

Introduction

Islamic Activism as an Inner Journey: Thinking Religion as a Psychological Category

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The public resurgence of religion in general and Islam in particular has taken multiple forms over the last decades, and scholars have grappled with the problem of trying to interpret the significance of such a resurgence for individuals, state and society. There is unanimity amongst most scholars of religion that late modern and post-modern religious revival does not entail a return to traditional roots, but a number of subtle and profound transformations, which occur at the level of both individual and collective meaning. Much more, however, has been written on the social and political significance of these transformations than on their personal, psychological dimension.

In reaction to the secularization perspective that was dominant until the late 1970s, many studies in the anthropology and the sociology of religion have pointed to the social significance of religious revival in global politics and collective identity formation¹ James Beckford, for example, has argued that the revival of religion is one of the possible responses to the questions posed by post-modernism.² Similarly Renato Ortiz, looking at the transformation of religion in the long term, has argued that globalization has provided an opportunity for ethical engagement beyond the bounds of particular national borders. Ortiz sees an uneasy competition between the social function of religion and the culture of modern nationalism. Globalization – he argues – has weakened the power of the nation, thus providing grounds for religion to

1 Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999).

2 James A. Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 176.

re-emerge with a focus on ethical questions.³ Located at the intersection of the personal and the political, of the intimate and the public, ethical issues are central to understanding the processes that sustain the post-modern resurgence of religion. Some studies on Islamic militancy have pointed to the role of similar ethical aspirations among members of Islamist organizations.⁴

The preoccupation of the above authors with the new sociology of religion may be contrasted with the tendency to elaborate a critique of the very formation of a religious discourse in modern times. Talal Asad's ground-breaking *Genealogies of Religion* may be regarded as a milestone in this regard.⁵ Asad regards religion as a discursive strategy rather than a symbolic code: "Religion has been part of the restructuring of practical times and spaces, a rearticulation of practical knowledges and powers, of subjective behaviours, sensibilities, needs and expectations in modernity."⁶ The same line of analysis has been followed by a number of other authors who have attempted to deconstruct the use of the category of religion and religious discourse in modern politics. Religion – they argue – does not represent a resource to which one turns, but an opportunity to construct one's engagement in public life.⁷

Both the new public roles of religion and their discursive use beg the question as to what is happening with religious commitment and

3 Renato Ortiz, "Notes on Religion and Globalization," *Napantla: Views from the South*, 4, 3, 2003, 423-448.

4 See especially Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

5 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

6 Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's 'The Meaning and End of Religion,'" *History of Religions*, 40, 3, 2001, 221. See also Asad's observations on Islam in Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Occasional Papers*, Washington: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986.

7 David Chidester, *Savage Systems* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1996); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Peter van der Veer, "Religion in South Asia," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31, 2002, 173-187; David Chidester, Abdulkader Tayob, Wolfram Weisse (eds.), *Religion, Politics and Identity in a Changing South Africa* (Munich: Waxmann Munster, 2004); Timothy Fitzgerald (ed.), *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (London: Routledge, 2007); Abdulkader Tayob, *Religion in Modern Islamic Discourse* (London: Hurst, 2010).

engagement at the individual level. What does religion really mean for individuals engaged in various forms of religious activism? More particularly, what does religion mean to committed actors when the religious terrain itself is rapidly changing? How do activists in religious movements use religious discourses to navigate the terrain of politics?

The papers published in this collection stem from a conference hosted by the Centre for Contemporary Islam in Cape Town in October 2012. The conference aimed to critically looking at the category of 'Islamism' by closely examining the biographies of individuals who have been involved in one or more Islamic revivalist groups over the last few decades. Participants were asked, in particular, to capture attempts by 'Islamists' to self-reflexively narrate their engagement, their doubts, and their transformations. The discussion focused on critically interrogating the discursive *and psychological* dimension of the subjects' personal participation in movements characterized by a social and political activism expressed in religious terms.

Beyond 'Islamism': The Varieties of Islamic Activism

The articles included in this collection look at the lives of individuals who have been involved in an extremely diverse array of Islamic movements, supporting sharply different forms of religio-political activism. These range from the Sufi missionary activism of *Dawate Islami* (Auwais Rafudeen) to the clandestine engagement of Jihadist actors (Aini Linjakumpu), passing through the more 'classical' involvement in the political spheres of countries like Turkey, Egypt, and South Africa of intellectuals linked, respectively, to the Justice and Development Party (Michelangelo Guida), the Muslim Brothers (Aslam Farouk-Alli) and the Muslim Youth Movement (Abdulkader Tayob), to conclude with Don Omaruddin Mattera's journey between political action and religious quest (Tahir Sitoto). As such, this collection raises some questions as to whether the notion of 'Islamism' is a meaningful, coherent category for actors and by consequence, a useful analytical category for observers. While many of the actors discussed in this collection fit James Piscatori's now classical definition of Islamists as "Muslims who are committed to

political action to implement what they regard as an Islamic agenda,”⁸ others reflect a broader, socially driven but not necessarily politically oriented, engagement with religion as a source of ethical activism, thereby falling within the broader, more inclusive category of ‘Islamic activists.’

In the first paper, Abdulkader Tayob looks at the biographies of a number of South Africans who were involved with the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM). Through its history, the MYM always remained a diverse movement and never developed a unified political vision. The activists explored by Tayob bear witness to this diversity in terms of political orientation. The basic drive to join the movement is identified by the author in a search for a “more vibrant Islam” often conceived as an alternative, or even in opposition to the ‘ritualistic’ and ‘quietist’ Islam of the traditional Ulama, in a way that is reminiscent of some of Bernard Lewis’ observations on the dialectic between the ‘activist’ and the ‘quietist’ dimension in Muslim history.⁹ The issue of race, however, as well as the cultural and political resistance to the apartheid state, also played a significant role for many in the MYM. The end of apartheid, and the dissolution of the subject against which the MYM activists had tended to frame their discourses, has led to a greater diversification of the ideological and intellectual trajectories of the members. Often framed as a *discourse of opposition* and difference, political Islamic activism tends to undergo profound changes of meaning when the political context in which it operates is subjected to deep transformations.

The second paper, by Aslam Farouk-Alli, is dedicated to a portrait of Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, the Egyptian religious scholar whose writings have influenced an entire generation of Middle Eastern sympathizers and activists of the Muslim Brotherhood. Here, one finds the closest example in this collection to the ideal ‘prototype’ of the classical ‘Islamist’ thinker. Nurtured by his frustration with the increasing autocratic nature of the

8 James Piscatori, *Islam, Islamism and the Electoral Principle in the Middle East* (Leiden: Institute for the Study of Islam and Modernity, 2000), 2.

9 Bernard Lewis, “Islamic Revolution,” *The New York Review of Books*, 34, 21-22, 1988.

Egyptian state, as well as by his dissatisfaction with the quietist – when not collaborationist – attitude of traditional Azharite Ulama and Sufi orders vis-à-vis the state, Ghazālī's vision of a political Islamic revival naturally drew him towards some sort of 'Salafi orientation' based on a revival of the methodology of Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). Aware of the potentially divisive nature of the sectarian theology associated with the thought of Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb, and in opposition to the ultra-conservative agenda of the Saudi Kingdom, al-Ghazālī attempted to promote a 'rationalist' and 'moderate' Salafism as a broader platform for Muslim political mobilization.

Although most Arab, Muslim Brotherhood-inspired Islamist parties are presently engaged in an attempt to converge politically with their Turkish counterpart (an attempt favoured by the Arab spring and by the expansion of a new foreign policy of the Turkish state), the intellectual roots of the two forms of Islamism are profoundly different, as shown by Michelangelo Guida's portraits of Nurettin Topçu & Necip Fazıl Kısakürek. The re-discovery of Sufism, in fact, rather than its critique or rejection, was central to the formation of the modern Turkish Islamist self. Here too, however, Islamism appears as a creative mediator between tradition and modernity, rather than as a form of 'traditionalism.' For both Topçu and Kısakürek, in fact, the re-discovery of Sufism is mediated by the reading of the French philosopher Henri Bergson and his criticism of positivist rationality, and takes shape in reaction, but also in conversation with, the militantly secular form of nationalism promoted by the modern Turkish state, whose obsession with French philosophers it mirrors to a large extent.

The ideology that sustains the form of activism discussed by Auwais Rafudeen in the following paper is less 'hybrid' intellectually, in a sense, than any of the previous cases. The 'traditionalist,' and overly Sufi attitude of Pakistani and South African *Dawate Islami* leaders like Kajee Saheb and Abdun Nabi Hamidi reacts to, and partly mirrors, the pietistic reformism of the well-known missionary movement *Tablighi Jamaat*. The competition between the two movements is a direct extension of the all-encompassing doctrinal division between the Deobandi and the Bareilvi schools in the Indian subcontinent, and has now reached the Indo-

Pakistani diaspora worldwide. Dawate Islami depicts itself as an entirely a-political, devotional movement. Its activism (and indeed, Dawate Islami can be rightly considered as a sort of ‘activist offshoot’ of the Bareilvi theological school) transforms the subjects in ways that can indeed have political ramifications, not alike the a-political pietism of the Egyptian Islamist women studied by Saba Mahmood.¹⁰

Yet another form of activism is the one discussed by Aini Linjakumpu in her study of the autobiographies of individuals who have been involved in the violent activism of underground terror organizations. Although the organizations in which Ed Husain, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Omar Nasiri were temporarily involved are overly political, the author alerts to the fact that politics is never a purely material phenomenon. In particular, the paper brings out the central role of emotions in contemporary politics in sustaining violent forms of activism like the ones she discusses. The emotional identification with (real or imagined) victims of power and oppression is central to the processes whereby “past and contemporary politics are manipulated and manufactured” to justify indiscriminate violence against (real or imagined) symbols of power and oppression.

The dialectic between the religious (intended as search for transcendence) and the political is the central theme of Tahir Sitoto’s paper that concludes the collection. Explicitly challenging overly political interpretations of black conversion to Islam, Sitoto describes the religious engagement of the South African poet and Black Consciousness philosopher Don Mattera. Mattera’s ‘migration’ to Islam – Sitoto argues – has to be understood in the context of the poet’s quest for transcendence. It thus complements Mattera’s political and social activism in the Black Consciousness movement, rather than being the latter’s direct extension.

Trajectories of the Self: Conversion, Engagement, Dis-Engagement, Transcendence

How and why do the individuals who engage in various forms of Islamic activism start their journeys into activism? Where do such journeys

10 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

lead them? How to make sense of the trajectories of religious activists as ‘trajectories of the self’ rather than as mechanical social processes?

The first of the contributions, by Abdulkader Tayob, directly engages the psychology of religion by referring to William James and to his positive view of the effects of religious experience. In particular, Tayob draw on James’ classical pragmatist definition of conversion as “the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious truths.”¹¹ While James helps to make sense of the trajectories of the activists of the MYM as ongoing journeys of self-discovery, it is to the introspective insights of the classical Muslim theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) that Tayob turns in order to make sense of the fact that these journeys do not happen in a linear way, but “through conflicts, diversions, competing forces and resolutions.”

The non-linear, composite nature of the journeys of Islamist activism, and the focus of Islamic activists on the ethical are also highlighted by the second contribution. Here, Aslam Farouk-Alli draws on Charles Taylor’s notion of a “dialogical self,” as well as on Mikhail Bakhtin’s “ideological becoming,” to reconstruct the journey of Muḥammad al-Ghazālī and in particular, the “polyphonic nature of dialogical discourses” that contributed to the making of Ghazālī’s moral self.

James’ concept of ‘conversion’ also resonated in Michelangelo Guida’s paper on Turkish Islamist intellectuals. Topçu and Kısakürek – argues Guida – went through “two conversions.” Here the author refers mostly to another aspect of James’ psychology of conversion, i.e. the idea that religious ideas, previously peripheral in the consciousness of a subject, “take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual center of his energy.”¹² The first of such conversions was prompted by the discovery of Henri Bergson’s philosophy of intuition as a form of Western thought different from the mechanic evolutionism proposed

11 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 171.

12 James, *Varieties*, 176.

(or rather, imposed) by the Turkish secularist political elite. The second, which was in many ways an extension of the first, was prompted by the encounter with two Sufi masters who re-connected Topçu and Kısakürek to their lost spiritual heritage. Such a double conversion, concludes Guida, allowed the two intellectuals to “re-invent” themselves as Islamist actors in the heavily secular context of the Turkish Republic, as well as mediators between tradition and modernity.

Aini Linjakumpu’s paper on Jihadi militants constitutes a significant break in the literature on the topic. By adopting a psychological perspective, in fact, and by focusing on processes of *dis-engagement* from radical activism as much as on processes of *engagement* in it, Linjakumpu proposes a shift from the more common concern for understanding the “root causes” of radicalism to a less common concern with the “routes to,” as well as from radicalism. In a sense, this paper also speaks of a process of “double conversion.” In this case, however, the two conversions experienced by the actors follow the two opposite directions of engagement and disengagement. Both are seen by Linjakumpu as gradual and volitional processes – not as *sudden and passive* ones as the more mystical type of conversions in James’ model. Linjakumpu’s conclusion is that disengagement is a very common phenomenon in radical Islamist groups because commitment to a clandestine, secretive network is difficult to sustain psychologically. Such a proposition contributes an important element of comparison between global Jihadi groups and other, more mainstream forms of religiously driven Islamic activism, a comparison that might be worth investigating further.

The intensity of the commitment is also an important theme in Auwais Rafudeen’s study of Pakistani and South African Dawate Islami activists. In order to make sense of the latter’s experiences, Rafudeen draws on Talal Asad’s focus on the “cultivation of a virtuous self” as a central element of contemporary religious resurgence. The virtuous self, however – argues Rafudeen – also leads to “new states of the self” which in turn, refresh and renovate the commitment of the subject to his moral transformation. In this circular dynamic, punctuated with dreams and

visions, lies the specificity of the journeys in Sufi traditionalist activism of the Dawate Islami members.

All the journeys portrayed in this collection can be seen, ultimately, as various efforts, expressed in Islamic terms and rooted in a religious search, to establish firm ethical grounds for a sustainable social and political action. During these processes, however, the subjects engage in journeys of self-discovery that are ultimately elusive, for the essence of consciousness and selfhood cannot be possibly grasped by a consciousness embodied in the subjectivity of ordinary human experience. Religious processes of self-discovery are rooted in the intuition of the self's own transcendent dimension, and such an intuition can have a destabilizing effect. This is the search Augustine of Hippo hinted at when, asked by his own intellect to summarize the long series of wishes and desires he had listed in the prayer that opened the text of his *Soliloquies*, he answered with the words, "I desire to know God and the soul."¹³ None of the journeys collected in this issue of the *Journal for Islamic Studies* resonates of the intuition of the ultimately transcendent nature of the self as the 'migration' to Islam of Don Omaruddin Mattera. This is the reason why it has been chosen to seal this collection.

13 [Augustine of Hippo,] *The Soliloquies of St. Augustine*, transl. by Rose E. Cleveland (Boston: Little, Brown & C., 1910), 7.