Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism After Virtue

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Abstract
This article explores the work of the influential poststructuralist and postcolonial anthropologist Saba Mahmood (UC Berkeley, USA). Mahmood’s work in anthropology adopts an Asadian and Butlerian approach, particularly in the seminal Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject. In this work, Mahmood critically interpellates the categories of ‘Western’ secular feminism through an exploration of the lives of pious Muslim women of Salafi orientations in Cairo in Egypt. Mahmood’s work constitutes an important intervention at a point in time when secular feminist discourses are increasingly instrumentalized across the political spectrum in anti-Muslim discourses in the ‘Western’ world and in Europe. I argue, however, that in wanting to use the understandings and practices of pious Muslim women in Egypt in order to critique Western secular feminism, Mahmood fails to pose critical questions about the historicity of these practices and understandings, and lends her analysis to a form of cultural relativism which offers few prospects for a way forward for feminism.

Key words
Judith Butler ■ critical theory ■ critique ■ feminism ■ feminist theory ■ Islam ■ Muslims

WHY IS it so hard to say anything about politics from outside politics? Why can there be no discourse about politics that is not in itself political? (J.M. Coetzee, Diary of a Bad Year, 2007)

In the end, we see what we want to see, and the rest falls away. (Daniel Mendelsohn, The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Millions, 2007)
THE WORK of the anthropologist Saba Mahmood (University of California-Berkeley) has attracted much attention from academics in various fields in recent years. Her writings represent in many ways a challenge to the ways ‘Western’ secular feminism has chosen to conceptualize gender issues in the so-called ‘Muslim world’. In pointing out how many of these conceptualizations have reflected the categories of many academics aligned to such traditions of thought themselves, Mahmood has made an important anthropological intervention. This comes at a point in time when the need for a re-thinking of categories of thought is more important than ever for a feminist and anthropological engagement with ‘the lives of others’. For some time, an important problem for secular feminism – as both an analytical and prescriptive frame of thinking – has been its apparent inability to conceptualize female agency and freedom in any terms other than resistance or subordination to patriarchal societal norms. This has led to a situation in which female agency anchored in other understandings of freedom than those implied by secular feminism becomes void. There can be little doubt that many secular feminist discourses are central to anti-Muslim discourses in present Europe, and that absolutist secularism, with its particular understanding of gender and sexuality, positing Muslims as the embodiment of gendered alterity, feeds on these discourses (see Scott, 2007: 181).

Increasingly, calls for women’s rights are being instrumentalized in anti-Muslim discourses across the political spectrum in ‘Western’ and European societies. This instrumentalization is by no means limited to populist right-wing movements, which have had little historical interest in the promotion of women’s rights. ‘The stigmatisation of Muslim men in terms of women’s rights’ has been identified as a ‘longstanding element of Western discourse’ (Ewing, 2009: 13). Elaborating on this theme, Judith Butler has argued that ‘sexual politics’ involves ‘claims to new or radical sexual freedoms’ which are ‘appropriated precisely by that point of view – usually enunciated from within state power – that would try and define Europe and the sphere of modernity as the privileged site where sexual radicalism can and does take place’ (2009a: 102). She further argues that modernity in the era of sexual politics is defined as linked to sexual freedom (Butler, 2009a: 105), and that practising Muslim men and women are cast as outsiders by virtue of their perceived or real submission to other forms of sexual politics and gender relations. Given this ideological climate, Mahmood has undoubtedly made an important intellectual contribution in identifying the role of mainstream secular feminist understandings and categories as central to the exclusion of practising Muslim men and women in contemporary and late modern ‘Western’ social and political imaginaries. Furthermore, her work represents an important contribution to a nascent body of work in anthropology on contemporary Salafis in the Middle East and elsewhere. These modern ideological movements in Islam are by no means easy to explore ethnographically under the present circumstances much influenced by a mutual ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Ricoeur, 1970).
Nevertheless, and in a similar spirit, Mahmood’s own categories require critical interpellation. For what Mahmood sees in the lives of pious Salafi-oriented Muslim women in Egypt and elsewhere is — I would argue — by most accounts only part of the picture. It is premised on a view of particular Muslim women and men as the embodiment of difference or ‘radical alterity’ (Keesing, 1989) in relation to the construct of ‘secular liberalism’ and its purported categories. As an ethnographic stance this refusal to see the complexities and the fractured nature of the moral selves and the moral lives of pious Muslim women ultimately lends itself to a form of culturalism. For good reasons, this culturalism stands in a troubled relationship with contemporary ‘Western’ secular feminist politics. Modern Salafism is a complex and variegated ideological phenomenon, representing a continuum of puritan and literalist ideas concerning Muslim lives and ritual practices. But Mahmood’s ethnography of the women’s mosque movement in contemporary Cairo fails to make crucial distinctions between strands of modern Salafism more or less amenable to women’s rights. I would argue that Mahmood’s refusal to critically interpellate the categories of thought and practice central to Salafism in its various forms and expressions raises several serious analytical questions. Foremost among these is whether a conceptualization of anthropological critique appearing to target secular formations exclusively can be considered consistent in its apparent defence of pluralism. Finally, I would contend that Mahmood’s description of modern varieties of Salafism in Egypt is dehistoricized and decontextualized in omitting, for instance, the historical and contemporary role played by Saudi funding of Salafi publications and infrastructure. Salafism in Egypt is first and foremost an Egyptian phenomenon. Therefore, by asserting that Mahmood omits a Saudi role, I do not mean to imply that Salafism is a mere import to Egypt, as many of its local detractors would have it, only to suggest that it is more of a transnational phenomenon than what Mahmood’s analysis would seem to allow.

Recasting Feminist Theory

Critiques of the parameters of feminist thought and practice in ‘Western’ contexts as applied to women living outside of these contexts are not new to feminism nor to feminist anthropology (Mohanty, 1988; Moore, 1988). The emphasis on studying and analysing the particularities of the conditions of women in different contexts has become part of the received wisdom in feminist as well as anthropological scholarship (Moore, 1988). Critical re-interpretations by ‘feminists of colour, feminists from the developing world and lesbian feminists’ led to the challenging of ‘the notion of the universal category “woman” and the assumption of underlying commonalities of experience for all women’ (Moore, 1994: 11). This has become all the more important in a contemporary context where many ‘Western’ politicians and public intellectuals of various ideological stripes have appropriated and instrumentalized the discourses of feminism in order to legitimize the
brutalities of military adventurism and interventionism in the so-called ‘Muslim world’ (Abu-Lughod, 2002), as well as to render Muslim men (Ewing, 2009) and women (Moors and Salih, 2009: 376) in ‘Western’ contexts as the embodiments of purported ‘non-Western’ norms and values. The feminist anthropologist Henrietta Moore anticipated a development in which the concept of difference would eventually threaten ‘the whole edifice on which feminist politics is based’ (Moore, 1994: 11). And so it was to be. Some feminists, such as Judith Butler (1995), also took difference to mean that feminism, in its encounter and engagement with nascent and emergent ‘Third World feminisms’, would have to incur the risk of supporting forms of feminism that may not turn out to be conducive to advancing women’s rights at all.\(^3\) Mahmood’s work, which positions her within a postcolonialist and post-structuralist tradition, is closely aligned with Butler’s analysis\(^4\) (see Mahmood, 2005: 17–22 in particular).

**The Women’s Piety Movement and ‘Western’ Secular Feminism**

In Mahmood’s ethnographic study of women in the piety movement in modern Egypt, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), she subjects the normative and ideological foundations of ‘Western’ secular feminism to critical interpellation. Among the most important questions raised in her study is that of the conceptualization of agency often underpinning the work of ‘Western’ secular feminists. As she puts it, one of her aims is to:

> question the overwhelming tendency within poststructuralist feminist scholarship to conceptualize agency in terms of subversion or re-signification of social norms, to locate agency within those operations that resist the dominating and subjectivating modes of power. (2005: 14)

In so doing, Mahmood takes several leading feminist scholars of anthropology to task for failing to ‘problematize . . . the universality of the desire – central for liberal and progressive thought – and presupposed by the concept of resistance it authorizes – to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of male domination’ (2005: 10). This failure, she suggests, is attributable to a ‘tension within feminism’ due to its ‘dual character as both an analytical and politically prescriptive project’ (2005: 10, emphasis added). This is a facet of Mahmood’s analysis which I personally find useful. Mahmood also usefully points to the importance of methodological relativism, or the temporary suspension of one’s own normative political and ethical commitments as a requirement for anthropological understanding of the lifeworlds of pious Muslim women.

But for all Mahmood’s insistence on the need to explore actual practice, or ‘the thick texture of the lives of the mosque participants’ (2005: 198), there is relatively little of it in her works. In *Politics of Piety*, she
is content with confining her ethnographic focus to following her female Muslim informants in the Egyptian women’s piety movement in the ritual sphere, in other words, in the mosques that they attend (see Mahmood, 2005: 42–3). These are not any kind of Muslim women, but Muslim women with a very particular conception of what being Muslim entails in terms of embodied comportment and commitment. Their conceptions and views seem to have much to do with their particular social and political location in contemporary Cairo. Ritual activity is in Islamic traditions a highly patterned and prescribed activity (Graham, 1981: 83). It is activity directed at the generation and achievement of certain moral and societal dispositions.

Few anthropologists who have worked on Muslims anywhere in the world will be unaware of the limitations inherent in conducting fieldwork in and through mosques. The limitations of this methodological ethnographic framework in Mahmood’s work are demonstrable. One gets little sense of the extent to which moral dispositions cultivated in the ritual sphere are consonant with the actual behaviour of these pious Muslim women in other social fields. Nor do we learn much about the extent to which the moral dispositions cultivated in the ritual sphere reflect non-conflicted and coherent moral selves which remain so over time (rather than contextual and transient ones). Similarly, we learn little about the social status and class positions of these pious Muslim women, and the extent to which this impacts on their ritual practice. Peter van der Veer notes, in a review of Mahmood’s book, that ‘her focus on the micro-processes inside the mosque seem to prevent her from looking at the micro-practices outside the mosque’ (2008: 812). Consequently, Van der Veer argues, ‘one wonders whether piety defines the entirety of these women’s lives’ (2008: 812).

What Mahmood fails to problematize are ‘the complexities of consciousness even in the face of the most dominant cultural formations’ (Ortner, 2005: 46). As Cooper (2008: 39) has pointed out, Mahmood’s analysis operates in the iterative mode, whereby she herself ‘repeats and validates the moral norms of her pious interlocutors’. This is nowhere more apparent than on pages 174–80 of her book, where she recounts the narrative of how Abir, a female informant, who had become part of the piety movement, subtly and through an appeal to religious arguments forced her upwardly mobile husband, Jamal, to abandon his indulgence in alcohol and his taste for watching X-rated films at home (Mahmood, 2005: 174). For Abir, it is clear that her husband is an ‘errant’ Muslim, yet her appeal to religious arguments ensures her eventual ‘victory’ over her husband. The whole version of events is apparently based on Abir’s narrative as recounted to Mahmood. As readers we never get to listen in on Jamal’s narrative of the same events.

Asef Bayat notes that the halaqat, or Islamic study and prayer groups for women which Mahmood studied, and which became a central feature of the Islamic landscape of urban Egypt in the course of the 1990s, primarily attracted well-off Egyptian women. These women’s turn to
religion, he argues, may well have enhanced their own personal autonomy, but in reproducing patriarchal constraints they effectively delimited the agential possibilities of Muslim women from other social strata and with affinities to other ideologies (Bayat, 2007: 155–61). But the fact that Mahmood pays little attention to the social and class location of her pietist interlocutors is in a sense symptomatic of the ‘culturalist turn’ of the postcolonial and poststructuralist left, and the ‘culturalization of politics’ in which it is implicated. This culturalization of politics is premised precisely on an obscuring of class and social relations.

The power of discourse, as outlined by Foucault (1972: 21–40), operates on multiple levels, and generates its own exclusions and inclusions. Modern forms of power are, in Foucault’s understanding, capillary, and function through everyday social practices (Fraser, 1981). What this means in this context is that, as much as the pious Muslim women Mahmood has studied see themselves as set apart from political power and its exercise in the context of contemporary Egypt, the practices they are engaged in also contribute towards the reproduction of certain forms of gendered (patriarchal and social) power relationships in new forms, and toward the crafting of new social and political hegemonies.

The very title of Mahmood’s book, and her recurrent invocations of a Butlerian and Foucaultian nomenclature in which ‘the private is political’, more than suggests that her female Salafi informants’ piety is political in Mahmood’s — if not necessarily their own — eyes. My problem is not so much Mahmood’s contention that the piety movement has ‘political implications’ (Mahmood, 2005: 193) — though one could well argue that we need to consider it seriously when our informants claim to be acting in non-political ways and wanting to have nothing to do with politics — as her reductionistic rendering of this ‘politics of piety’ as one of embodied challenges and alterity to a purported ‘Western’ secular liberalism. In Egypt, we are led to believe, secularism is incarnated in the authoritarian state under Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011). As the unfolding of the events which led to the fall of Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011 demonstrated, this might in fact be getting the dynamics of relations between a secular and authoritarian state and the contemporary strands of Salafism in the Egyptian context quite wrong. For if anyone condemned the democratic uprising as vociferously as the propaganda machinery of the Egyptian state under Mubarak — and very often on the very same terms as the state (‘Zionist plot’, ‘Western machinations’, and so forth) — it was in fact the leaders of Salafi movements in Cairo and Alexandria (see Tammam and Haenni, 2011, for this). This is not to say that Salafi followers did not take part in the demonstrations against the Mubarak regime — some evidently did. Documents secured by pro-democracy demonstrators from the offices of the state security organ — Mabaheth Amn al-Dawla [State Security Investigations Directorate, SSI] — on 6 March 2011 appear to implicate some Salafi leaders in Egypt in collaboration with the state security apparatus under Mubarak in the recent decade (see Schielke, 2011). In other words, rather than posing a challenge to the
Mubarak state’s purported ‘secularism’, Salafi leaders have in fact in many instances with their calls for their Egyptian followers to abstain from politics, and their outright condemnation of political forces attempting to bridge ‘religious-secular’ and Muslim-Christian divides in opposition to the authoritarian state (see Hirschkind, 2011), been extremely useful to the very same authoritarian and ‘secular’ state.

In many ways, Mahmood’s work is indicative of a broader shift in anthropological studies of Muslim societies in the course of the 1990s towards an emphasis on new (and old) modes of religiosity among contemporary Muslims. This development cannot be seen in isolation from broader and more general developments in ‘Western’ conceptualizations of Muslims. These were much inspired by both the emphasis on processes of re-Islamization in the ‘Western’ media following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, as well as the emergence of Islamism as an oppositional political movement and ideology in the 1980s and 1990s. In turn, these coalesced to form a perspective framing Muslims first and foremost as religious beings. There are many silences in these kinds of conceptualizations – silences about what happens in the spaces between secularity and religiosity among Muslims, about class and social status, and about modes of Muslim sociality which are not primarily religious, to mention but a few. But central to these new ways of studying religiosity is what Turner referred to as ‘the abstraction of cultural phenomena from their real social and political-economic contexts’ (1993: 415).

The Politics of Ethnographic Refusal

Ultimately, Mahmood’s ethnographic stance reflects what Ortner (1995: 188) once characterized as an ‘ethnographic refusal’ or the ‘refusal to know and speak and write of the lived worlds inhabited by those who resist (or do not, as the case may be), a refusal of an ethnographic stance implying a commitment to ‘producing understanding through richness, texture and detail, rather than parsimony, refinement, and (in the sense used by mathematicians) elegance’ (Ortner, 1995: 174). The production of richly textured ethnographic accounts and ‘thick descriptions’, however, is not Mahmood’s first priority. She wants to debunk ‘Western’ secular feminism and ‘Western’ secular liberalism, and whether her ethnographic data can provide a solid template for doing so seems to be of lesser importance to her. Marshall Sahlins points to the inherent reductionism in a notion of anthropological critique based on using ethnographic data as a template for criticizing one’s own society. Writing ten years ago, he observed:

It is as if other peoples had constructed their lives for our purposes, in an answer to racism, sexism, imperialism and the other evils of Western society... An acid bath of instrumentality, the procedure dissolves worlds of cultural diversity into the one indeterminate meaning. (Sahlins, 2000: 505–6)
But for Mahmood, the notions of female agency and political action adhered to by many urban Muslim women in Cairo in their mosque movement clearly serve as a counter-model to those adhered to by many ‘Western’ secular feminists, in spite of her assertion that ‘Islamism and liberal secularity stand in a relationship of proximity and co-imbrication rather than of simple opposition’ to one another (2005: 25). What the ethnographic exploration of the women in the piety movement yields (for Mahmood, at any rate) is the opportunity to problematize

the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom...and that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them. (Mahmood, 2005: 5)

Elsewhere in her book, however, Mahmood appears to argue that there is a ‘simple opposition’ at work, since she claims that many pious women in Egypt and elsewhere do in fact constitute their relationship with ‘secular liberalism’ as precisely one of ‘simple opposition’ inasmuch as ‘contemporary Islamist activists identify secular liberalism as a powerful corrosive force within Muslim societies’ (2005: 191). Secular feminism draws on the imaginaries of secular liberalism, a secular liberalism which for Mahmood defines and prescribes nothing short of ‘a way of life’ (2005: 191). It seems quite clear, however, that the reductionist isomorphism between secularism and liberalism is Mahmood’s own. This should remind us that the concept of ‘iteration’ involves a resignification and repositing of meaning (Benhabib, 2006: 48). The ideology of secular liberalism — in Mahmood’s polemical construction of it — appears to be as all-encompassing and determinative for its followers as it is assumed that religious faiths are for the believers.

How secularism, which for Mahmood is ‘a historically shifting category with a variegated genealogy’ (2006: 323), comes to assume this status as a form akin to religious belief in particular contexts is never explained (see Gourgouris, 2008a: 441). More worrying, from an anthropological point of view, is that Mahmood here conflates secularism and liberalism, even though, as Connolly (1999: 10) points out, ‘neither is entirely reducible to the other’. In fact, as argued by Bilgrami (2004: 173), ‘secularism is not dependent on liberalism, since there can be perfectly illiberal forms of secularism’ (see also Gourgouris, 2008b: 455). One need not venture further than, precisely, Egypt, under its secular and Western-orientated dictator Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011), to find a form of state secularism that is quite illiberal. Secular liberalism, for many of the individuals who live in societies definable as both liberal and secular, may become definable in and through those terms and be incorporated into what Bourdieu (1978) refers to as the doxic or ‘taken for granted’. This, however, does not mean that secularism represents an orientation to the world of the same order as religious faith. Mahmood’s aim is similar to that of her mentor Talal Asad: she wants to ‘question liberalism’, and she wants to do so by using
'the resources of the Islamic tradition’ in order to ‘question many of the liberal political categories and principles for the contradictions and problems they embody’ (Mahmood, 2003: 1). The ‘resort to Islam as a means of obtaining some kind of critical distance from one’s own society’ (Almond, 2007: 2) is of course nothing new in the canons of post-structuralist thought – it was central for Foucault and many of his epigones (see Afary and Anderson, 2006).

In order to make her case for a questioning of liberalism, Mahmood, like Asad before her, is therefore required to constitute ‘Islamic traditions’ and her Muslim interlocutors as the embodiments of ‘difference’ and ‘alterity’. Unlike Asad (1986), however, Mahmood refers to ‘Islamic traditions’ in the plural; but the problems of Asad’s approach (see Bangstad, 2009 for a critique) remain evident in her usage of the concept. As noted by Silverstein: ‘the notion that Islamic traditions – their culturally defined goals and modes of reasoning and being – stand in an alternative counterrelation to liberal politics is . . . incoherent’ (2008: 143). Furthermore, there is an equivocation on the very degree of alterity to be ascribed to Islamic traditions in Mahmood’s work (Silverstein, 2003: 499). For Mahmood, Muslim liberal reformists like Abdulkarim Soroush, the late Nasr Abu Zayd, Hassan Hanafi and – by implication, since they are not explicitly referred to by Mahmood in the article in question – Khaled Abou El Fadl and Abdullahi A. an-Na’im are problematic,9 inasmuch as they are engaged in the work of exploring the potentialities of a convergence between Islamic norms and values, human rights, democracy and secularism. She writes of them:

I believe the reason these kinds of questions [about secular liberalism] are seldom pursued is because of the hegemony that liberalism commands as a political ideal for many contemporary Muslim intellectuals, a hegemony that reflects the enormous disparity of power between the Anglo-European countries and what constitutes the ‘Muslim world’ today. (Mahmood, 2003: 2)

In an interview with Nermeen Shaikh, Mahmood elaborates upon this critique by arguing that ‘some of the most heinous crimes committed against humanity – including the Holocaust – were under the rule and rubric of democracy’.10 ‘So when Muslim scholars unproblematically uphold “liberal democracy” as the ideal to emulate, I am forced to ask: What form of democracy, for whom, and with what conceptions of the public good?’ (Shaikh, 2007: 152).

In an earlier contribution, Mahmood charges these Muslim ‘liberal reformists’ with ‘closing down certain readings’ (2006: 346) of Islamic traditions. She is disparaging, not to say dismissive, of their works. For even though Mahmood has later admitted that the Muslim intellectuals in question are generally ‘opposed to U.S. geopolitical interests’ in the Middle East, they ‘share secular assumptions about enlightened religiosity with
the U.S. State Department’ (2008: 463). If this is not akin to imputing ‘guilt by association’, then it is difficult to see what else it could be. The charge that their work ‘forecloses certain readings’ is a problematic one, insofar as any text is an act of interpretation based on certain readings, and as such forecloses other readings. According to Mahmood, ‘secularism remakes certain kinds of religious subjectivities so as to render them compliant with liberal political rule’ (2006: 328). But nowhere does she specify exactly how this is done, so we are left with a conceptualization of secularism as an agent in the mode of a deus ex machina rather than as something produced by real people acting in real ways upon the world and as agents of and in history. ‘The normative claims of secularism fail to interrogate secularism’s contention that it is the most effective political solution to warding off religious strife’, asserts Mahmood (2006: 326). But the question that Mahmood poses here is surely an empirical one. The historical record of secularism in this regard is certainly mixed, but so is the record of, say, purportedly Islamic states. Here it would suffice to point to the persecution of Ahmadis, Shias and Christians in postcolonial Pakistan (see Bhargava, 2007), the persecution of Bahais in postcolonial Iran (Keddie, 2006: 312), and Christians and animists in postcolonial Sudan (Collins, 2008). It may well be that secularism in the present era needs to be more ‘Other-wise’ (Mahmood, 2010: 282), but the problem arises when and if this is posed as a unilateral demand, apparently applicable only to contemporary varieties of secularism. In other words, in order to be minimally consistent, one would – unlike Mahmood – have to be prepared to entertain the question as to whether arguably anti- or non-secular traditions and anti- or non-liberal traditions such as Sunni Salafism are similarly ‘Other-wise’. And the fact of the matter is that certain varieties of Salafism are plainly insufficiently so,11 and that the most rigid and exclusivist varieties of Salafism are not even conceivably so.12 In the present Egyptian context, this is not merely a theoretical question: in Alexandria, once so cosmopolitan, where Salafis now control many of the mosques in the eastern parts of the city, there have been a series of violent clashes in recent years which have cost the lives mainly of Coptic Egyptian Christians (Schielke, 2010).

Secularism and Empire

In her essay ‘Secularism, Hermeneutics and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation’ (2006), Mahmood argues that ‘the US imperial project’ (2006: 329), in attempting to reform Islam, has exhibited ‘an extraordinary secular cast’ (2006: 330). She admits, however, that this imperial project is not ‘non-religious’, since it is ‘shot through with the agendas of the Christian right’ (2006: 329). The problem here is as follows. If the neo-conservative ‘US imperial project’ exhibits ‘an extraordinary secular cast’, it seems reasonable to suppose that the epistemological and political foundation for this is
an ideological conviction to the effect that secularism offers a political and social solution for all societies where the US has interests, and indeed, for the US itself. But the paradox here is that both the Bush administrations, for nearly a decade (2000–9), were in fact responsible for launching the most sustained and serious attack on secularism as a governing political principle in modern US history.\textsuperscript{13} As Butler (2009a: 124) notes, there was at the very least ‘a crossover of secular and non-secular perspectives’, especially in the ‘civilizing mission of the Bush II administration’.

Mahmood, furthermore, refers to the US State Department’s ‘well-documented alliances with Bin Laden’ (2006: 335) during the proxy war against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. If this is in fact ‘well-documented’, it is puzzling why Mahmood is not able to provide any reference to secondary literature which ‘documents’ this.\textsuperscript{14} The fact of the matter is – as well documented by Coll (2004: 87), Bergen (2006: 61) and \textit{The 9/11 Commission Report} (Kean and Hamilton, 2004) – that no evidence of contact between the CIA, the US State Department and Bin Laden has ever been found, let alone funding of Bin Laden by the CIA and/or the US State Department. Central al-Qaeda ideologues such as Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Musab al-Suri have also rejected these claims as spurious (Bergen, 2006: 61). Bin Laden’s activities in Pakistan and Afghanistan were in fact funded by Saudi and Pakistani intelligence (see Coll, 2004: 71–88), and from Bin Laden’s own pockets. It has furthermore been documented that Bin Laden called for boycotts of US products among his followers and associates in Pakistan in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{15}

Further examples of polemical assertions which are not substantiated by the available empirical evidence are found in a co-authored article for \textit{Anthropological Quarterly} from 2002 (Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002). Here it is alleged that a consequence of the campaign to ‘rescue’ Afghan women under the Taliban by ‘Western’ feminists was ‘the dramatic reduction of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, the brunt of which was borne by women and children as the most destitute members of the population’ (Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002: 346). No mention here of the fact that the UN and other humanitarian agencies were in fact forced by the Taliban to withdraw from Afghanistan by Taliban factions’ repeated harassment and intimidation of humanitarian aid workers, whom they suspected and accused of being either ‘spies’ or ‘Christian missionaries’. Rashid (2002) has catalogued this well. He notes that UN staff pulled out of Kandahar in 1998 after senior Taliban leaders physically attacked and threatened UN staff (Rashid, 2002: 70); that the Taliban created serious obstacles to the UN’s work in Afghanistan by requiring female Muslim UN staff to travel with male blood relatives (2002: 70); that the Taliban shut down UN-funded and run schools for Afghan girls (2002: 114); and, finally, that the Taliban shut down UN and NGO offices in Kabul by force in 1998, and were believed to be behind the kidnapping and murder of Afghan UNHCR and WFP staff (2002: 114).\textsuperscript{16}
The epilogue of Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* poses the following rhetorical question to its readers:

Do my political visions ever run up against the responsibility that I incur for the destruction of life forms so that ‘unenlightened’ women may be taught to live more freely? Do I even fully comprehend the forms of life that I want so passionately to remake? Would an intimate knowledge of lifeworlds distinct from mine ever lead me to question my own certainty about what I prescribe as a superior way of life for others? (2005: 198)

Mahmood answers her own question herself, in the following assertive and – well – prescriptive manner:

This [i.e. my] attempt at comprehension offers the slim hope in this embattled and imperious climate, one in which feminist politics runs the danger of being reduced to a rhetorical placard of Islam’s abuses, that analysis as a mode of conversation, rather than mastery, can yield a vision of coexistence that does not require making other lifeworlds extinct or provisional. (2005: 199)

In spite of Mahmood’s assertions to the contrary (see, for example, 2005: 17), it is difficult to see this as a stance which does not in effect lend itself to culturalist assumptions. As Cooper (2008: 27) has pointed out: ‘when feminist and postcolonial political theorists seek to align themselves with the religious revival of the other culture, they perform a kind of mirror-game that does nothing to unsettle this frontier [the frontier line on which imperialist and anti-imperialist border politics are played out – i.e. those of gender]’. Cooper further points out that Mahmood ‘stops short of addressing women’s implication in the work of law-making violence’ (2008: 40). The terms Mahmood invokes here in describing the potential violence of ‘Western’ secular feminist orientations, ‘the forms of life I want so passionately to remake’, ‘the destruction of life forms’, seems to obscure the fact that most Salaifs are not only opposed to secularism [‘ilmaniyya], but also against well-established Islamic traditions that are supported by movements that cannot be accused of Westernization, but represent a notion of “the popular” that has come under threat thanks to mass education and literacy’ (Van der Veer, 2008: 811). In this respect, Sufi-oriented Egyptians are perhaps the most obvious examples. The pious dispositions cultivated by the Salaifi women Mahmood has studied are of course perfectly modern, as is Salaifism itself (see Meijer, 2009: 16–17). One may therefore easily and perfectly turn the argument around and claim that it is in fact Salaifi piety – a product of Islamic modernity and a particularly rigid interpretation of Islamic foundational texts and history – which seeks to ‘passionately remake’ or ‘destroy the life forms’ embodied by many Muslim women in Cairo through its calls for a disciplining of pious selves. Nowhere in Mahmood’s account do we learn about Salaifism’s intolerance
and condemnation of ritual practices central to the lives of many contemporary Muslim Cairene women, such as the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday [mawlid] or the visiting of Sufi saints’ tombs [ziyara], let alone of Salafis regular inveighing against Shias, Ismailis or Zaidis. In its most rigid and exclusivist varieties, Salafism is part of what El Fadl has referred to as a ‘supremacist puritanism’ in Islam (2003: 43). It attempts to remake Muslim lifeworlds by delinking Islam from any particular cultural context (Wiktorowicz, 2006: 210), and also by demanding that any belief and action of Muslims be anchored in the Qur’an and the Sunna. As Marc Lynch (2010) has shown, there is a proclivity towards reshaping public culture in line with pious requirements so as to ensure social uniformity in Salafism. The strategy of ‘Islamization from below’ is one which the various strands of Salafism in the Egyptian context largely share. Salafis in the line of the Muslim Brothers are, however, much more concerned with political and civic participation than those studied by Mahmood, and much more accepting of democracy as a mode of political organization and mobilization. The historical record also suggests that while Sunni and Shia Islamists may not endorse gender equality, they are generally not averse to female labour market, civic and political participation (see Afary, 2009, Rutherford, 2008), especially to the extent that such participation may further their own long-term aims of reconfiguring both state and society, whereas such participation is generally anathema for the most puritan and literalist of Sunni Salafis (see Al-Rasheed, 2002). This is not to suggest that puritan and literalist Salafis may not alter their views on such participation in particular social and political circumstances. We certainly need to see Salafi movements as dynamic social movements influenced by local as well as translocal contexts.

The ability of Salafism to remake lifeworlds is in fact much stronger than the ability to do so possessed by ‘Western’ secular feminism, precisely because the term Salafi ‘is exploitable by any movement that wants to claim that it is grounded in Islamic authenticity’ (El Fadl, 2005: 75). This is accomplished by its harking back ‘to the period of the Prophet, his Companions, and their successors’ (2005: 75). Salafis’ claim to be ‘proper Muslims’ more often than not implies that other ways of being Muslim are ‘improper’. For puritan movements in Islam, the notion of a specifically supra-historical Islamic authenticity [asala] has always been central (al-Azmeh, 1993: 50). As Bernard Haykel has noted, ‘the term Salafi is prestigious among Muslims, because it denotes the earliest and therefore authentic version of Islam’ (2009: 33). With the exception of four pages in Politics of Piety (2005: 61–4), Mahmood does not attempt to situate or contextualize the emergence of Egyptian Salafism or Salalism in general in historical terms. Nor does she make the crucial analytical distinctions between its different historical and contemporary varieties in the Egyptian context. In a footnote (2005: 61, fn. 45) she links modern Salafism to Rashid Rida (1865–1935) and Muhammed ‘Abduh (1849–1905). As she rightly notes, these Muslim intellectual reformers active in Egypt ‘argued
for an interpretation of the founding sources of the tradition, in accordance with principles of scientific rationality, liberal governance and natural law.

Part of the intellectual challenge in writing about Salafism – as has been duly noted by many authors – is its fragmentation and heterogeneity (see Haykel, 2009: 45–6; Meijer, 2009: 3; Wiktowicz, 2006: 212). Where Mahmood confuses the issue is – by implication – suggesting that all present Egyptian Salafists trace their intellectual lineage to the modernistic and rationalistic legacy of Rida’ and ‘Abduh.20 As a matter of fact, the ideological lineages of these earlier Salafis and many of the present Salafis are not, strictly speaking, identical (Wiktowicz, 2006: 212), in as much as the former did not partake in Ibn Taymiyya’s anti-rationalist and literalist theological teachings (Haykel, 2009: 45), and the latter frequently excoriated ‘Abduh and Rida as ‘deviant rationalists’ (Wiktowicz, 2006: 212). Lauzière (2010) usefully notes that ‘today, salafiyya is first and foremost a label that Sunni purists use to designate their approach to Islam. The term is usually understood to refer to a rigorist creed and religious methodology that share a ‘family resemblance… to Wahhabism or are intimately linked to the religious establishment of Saudi Arabia (Lauzière, 2010: 370). Furthermore, Al-Rasheed (2007: 3) notes that the Saudi Wahhabi Salafiyya ‘does not have much in common with’ what she terms the ‘modernist Salafiyya’, since the former emerged as a result of the encounter with the ‘West’, and as a result of a Muslim quest for advancement, whereas the latter emerged in central Arabia prior to this encounter.21

Saudi financing of Salafi publishing and infrastructure in Egypt dates back to the 1920s, when Rida’ and some of his supporters threw their weight behind the nascent Saudi state, and the Salafiyya Press and Bookstore, established in Cairo in 1909, established a Saudi branch in Mecca (Lauzière, 2010: 383). In its latest incarnation, Salafi satellite television in Egypt is mostly funded and owned by Saudi investors (Field and Hamam, 2009).22 Yet, from Mahmood’s description, it is difficult to ascertain the fact that Salafi da’wa (proselytization), in its different varieties in Egypt and elsewhere in the modern Middle East since the 1970s, has also been bankrolled by Saudi petro-dollars on a significant scale. This financing has been part and parcel of the Saudi bid to outflank Shi‘ism as well as secular nationalisms in the contemporary Middle East (see Al-Rasheed, 2002; El Fadl, 2003; Meijer, 2009: 20). Moreover, Mahmood’s account ignores the fact that Salafism and Wahhabism23 have been co-imbricated for the past 30 years (El Fadl, 2005: 74). While Saudi sponsorship of Salafi publishing and infrastructure on a global level is of course not a sufficient explanation for its presence in the present Muslim world (see Haykel, 2009: 37), information concerning this sponsorship is completely left out of Mahmood’s account.24 Anthropologist Lara Deeb provides a cautionary commentary in noting that:

in responding to such instrumentalised arguments [i.e. arguments which assume that piety practices are linked to identity politics or to economic,
social or political gain], it is also possible to slip into another sort of reductive argument where piety becomes a singular aspect of life unto itself, fully detached from other daily practices, from politics, and from complex social environments and relationships. (2009: 113–14)

In the encounter between religious and secular traditions which Mahmood envisages, it would appear that the requirement of change is one placed exclusively at the door of the ‘teleological certainty’ which is said to characterize ‘progressive liberalism’ (Mahmood, 2005: 39). Herein lies the crux of the matter. For as Seyla Benhabib has argued, ‘traditions are notunities with clearly definable borders but hybrid conversations and argumentations’ (2002: 194). With the globalization of the modern media as well as of financial capital, and increased transnational flows, postcolonial Muslims live less as Leibnitzian ‘windowless monads’ (Gray, 2000: 52), encapsulated and enclosed in their own ‘forms of life’, than ever before.

Furthermore, a politics which subordinates the exercise of female autonomy and agency to the interests of a ‘preservation of life forms’ – as Mahmood’s account in effect does – becomes in fact and impact culturalist. One notes here that Mahmood (2009b: 146) takes exception to the characterization of her position as one which, in Butler’s phrase, ‘affirms cultural difference as a constant point of reference in the effort to “parochialize” certain absolutist and monolithic conceptions of normativity’ (Butler, 2009b: 106). Mahmood responds to this charge by asserting that ‘the term culture is alien to my analytical vocabulary’ (2009b: 146). Her declaration here appears to imply that the only ones liable to base themselves on culturalist assumptions are those who explicitly foreground the term ‘culture’ for analytical purposes. In Van der Veer’s words, Mahmood ‘is at great pains to declare that she is a feminist and wants to contribute to feminist theory’ (2008: 811). But there simply is no way of reconciling feminism with a perspective which appears to prioritize the ‘preservation of life forms’ over women’s rights. The detachment of feminism’s descriptive from its prescriptive character called for by Mahmood (2005: 197–8) appears problematic in light of her own warning that feminism is to avoid making ‘certain life forms provisional, if not extinct’ (2005: 197). I would argue that these calls do not reflect analytical detachment but Mahmood’s own normative ordering of priorities for feminism. She claims to be calling for an expansion of ‘the normative understanding of critique’, so that ‘we occasionally turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be remade through an encounter with the other’ (2005: 36–7).

It is true that Mahmood stops short of calling for the embracing of pious Salafi lifestyles or the abandonment of a critical stance towards socially conservative and non-liberal movements of this kind (2005: 38–9). But this avoids the central question. For if feminism is to mean anything at all, it is extremely difficult to avoid the conclusion that women’s entitlement to rights and dignity regardless of religious and ethnic affiliation must be central to its minimal and core definition.25 If a term like feminism is to
retain any force, there must in fact be something with which it is in fact incompatible (Eagleton, 1996: 103). To this extent, feminism is indeed prescriptive, and rightly so (Schott, 2009: 51–2). To be frank about this does not entail reducing feminist politics to a rhetorical display of the placard of Islam’s abuses, as Mahmood (2005: 199) would have it. ‘Anxieties about cultural imperialism’ may in fact engender a kind of relativism which makes it ‘difficult to represent any belief or practice as oppressive to women or at odds with gender equality’ (Phillips, 2007: 1). For as Martha Nussbaum argues: ‘at some point, we must draw the line and deny that these approaches deserve the title “feminist” at all’ (2000: 187). Nussbaum is by no means opposed to exploring the feminist potentialities in religious traditions (see 2000: 167–240), but she is also quite clear about the fact that religious discourse and practice may at times lead to infringements of women’s basic rights (1997: 98), and that women may at times partake in these very infringements themselves.²⁶ One is reminded here that feminist anthropology emerged precisely in response to anthropological and sociological scholarship which treated women as ‘essentially uninteresting and irrelevant’, and which accepted ‘as necessary, natural and hardly problematic the fact that, in every human culture, women are in some way subordinate to men’ (Rosaldo, 1974: 17). In an incisive critique of precisely the kind of reasoning found in Mahmood’s work, Seyla Benhabib has written:

> It does not follow that if we respect human beings as culture-creating beings that we must either ‘rank or order’ their worlds as a whole or disrespect them by dismissing their life-worlds altogether. We may disagree with some aspect of their moral, ethical or evaluative practices without dismissing or holding in disrespect their life-worlds altogether. Most human encounters, with the exception of attempts by murderous regimes to annihilate the world of the other, occur in this in-between space of partial evaluations, translations and contestations. (2002: 41)

In addressing precisely this issue, Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006: 141) has asked whether we should conclude that all ‘forms of life’ ought to be ‘respected’ and ‘preserved’ at all costs to individuals. Or, alternatively, can it be the case that, in insisting that our own knowledge, convictions, mode of analysis and categories are fallible and open to question, the same must hold for the knowledge and convictions held by others (Sayer, 2009: 778)? And, finally, might we dare ask whether anthropological critiques should be able to pose the same critical questions to arguably anti- or non-secular formations as they do to secular formations in order to be minimally consistent?

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have argued that the post-structuralist and postcolonial conceptualizations of Islam and Muslims as found in the anthropology of
Saba Mahmood are premised on the proposition that Islam and Islamic traditions represent a counterpoint to Western secularity. For Mahmood, Muslims are primarily defined in and through Islamic traditions, as well as these traditions’ reference to foundational texts. Mahmood also has a discernible lack of interest in the singularities of Muslim empirical existence, to the extent that this existence is irreconcilable with the positing of Muslims as religious and representatives of a radical ‘non-Western’ alterity. Mahmood’s work does not constitute a ground onto which a sustainable anthropological conceptualization of the lives of contemporary Muslims in a globalized and hybrid world — in which the religious and the secular, the non-Islamic and the Islamic intersect — can be grafted. Nor does it appear to offer a way forward for any sustainable feminist politics (Van der Veer, 2008: 811). For, beyond denouncing secular feminism’s universalist assumptions, calling for ‘more understanding’ of pious Muslim women and ‘a larger transformation of the cultural and ethical sensibilities that undergird the law’ in ‘Western’ contexts (Mahmood, 2009a: 860), and offering a trenchant post-structuralist critique of modern state power and ‘Western’ secular liberalism, Mahmood does not seem to offer any practical way out of the current impasse. The omissions and evasions in Mahmood’s representation of varieties of Salaﬁsm point to a notion of critique that is limited to ‘the highlighting of hidden presuppositions and the deepening of reflexivity’ (Sayer, 2009: 778) and to the proliferation of ‘deconstructive questions’ (O’Hanlon and Washbrook, 1992: 154). Like Foucault, Mahmood seem to be dashing the hope ‘if we had one, that there is some good we can affirm’ (Taylor, 1985: 152). This may of course not matter all that much for anthropology as an analytical discipline, but it does matter for those anthropological scholars interested in exploring potential convergences in and between various traditions, rather than merely affirming existential difference.

So what are the available alternatives for feminist anthropology? This is neither the time nor the place to outline a detailed programme for feminist anthropology on Muslim women in the future, but it seems to me that a good starting point would be to avoid reducing ethnographies of actual Muslim women’s lives to the function of templates for ideologically motivated critiques from either side of the political spectrum.

A nascent body of work in anthropology exploring the lives of ordinary Muslims in different contexts has in recent years attempted to transcend the binaries on which Mahmood’s thought to a large extent depends. As cases in point, I will limit myself to referencing the work of Adeline Masquelier (2010) on the impact of revivalist Islam on Muslim women in a town in rural Niger and Arzoo Osanloo (2009) on women’s rights discourses in Tehran, Iran (Osanloo, 2009). In exploring the heterogeneity of Islamic thought and practice in particular contexts, their writings provide a useful antidote to the assumption that revivalist Islam is the only and most powerful dimension of Muslim thought and identity in the contemporary Muslim world (Marsden, 2007: 9) or to ‘totalizing notions of the cultivation of virtue’ (Soares and Otayek, 2007: 18). While these monographs may not
have the same potential for positing anthropological critiques of ‘secular liberalism’ or ‘secular feminism’ on the basis of ethnographic explorations, such work nevertheless ultimately comes much closer to an ideal of exploring Muslim women’s lives in particular contexts in all their heterogeneities, complexities and ambivalences.

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Notes


2. The women’s da’wa (proselytizing) training centres listed as being central to the women’s mosque movement in Cairo at the time of her study (Mahmood, 2005: 72) are all run by Salafi-oriented organizations.

3. See Nussbaum (1999) for a critique of Butler centred on allegations of a non-committal stance on feminist concerns.

4. For an important critique of Butler’s post-structuralist understanding of gender and her emphasis on gendered performativity, see Moi (1999).

5. For the term ‘culturalization of politics’, see Žižek (2008).

6. I wish to thank Prof. Jonathan Spencer for making this point in correspondence (March 2011).

7. Some useful cases in point are made by Tammam and Haenni (2011). Upon learning in December 2010 that Mohamed al-Baradei would stand in the presidential elections of 2011, prominent Egyptian Salafi sheikh Mahmoud Amer from Damanhur Governate, according to the Arabic newspaper Al-Sharq al-Awsat on 21 December 2010, declared that al-Baradei’s blood was ‘licit’ on the grounds that he was ‘inciting civil insurrection [fitna] against the Mubarak regime’ – in fact an open call for al-Baradei’s murder. During the insurrection against the Mubarak regime, sheikh Yasir Burhami of Alexandria pronounced a legal edict reproduced by the Arabic Salafi website SalafVoice declaring the pro-democracy demonstrations ‘illicit’ [haram]. The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, sheikh Abdel Aziz al-Sheikh, declared on 4 February 2011 that protest movements in the contemporary Arab world originate from ‘the enemies of Islam’. Saudi king Abdallah bin Abdul-Aziz al-Saud for his part expressed his full support for the Mubarak regime on 29 January 2011 and referred to the pro-democracy demonstrators as ‘infiltrators inciting a malicious sedition’. After the fall of Mubarak, Salafi sheikh Ahmed Farid of Alexandria declared to the Egyptian newspaper Al-Shorouk on 5 March 2011 that democracy was haram [illicit], and furthermore
expressed revulsion over the fact that ‘women and men had been together’ in the demonstrations against the regime, and that there had been ‘Christian crosses’ among the demonstrators at Tahrir Square in Cairo. One could perhaps suggest that the many ‘Western’ pundits, academics and politicians who regarded the Mubarak regime as a bulwark against sectarianism and a supposed ‘re-Islamization’ of and in Egypt (and Mahmood is certainly not among them) should take some note of the political bedfellows of the late Mubarak regime.

8. Here, again, a lack of distinction between Salafists of different strands would appear to be discernible on Mahmood’s part. Islamists in the classical Egyptian sense (i.e. activists aligned with the Muslim Brothers) are hardly represented among Mahmood’s interlocutors, as she notes: ‘very few of the mosque groups are affiliated with the Muslim Brothers’ (2005: 71).


10. Scholars such as Michael Mann (2005) have made similar arguments, but even though there can be no doubt that German Nazism came to power on the back of popular will in 1933, and through qualifiably democratic means, it requires more than a stretch of imagination to regard German Nazism as a quintessentially democratic movement, and the Holocaust as a result of democracy. Whatever remained of German democracy after the fall of the Weimar Republic was soon completely abolished in the course of the brutal repression of political opponents by German Nazis after 1933. The way Mahmood poses this question to ‘Muslim scholars’ of supposedly liberal democratic persuasions is thus more than a bit polemical. Popular will, post-Holocaust/Shoah, is of course not the only nor the most crucial aspect of democracy, even though a number of Islamists, including Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926–), in fact think so (Browers, 2009: 65).

11. Salafis in the mainstream Islamist Muslim Brothers’ lineage in Egypt can be said to: ‘accept the idea of political pluralism, but are fighting over its limits; they do not dispute that the principle of universal citizenship is crucial to democracy, but in practice are divided about equality between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens and between men and women’ (Ottaway and Hamzawy, 2008: 7). Browers (2009: 92) notes that, among ‘moderate Islamists’ of the wasatiyya (‘moderate’, ‘centrist’) trend, whose main exponent is the Muslim Brothers-aligned Egyptian-Qatari sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a recognition and critique of popularly held unequal notions of citizenship for non-Muslim minorities and women is lacking.

12. John L. Esposito notes that ‘Wahhabi/Salafi religious exclusivism is clearly antipluralist and often religiously intolerant of other believers, both other Muslims – in particular [the] Shia, whom they despise – as well as non-Muslims’ (2010: 77).

13. For cases in point, see Kaplan (2004) and Linkler (2005).

14. Among others who have made similar unsubstantiated allegations are Mahmood Mamdani (2002: 770–1, 2004: 132), Judith Butler (2004: 10) and Arundhati Roy (2001). It is worth noting that none of these authors provide any evidence to substantiate their claims to the effect that Osama Bin Laden was sponsored, recruited and/or trained by the CIA.

15. See Wright (2006: 127) for this, Wright refers to such a call having been made during a lecture Bin Laden held at the Red Crescent Society Hospital in Peshawar, where Ayman al-Zawahiri worked. Bin Laden is alleged to have seen a
boycott of US products as a means to support the Palestinian cause. The incident is also reported by Bergen (2006: 61).

16. Rashid (2002) also documents how sports stadiums funded by UN agencies were used by the Taliban for public executions of women charged with infractions of the shari’a. See also Filkins (2008) for this.


18. I owe this point to Associate Professor Bjørn Olav Utvik.

19. The term ‘Salafi’ was never used in the era of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, and the usage of the term has therefore resulted in often virulent debate among Salafis themselves (Wiktorowicz, 2006: 219). Al-Rasheed (2007: 3) notes that there is no consensus among Sunni Muslims as to who the pious ancestors were, but that most scholars would include the first generation of the Prophet, whereas others would stretch it to include the three generations after the Prophet.

20. As a recent contribution by Gilbert Achcar (2009) makes clear, one should be careful not to make too much of Rida’a’s supposedly liberal, modernist and rationalistic legacy, and its continuities with ‘Abduh’s legacy. ‘Abduh’s death in 1905 was followed by a turn in Rida’a’s thought which in the 1920s was to manifest itself in his spirited defences of Wahhabism, the al-Sauds of the nascent Saudi state, and in virulent attacks on Shiias and Jews (2009: 105–8, 111–20) for this. Rida’a himself was clear about the fact that being a Salafi was not sufficient to be counted among the proponents of ‘Abduh’s ‘modernist school of thought’ [madrasa fikriyya] and first publicly acknowledged his passing from the Hanafi school of law [madhab] to be a Salafi in 1928. He referred to Saudi Wahhabis as Salafis as early as 1905 (Lauzière, 2010: 375).

21. Al-Rasheed (2007: 2) consequently prefers the term ‘Wahhabiyya’, in order ‘to refer to the Saudi variant of Salafiyya’ in contradistinction to the ‘modernist’ (or ‘reformist’) Salafiyya. The main proponent of Salafism in the original lineage of Rida’a and ‘Abduh in the contemporary world is Tariq Ramadan (1962–), who describes himself as a ‘reformist Salafi’.

22. In a widely reported governmental crackdown on Salafi television stations ahead of the parliamentary elections of November 2010, the Egyptian Ministry of Information suspended the broadcasting licences of 12 of these channels, and issued warnings to 20 other channels due to their alleged incitement to religious hatred against Christians. A spokesperson for one of the most popular of these channels alleged that ‘foreign pressures’ were behind the suspension (see El Hennawy, 2010).


24. There is no reference to any such funding of literature and infrastructure to be found in Mahmood’s 2005 book. Mahmood furthermore dismisses the notion held by many scholars that Egyptian migrant workers who worked in the Gulf in
the petroboom years of the 1970s and 1980s might have contributed to the spread of more socially conservative understandings of Islam in Egypt in a short footnote (2005: 42–3).


27. The question of what this might mean, and how it is to be effected, is never answered by Mahmood. In her essay about the cartoon crisis of 2005–6 (Mahmood, 2009a), Mahmood argues that the Aristotelian concept of skhésis [archetype], which she renders as being linked to a doctrine of ‘consubstanciality’ during the second iconoclastic controversy, ‘aptly captures’ how a devout Muslim’s relationship to the Prophet Muhammad is lived and practised. However, Mahmood’s account of the notion of skhésis in Aristotle and Nikephoros, and her use of it in the context of her discussion of the cartoon crisis, are problematic (Michael Nafi, pers. comm., 27 July 2010).


References


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