what ways do you think the contemporary Islamist movements represent a vision of polity that is distinct from regnant conceptions of the nation, political debate, and consensus?

A different vision of polity. That is an aspect of Islamist thinking that requires much more original work. I feel that there is a need to rethink the nature of the political in a far more radical way than Islamic movements seem to have done. To a great extent, there has been an acceptance of the modernizing state (and the model of the Western state) and a translation of its projects into Islamist terms. Often Islamists simply subscribe to the parameters of the modern nation- state, adding only that it be controlled by a virtuous body

of Muslims. A much more radical idea is needed before we can say that Islamists have a vision of a distinctive kind of polity.

However, I don't want to exaggerate the homogeneity of these movements. There have been some interesting schematic attempts at rethinking. For example, the Tunisian Islamic leader Ghannushi, who is banned from Tunis, has recently argued for the political institutionalization of multiple interpretations of the founding texts. In one sense, the institutionalization of divergent interpretations is already a part of the Islamic tradition (both Sunni and Shi`a). But, if I understand him correctly, Ghannushi is trying to politicize that traditional arrangement and make it more fluid, more open to negotiation. Starting from the classic distinction between the essential body of the text, on the one hand, and its commentaries (i.e., "consequences"--what follows), on the other, he argues that the latter be brought into the political arena. This would involve the electorate being asked to vote for or against the policies that flow from given interpretations--and always having the option of changing its mind about them. In other words, the *political implications* of an interpretation (not all "the meanings" of the text itself) would be open to acceptance or rejection like any other proposed legislation or project. This clearly needs to be much more elaborately developed and clarified if it is to make political sense.

Are elements of this kind of thinking part of the Islamic discursive tradition?

I certainly think they are. That's what *ijtihad,* the principle of original reasoning from within the tradition, is all about. There is a lot of talk about *ijtihad* nowadays among Muslims, but too often it's used as a device to bring Islamic tradition in line with modern liberal values for no good reason. I believe it ought to be used to argue with other Muslims within the tradition and to try to formulate solutions to problems that are recognized as problems for the tradition by other Muslims.

You discuss in your work the practice of nasiha in Saudi Arabia, as an example of public critique within the Islamic tradition, which is quite distinct from the liberal notion of public criticism.[2] Can you speak to that, given your comments on the limits and possibilities of specific traditions of thought?

Yes, *nasiha* is different from liberal notions of public criticism. For example, it doesn't constitute a right to criticize the monarch and/or political regime but an obligation. Similarly, the business of criticism is not restricted only to those expressly qualified--the educated and enlightened few. It's something that every Muslim has the duty to undertake, and whose theory the *`ulama* must continually reconsider and discuss for each time and place. It is, therefore, a form of criticism that is internal to a tradition. That is to say, only someone who has been educated in that tradition, who has been taught what "appropriate Islamic practices" are, can undertake it properly. This is not a criticism that anyone coming from the outside, a total stranger, say, armed with a fine sense of logical argument and a set of universal moral principles, can carry out. So it is quite different from the notion of abstract and generalized criticism that has to be confined to the enlightened, literate members of a polity.

So are you suggesting that there are traditions that can continue their own trajectory of debate, without

necessarily coming into conversation with other parallel traditions--in this case the Western-liberal tradition of political and public critique?

No, that is not what I'm saying. My point, first of all, is that *nasiha*, in the way that I described it in my book, is a form of criticism that can only be mounted if the critic is familiar with the relevant tradition that provides the standards defining Islamic practices and also with the specific social conditions in which those standards are to be applied. But when social conditions change, the standards often have to be extended or modified. In the case I discuss, this process is closely connected with the development of the modern Saudi state. Many of the practices in that state are modeled on the practices of the modern nation-state. This also applies to various aspects of "private life." In other words, the new social conditions are beginning to include aspects of Western political traditions. Wahhabi religious discourse is, therefore, involved in a complex process of appropriating and rejecting parts of those traditions. Thus, even though the principles of *nasiha* still remain distinctive, and quite different from Enlightenment principles, the scope and objective of *nasiha* has changed very significantly. That's not exactly what I would call a "conversation" with another tradition, but it is certainly an engagement with it. I can't see how any non-Western tradition today can escape some sort of an engagement with Western modernity. Because aspects of Western modernity have come to be embodied in the life of non-European societies.

Do you think that the post-Reformation Protestant conception of religion, as an internal belief system that has little to do with arranging political and social life, influenced or transformed the character of Islamic debates in this century? If so, in what ways?

Well, I think to some extent they have--where Islamic reform movements have adopted standards of rationality from modern Western discourses or even where Muslim apologists claim that Islam does quite well when properly measured by Western standards of justice and decency. This influence is also evident whenever the *shari`a* is made compatible with Western law and practice and is subjected to institutions of the modern state. And the modern state gives rise to two quite distinct movements--those for whom religious faith is something that fits into "private space" (in both the legal and the psychological sense), and those for whom the "public functions" of the modern state must be captured by men with religious faith.

It has often been argued that the tradition of liberalism is based upon principles of pluralism and tolerance in ways that Islamic tradition is not, and that the concept of plurality remains foreign to Islam. How would you respond to that?

Well, I would say that it is certainly not a modern, liberal invention. The plurality of individual interests is what the liberal tradition has theorized best of all. On the other hand, the attempt to get some kind of representation for ethnic groups and minorities in Western countries has been difficult for liberalism to theorize. Liberalism has theories of tolerance by which spaces can be created for individuals to do what they wish, so long as they don't obstruct the ability of others to do likewise. But these aren't theories of pluralism in the sense we are beginning to understand the term today. Liberalism has theories of multiple "interests," interests which can be equalized, aggregated, and calculated through the electoral

process and then negotiated in the process of formulating and applying governmental policies. But that is a very different kind of pluralism from the different ways of life which are *(a)* the preconditions and not the objects of individual interests, and which are, *(b)* in the final analysis, incommensurable.

Now the Islamic tradition, like many other non-liberal traditions, is based on the notion of plural social groupings and plural religious traditions--especially (but not only) of the Abrahamic traditions [*ahl al-kitab*]. And, of course, it has always accommodated a plurality of scriptural interpretations. There is a well- known dictum in the *shari`a: ikhtilaf al-umma rahma* [difference within the Islamic tradition is a blessing]. This is where the notions of *ijtihad* and *ijm`a* come in. As modes of developing and sustaining the Islamic tradition, they authorize the construction of coherent differences, not the imposition of homogeneity.

Of course there are always limits to difference if coherence is to be aimed at. If tolerance is not merely another name for indifference, there comes a point in every tradition beyond which difference cannot be tolerated. That simply means that there are differences which can't be accommodated within the tradition without threatening its very coherence. But there are, of course, many moments and conditions of such intolerance. One must not, therefore, equate intolerance with violence and cruelty.

On the whole, Muslim societies in the past have been much more accommodating of pluralism in the sense I have tried to outline than have European societies. It does not follow that they are therefore necessarily better. And I certainly don't wish to imply that Muslim rulers and populations were never prejudiced, that they never persecuted non-Muslims in their midst. My point is only that "the concept of plurality," as you put it, is not foreign to Islam.

Talking of pluralities of interpretations within the Islamic tradition, some scholars make a distinction between the Sufi [mystical] and Salafi [reformist] tradition within Islam. You have criticized the ways in which these two traditions are often mapped onto rural/urban, folk/elite, and oral/scriptural dichotomies, respectively.[3] Yet it is hard to deny the substantial differences between Sufi and Salafi thought. How can one fruitfully engage with these differences without falling into simplistic dichotomies?

Unfortunately, people continue to make these simplistic contrasts. It is true that for some sections of the Islamic tradition, such as the Hanbali tradition that is officially dominant in Saudi Arabia today, Sufism is thought to be quite different from what is defined as the central Islamic tradition. But the definition of the central Islamic tradition according to Saudi Hanbalis is not, strictly speaking, a Salafi one either. Wahhabi Islam has a specific connection with a particular state--even when it constitutes a contemporary language of opposition to the regime. This is a complicated question, and I don't want to get into details here. All I want to say here is that it's not as if there were only two options in Islam-- Sufi or Salafi. For reformers like Muhammad `Abduh, these were not mutually exclusive categories. `Abduh, one of the founders of the *Salafiyya* [reform] movement, always accepted the Sufi tradition. Certain aspects of his relationship with Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, including the Sufi language of love in which they sometimes communicated, can only be explained in terms of their familiarity with Sufism. `Abduh thought that certain kinds of reform were necessary for

contemporary Islam, but he regarded these as compatible with Sufi thought and values. This was not a new attitude. The great medieval reformer, Imam Ghazali, was at once a scripturalist (an elitist, if you like) and a Sufi.

I think that most Salafi reformers would be critical of Sufism when it transgressed one of the basic doctrines of Islam: the separation between God and human beings. I've heard criticism of Sufi practices that seemed to imply the possibility of complete union with God as opposed to the possibility of complete openness to God. I think that that is the crucial point for many people who are critical of Sufism.

There is, incidentally, an interesting debate that occurred in the eighteenth century between Muhammad `Abd al-Wahhab (the Arabian reformer) and the chief *qadi* of Tunisia (whose name escapes me) about the so-called worship of saints' tombs which some reformers see as a feature of the Sufi tradition. The argument is over whether the frequenting of tombs and the invoking of saintly blessing constitutes *`ibada* [worship] or *ziyara* [visitation]. The *qadi* argues that this is not a case of *`ibada*, for the very reason that visitation to the Prophet's tomb at Mecca is not *`ibada*. The Prophet, after all, can't be worshipped (worship is reserved for God alone), but visiting his tomb is an act of piety that elicits blessing. I don't think that `Abd al-Wahab was persuaded by this argument, but there was an argument. The denunciation by some sections of the Islamic movement of other Muslims as *kufar* [infidels; sing. *kafir*] is, of course, a termination of argument. Even worse, it is a quasi-legal judgment which carries serious penalties.

It is curious that those in Islamic movements who declare other Muslims to be kufar are also the ones who argue that the door of ijtihad [exercise of independent judgment in a theological question] is open in Islam. Yet the entire idea of ijtihad, as an exercise in debate and reconsideration of scholarly argument, seems to contradict the kind of closure entailed in declaring someone a kafir.

Many Muslims would not accept, of course, that *ijtihad* is open to the introduction of new interpretations. Incidentally, among Sunnis, *ijtihad* is much more a central part of traditional Hanabli doctrine than of other schools-- for them the gate of *ijtihad* was never closed. But although they are open to the principle of *ijtihad*, they are hostile to what they regard as its arbitrary use. They are similar, in some ways, to the Khawarij in the seventh century who were prepared to call other Muslims *kufar*, even to make war on them. They decided that certain things were open to *ijtihad* and others were not. To talk about some things in the light of *ijtihad* was simply to open the door to *kufr* [infidelity]. So it is a question of where you draw the conceptual boundaries, and what action follows from the way you draw those boundaries.

In examining world traditions, theorists of religion have often contrasted deistic religiosity with a "traditional" sensibility that emphasizes, for example, correct bodily practices, literal understandings of texts, etc. Deism, on the other hand, is associated with an abstract understanding of the idea of divinity, sacred texts, and general principles of a religious doctrine. Evolutionary models of religious theory associate deism with a post-Enlightenment conception of religion, of which Post-Reformation Christianity is considered paradigmatic, and Islam, Hinduism, and certain forms of Judaism are associated with a literalist understanding of religion.[4] Even if we reject an evolutionary model of religious development in history, there are obvious differences in the

focus on correct bodily practices in some of these religious traditions. Given your emphasis on historicizing the concept of religion, and on the inimical relationship between religious discourse and bodily practices (particularly in medieval Christianity), what do you suggest are some ways to engage with this characterization of religious traditions as deist and/or literalist?

I think this is a false opposition, because abstract principles and ideas are also integral to various Islamic, Judaic, and pre-Reformation Christian traditions. Abstract ideas are relevant not only for theology, they are important also for programs aiming to teach embodied practices. I talk about these programs in *Genealogies of Religion.* In this sense abstract ideas are not opposed to embodied practices. This point applies to the way Christian virtues are developed in the monastic context, and it applies equally to the way *nasiha* constitutes an embodied practice, as I try to show in my book. The point is that, in contemporary Protestant Christianity (and other religions now modeled on it), it is more important to have the right *belief* than to carry out specific prescribed practices. It is not that belief in every sense of the word was irrelevant in the Christian past, or irrelevant to Islamic tradition. It is that belief has now become a purely inner, private state of mind, a particular state of mind detached from everyday practices. But although it is in this sense "internal," belief has also become the object of systematic discourse, such that the system of statements about belief is now held to constitute the essence of "religion," a construction that makes it possible to compare and evaluate different "religions." These systematic statements, these texts, are now the real public form of "religion."

So I think the contrast one should make is between the development of prescribed moral-religious capabilities, which involve the cultivation of certain bodily attitudes (including emotions), the disciplined cultivation of habits, aspirations, desires, on one hand, and on the other hand, a more abstracted set of belief-statements, "texts" that contain meanings and define the core of the religion.

Now, insofar as certain modern forms of religiosity have been identified with sets of abstracted belief-statements which have barely anything to do with people's actual lives, you get the curious phenomenon of Christians, non- Christians, and atheists allegedly believing in or rejecting religion, but living the same kind of life. Now, if this is the case, then clearly it is different from embodied practices of various kinds. I think the important contrast to bear in mind is the difference between this kind of intellectualized abstracted system of doctrines that has no direct bearing on or relationship to forms of embodied practices, and lives that are organized around gradually learning and perfecting correct moral and religious practices. The former kind of religiosity is much more a feature of modern religion in Europe and, indeed, a part of what religion is defined to be: a set of belief-statements that makes it possible to compare one religion to another and to judge the validity--even the sense--of such abstract statements. This state of affairs is radically opposed to one in which correct practice is essential to the development of religious virtues and is itself an essential religious virtue. After all, while you can talk about certain belief- statements as being credible or non-credible, true or false, rational or irrational, you can't really talk like that about embodied practices. Practices aren't statements. As Austin pointed out in *How to Do Things with Words,* they are performatives and not constatives. We do not say of performatives that they are believable or unbelievable. We inquire, instead, as to whether they are well done or badly

done; effectively done or ineffectively done. So different kinds of questions arise in these two contexts. That is the opposition one has to bear in mind, and that is partly what my two chapters on monastic discipline are about.[5]

In Islam, this is what matters, and if Muslims simply argue about whether or not a particular doctrine is "true Islam," and if the answer to that question makes no difference to how they learn to live, how they develop distinctive Islamic virtues, then it makes no difference whether that doctrine is the same as Christianity or not, because the way in which they *live* is the same, or pretty much the same. That is the point one has to bear in mind. The crucial question, it seems to me, is this: Are there practical rules and principles aimed at developing a distinctive set of virtues (articulated by *din* [religion]) which relate to how one structures one's life? That is what I mean by embodied practices.

Since you mostly focus on medieval Christianity in your book, I am curious if you think that this sense of embodied practice also exists in parts of the contemporary Islamic world, where the cultivation of correct bodily practices actually modifies the way people live on a daily basis?

Yes, I think it does in some areas. I tried to describe some aspects of that in the context of the Wahhabi concept and practice of morality,[6] as opposed to post-Kantian conceptions of morality. In varying degrees, you continue to have this sense of morality in parts of the Muslim world, although it is gradually becoming eroded there as elsewhere. I think that, in a way, the recent Islamist movements have a sense that the pursuit of correct bodily practices is important and has to be somehow reinstituted where it has eroded, and protected wherever it exists. Unfortunately, Islamists often tend to link the maintenance of these practices to the demand for a modernizing Islamic state. This seems to me very problematic for all sorts of reasons. Anyway, the learning of these moral capabilities did not originally depend on the existence of a modernizing state. Yet now most Islamic movements are concerned to capture the center that the modern state represents, instead of trying to cut across or dissolve it.

In closing, I would like to address aspects of your work that are perhaps most controversial given the present focus on resistance and agency in sections of academic scholarship. One of the more provocative things you criticize in your book, for example, is the tendency, among social scientists, to analyze relationships of domination through a dualism of repression and consent.[7] Given that you find such an approach problematic, what other options are there for us to think about relationships of domination--if not through concepts of repression and consent?

Well, what underlies my objection to this duality is that the repression/domination model is based on the assumption that something called consciousness is essential for explaining social structures and transformations. I discuss this point briefly in my introduction to *The Genealogies of Religion.* Two kinds of consciousness are posited (one is the forced/oppressed kind of consciousness and the other is the consenting consciousness), and it is assumed that domination, for example, is to be explained in terms either of force or of consent. What this overlooks is something that, incidentally, is one of the basic insights of Marx, and what I have elsewhere called, rather unsatisfactorily, "structures of exclusion." The fact is that there are certain situations in which you simply have no options but to do certain kinds of things.

By this I don't mean that you are forced to, but simply that this is what the options are; or at least the "force" is not a matter of oppression but of circumstance. It is more like the situation in which one considers the kinds of move possible in a game of chess in which you oblige your opponent to make certain moves and prevent him/her from making other moves. In other words, there are certain circumstances and conditions which may or may not be immediately available to the consciousness of the person engaged in those activities but which constrain and structure the possibilities of his/her own actions. Whether such actions are undertaken reluctantly or gladly is another matter. But what is crucial here is: what it is that one is, in a sense, obliged to do by the structuration of conditions and possibilities, not the consciousness with which one does them, and the gladness, anger, or resentment with which one does them. This doesn't mean, of course, that people have no consciousness. It means that we are looking at the wrong thing if we look to consciousness to understand the changing patterns of our lives. For that, we ought to be looking at the circumstances by which possibilities are patterned and re-shaped.

But one may argue, in the name of the subject, that this a structuralist position that leaves no room for human agency--even though you draw a distinction between agency and subject. How would you answer the criticism that your analysis is over-determinist and structuralist?

Well, I would answer it in two ways. First of all, if it were the case that such a reading left no room for agency, it would still be crucial to know whether what I said was valid or not. Because I don't think that "agency" must be given priority in our reflections just because we like the idea of agency--that we must reject a theoretical approach which doesn't give adequate scope to agency simply because we disapprove morally of situations in which people can't shape their own lives. I think what one has to do is to show that the concept of "agency" is really essential for describing and analyzing every empirical state of affairs. We accept too easily that a theory is to be accepted only if it gives scope to agency. But the sense in which a theory gives scope to agency is quite different from the sense in which actual conditions give scope to agency. If it is the case that particular situations in the world do not give a person scope for shaping his or her life, such as in the case of imprisonment, there is no use blaming theories for that. It is the condition of imprisonment that doesn't give the prisoner that kind of scope. It is nonsense to complain about theory if, in fact, it is the situation in the world that is constraining. Of course, the prisoner's predicament is an extreme one in this context. But what one has to do always is to examine and analyze the conditions within which the possibilities of effective action (agency) are constituted.

Having said that, one also needs to remember that to say there are constraining conditions is not to imply that what an individual can or cannot do is determined by a structure, but only to inquire into the structure of possibilities. If you think about the metaphor of war, which is a more complex and brutal kind of situation akin to a game of chess in that it has its rules, you find that the possibilities of action may vary enormously with times and place, in which one side may have a wide range of options available and the other side very little. There, too, we have situations of extreme constraint--of little or no agency for one side.

Many devotees of "agency" fail to recognize that there are circumstances in which some people have more agency than others. In recent years, it has become common to hear

students of "postcolonial discourse" demanding that historical relations between European powers and the Third World countries must be re- considered in terms that allow for agency and resistance on the part of the latter. That may be all very well, but it is important to describe what kinds of options were available. One must never forget that, right through the nineteenth century, the establishment and extension of colony and empire meant that one side won something and the other lost. If we are to agree that both sides were agents, we must also agree that the agency of one eventually gave it an empire and the agency of the other lost it--that major political, economic, and moral principles were gradually taken by the colonized agent from the colonizing. Which does not mean, of course, that the latter imposed their pure ideas on the former. What it means is that we must find adequate ways of dealing theoretically with *historical asymmetries.*

I must confess I'm really unsympathetic toward the constant celebration of agency in contemporary social science. Agency has become a catch word. In a way, this intoxication with "agency" is the product of liberal individualism. The ability of individuals to fashion themselves, to change their lives, is given ideological priority over the relations within which they themselves are actually formed, situated, and sustained. The vulgar saying with which we are all familiar--which ignores this fact--is: "You can (re-)make yourself if you really want to." All you need is a strong enough will.

But what is an agent? It is too easily assumed that agency must inhere in "a subject," an individual characterized by his or her consciousness. Even when the agent is said to be a class, it is still modeled on the idea of the subject, a quasi- individual who possesses a will distinct from the wills of other individuals. The conflict of wills, expressed in the pursuit of contradictory "interests," is where you are supposed to find true agency. But this seems to me a very questionable view. Earlier I talked about the problematic idea of "interests." Here, I think its worth noting that there are collective agents who have no locatable subjectivity, no continuous will: corporations, governments, armies, etc. Agency as the principle of effectivity doesn't require the notion of subjectivity. The allocation of legal and/or moral responsibility doesn't depend on the notion of a consciousness, but on that of attributable consequences. A business corporation may be held to be legally or morally accountable, *to be an agent,* simply because it acted (or failed to act--which is a kind of act) in a particular way and that fact had practical consequences. To say that an action was the cause of something is to argue that a particular agent was responsible for it. In politics, a cause is something you argue for, you support, you oppose. In addressing yourself to a cause you are helping to constitute agency. There is no need to invoke ideas of consciousness here--whether of the "true" or "false" variety. What matters is that a type of social group, or type of position in social space, sustains certain (probable) practices, and that these not only have (probable) social and moral consequences, but can become the objects of political intervention.

Notes

1. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) 19.

2. Asad, 200-238.

3. Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,* Occasional papers (Washington D.C.: Ctr. for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown, 1986).

4. See, e.g., Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper, 1970).

5. Asad, *Genealogies* 83-170.

6. Asad, *Genealogies* 200-238.

7. Asad, *Genealogies* 14-16.