

PREFACE TO THE 2012 EDITION

As I write this preface to the second edition of *Politics of Piety*, Egypt is experiencing one of its most momentous developments since the anticolonial struggles of the early twentieth century. In a stunning display of power and perseverance, Egyptian protesters from all walks of life ousted the twenty-year-old brutal dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011. Their demands were succinct and clear: the restoration of full civil and political rights under a democratic system committed to the establishment of some measure of economic justice. The fact that this revolutionary mobilization cut across divisions of political and religious affiliations, class, and gender made this a watershed moment in the history of the postcolonial Middle East. It remains to be seen whether the ruling classes of Egypt will yield to the substantive demands of the movement or whether the inertia of the system will prove intractable. Whatever the outcome may be, this grassroots movement against a notoriously corrupt police state has certainly transformed the political consciousness of ordinary Egyptians and their sense of collective agency. As I write these lines, demonstrations have spread across the Middle East, inspired by the overthrow of the Mubarak regime, echoing similar demands. The question looms large as to what the future will hold for the inhabitants of the region.

Part of the aim of this new preface is to reflect on how the arguments of *Politics of Piety* are situated in relation to these developments. How should we place the politics of the da'wa—or piety—movement in the vast coalition that brought down the Mubarak regime? How do the arguments of the book speak to the latest turn of events in Egypt? In this preface I also address broader issues related to the reception of the book. These include: (1) the relationship between agency and politics; (2) my insistence on inserting questions of embodiment and ethics into the analysis of politics; and (3) the wider implications of my argument

about da'wa/Islamic piety for theoretical debates about modern religiosity. In what follows, I take up these three issues before turning to the demands posed by the present turn of events in Egypt.

My remarks will necessarily be inadequate to those who seek a “response” to their engagements with *Politics of Piety*. No author can claim to be entirely sovereign over her text. Ultimately, the arguments of this book have taken on a life of their own; they animate conversations and debates that are well beyond the aim and scope of the book itself but have now become a part of the life and reception of *Politics of Piety*. The remarks below are therefore written in the spirit of contributing to the engagements the text has engendered rather than asserting the sovereignty of the author over it.

Agency, Politics, Hermeneutics

Since its publication, *Politics of Piety* has elicited both the praise and the ire of feminists: some have hailed the book for restoring agency to religiously devout Muslim women hitherto denounced for their patriarchal proclivities. Others have condemned the book for precisely the same reason: inasmuch as the book is read as an exposé of the “agency” of the women who constitute the piety movement, it is charged with leveling critical differences between women who are upholders of patriarchal norms (dangerous, supine, submissive) and those who fight these norms in the name of liberty and freedom (heroic subjects of history). Both these readings ignore the fact that I was not interested in delivering judgments on what counts as a feminist versus an antifeminist practice, to distinguish a subversive act from a nonsubversive one. While acts of resistance to relations of domination constitute one modality of action, they certainly do not exhaust the field of human action. Rather, the aim of this book is to develop an analytical language for thinking about modalities of agency that exceed liberatory projects (feminist, leftist, or liberal). *Politics of Piety*, however, goes beyond describing these modalities of agency to focus on two related analytical and political problems that are far more central to its architecture: (a) the kinds of capacities—embodied, rational, technical—these various modalities of agency require; and (b) the conceptions of the body, personhood, and politics these capacities presuppose, enable, and construct.

My exposition of the elaborate program of self-cultivation practiced by the women's piety movement has sometimes been characterized as a “hermeneutical exercise” that abnegates or sidesteps questions of politics. This characterization has puzzled me, since much of the book is a reflection upon the kinds of political projects presupposed and enabled by the piety movement and those it chal-

enges or remains indifferent toward. As I argue in this book, while the piety movement undoubtedly seems at times inimical and at times indifferent to feminism (understood as a project for establishing the conditions for gender equality), the pietists' main concern lies elsewhere: namely, the cultivation of submission to what its members interpret to be God's will. Despite the self-avowedly apolitical stance of the pietists, their practices have a profoundly transformative affect in the social and political fields. They have transformed the very ground on which nationalist, statist, and other kinds of secular-liberal projects can be envisioned and practiced. To ignore the transformative potential of the piety movement is to fail to understand its power and force in Egyptian society.

Politics of Piety is not a hermeneutical exercise in another important sense: its primary preoccupation has less to do with the meaning of practices than with the work they perform in the making of subjects, in creating life worlds, attachments, and embodied capacities. For example, while interpretations of the veil abound in Egypt, two main views prevail among its practitioners and its critics: one understands the veil to be a divine command; the other regards it as a symbolic marker, no different from other signifiers (religious and nonreligious) that represent a Muslim woman's identity. In *Politics of Piety* I endorse neither interpretation, since it is not the veracity of these claims that interests me. Instead, I analyze both understandings of the veil as speech acts that perform very different kinds of work in the making of a religious subject.¹ I argue in this book that to understand a bodily practice (such as veiling) as a symbolic act presumes a different relationship between the subject's exteriority and interiority from that entailed by an understanding in which a bodily act is both an expression of, and a means to, the realization of the subject.

My point is not to dismiss semiotic processes (as some critics have charged), but to inquire into practices whose assumptions about semiosis do not map onto the model of signs that stand for meaning or identity. My arguments here are informed by the work of philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Charles Sanders Peirce, and J. L. Austin, who, in their different ways, have made us think of semiotic practices in registers other than those of meaning, communication, and symbolic signification. More recently, as Talal Asad, William Connolly, Charles Hirschkind, and Webb Keane remind us in distinctly different ways, many dimensions of practice—both linguistic and nonlinguistic—cannot be grasped in terms of a theory of representation alone.

In my more recent work, I have developed this point further by thinking critically about two different understandings of the Quran among Muslims: one

¹ Following Judith Butler, I understand a speech act to include not only oral or textual enunciations but also bodily acts. See Butler 1993.

that treats it as the literal word of God and another that claims that the Quran is a symbolic text whose meaning is historically determined.² Once again, I am less interested in championing the veracity of one claim over another. I analyze both these claims as two distinct kinds of performative speech acts that enable very different conceptions of power, truth, interpretive schema, critical norms, and the reading/reciting subject. In some ways, the question of agency in *Politics of Piety* is less central to my overall argument than is an explication of the constructive work different conceptual understandings of a practice accomplish in the making of subjects and the creation of distinct social and political imaginaries. It is unfortunate that this dimension of *Politics of Piety* has been least engaged in the commentaries the book has elicited. Instead, most of the attention has focused on who is or is not deemed “an agent.”

Ethics, Politics, and Criticism

I am sometimes chided for failing to denounce the participants of the piety movement for blindly following an orthodox interpretation of the Islamic tradition and associated patriarchal values. Despite my exegesis of their elaborate program of corporeal discipline, reasoned reflection, commentary, and pedagogy, some readers of this book assume that the pietist subjects are unreflexively conformist and self-abnegating. Such a judgment fails to recognize what is at stake in my analysis of the practices of the piety movement: to lay bare a parochial and narrow conception of autonomized agency that refuses to grant legitimacy to any other form of subjectivity or criticality. Part of the task of *Politics of Piety* is to provide a thick account of disciplines of subjectivity pursued by the pietists, which profoundly challenge the very assumptions on the basis of which they are judged as passive, obsequious, and uncritical.

My point is not that the program of ethical self-cultivation pursued by the piety movement is “good” or conducive to establishing relations of gender equality, or that it should be adopted by progressives, liberals, feminists, and others. I argue instead that the disciplines of subjectivity pursued by the pietists profoundly parochialize conceptions of the subject, autonomous reason, and objectivity, through which the pietists are understood to be lacking in faculties of criticism and reason. If academic knowledge production aims to be something more than an exercise in denunciation and judgment, it must surely think beyond its own naturalized conceptions in order to grasp what other notions of criticism, evaluation, and reasoned deliberation operate in the world. This in turn requires opening up a comparative (and dare I say critical?) study of differ-

²Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire,” *Public Culture* 86:2 (2006), 323–47.

ent forms of subjectivity and concomitant disciplines of ethical self-formation. A worthy project in this vein would be the analysis of practices of self-cultivation through which a commitment to the truth of the sovereign subject and autonomized agency is produced and sustained.³ Not all the practices, I suspect, will be as reasoned as they are assumed to be.

My argument in *Politics of Piety* suggests that political projects are not only the result of coalitional organizing, ideological mobilization, and critical deliberation. They are predicated upon affective, ethical, and sensible capacities that are often ignored as consequential to the analysis of politics. Departing from one's accustomed political stance and adopting a new one requires more than an ideational, judgmental, or conceptual shift. It necessitates a whole series of affective and sensible reorientations, some of which are undertaken systematically and others of which are acquired through social and cultural exposure and imbibing. Social movements sometimes try to thematize and stage such practices of ethical self-transformation. Various examples come to mind, including gay pride marches; collective actions staged by the civil rights movement to performatively create a different space for the exercise of civil and political equality; and the establishment of public soup kitchens in the 1960s to perform/establish a distinct ethics of care. Practices may also be undertaken on a smaller scale wherein people teach themselves to inhabit a different kind of a body, sensibility, aesthetics, or argumentative form. *Politics of Piety* is a thematic exploration of the ethical practices and affective attachments that undergird distinct political projects. As such, this book does not offer a sociology of the piety movement, but forces us instead to link what are often presumed to be two distinct domains of human life in liberal political theory: politics and ethics, each supposedly sequestered in the public and private domains.

Religion and Religious Subjectivity

Is the model of religiosity and religious formation I discuss in this book applicable only to Islam and the da'wa movement, or does it extend to other religious traditions as well? The dominant understanding of religion against which I am working in this book is one that regards religion as a set of beliefs expressed in a set of propositions to which an individual gives assent. While this privatized and individualized concept of religion has a Protestant genealogy, it has come to command a normative force in modernity and is often upheld as the measure against which the adequacy of other religious traditions is measured and judged.

³ I have written more on this topic in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, ed. Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

This secularized conception of religiosity commands particular weight in the development of non-Protestant religious traditions—particularly non-Western traditions—in the modern period and has largely transformed them from within. This has to do not so much with the “superior” conception of religiosity that Protestantism embodies but with the inequality of power relations that characterizes the relationship between Western Christendom and its Others, the West and the non-West—an inequality that sets up the history of Protestant Christianity as the entelechy that all other religious traditions must emulate in order to become truly modern.⁴

For a scholar of contemporary Islam, reading the scholarship on early modern Judaism evokes many parallels, key among them the argument that Jewish law and its concern with “orthopraxy” made Judaism incommensurable with modernity. In these arguments, Jewish law (like present day shari’a) was regarded as indexical of not only a lesser and unenlightened form of religiosity but also the social and political backwardness of the community, rendering it incapable of inhabiting the norms of a modern polity (similar to how Muslims are portrayed these days). It is not the legitimacy of this judgment that interests me, but rather the various movements of reform that such parameters and judgments have unleashed in response within these traditions modeled on the Protestant Reformation.⁵ Importantly, this push toward reform has invariably been met with resistance of various kinds, often described pejoratively as traditionalist or fundamentalist.⁶ Such a depreciatory account does little to analyze what was/is at stake in the resistance mobilized against secularized notions of religiosity, and the alternative concepts of religion, the subject, ethics, and morality that these movements propagate.

Politics of Piety is an attempt to understand a contemporary movement within Islam—the da’wa movement—that is articulated against many of the concepts, sensibilities, practices, and forms of life associated with a secular-liberal understanding of religion (as a privatized and individualized system of belief). The shari’a enjoys a pride of place in the pietists’ practices—shari’a understood not as a state-centered juridical discourse but as a discourse of ethical and moral cultivation (not dissimilar to Halakha, or traditional Jewish law, in Judaism). It would be a mistake, however, to understand this movement in oppositional terms

⁴ For a discussion of this point, see my essay “Can Secularism Be Other-wise?” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁵ For an influential account of this in Judaism, see Jonathan Hess, *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002). For a general account of how the emergence of the universal category of religion is indebted to the history of Protestantism, see Talal Asad 1993.

⁶ For a powerful critique of such a reductionist account, see Jay M. Harris, “‘Fundamentalism’: Objections from a Modern Jewish Historian,” in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 137–74.

alone, since secularism and secularity provide the structuring conditions for the articulation of the da'wa/piety movement. As such, despite its avowed antagonism toward secularism, the da'wa/piety movement presupposes many key secular concepts (about time, history, causality, and so on), making the movement far more hybrid in character than its practitioners would acknowledge.

That said, the da'wa movement also challenges many aspects of secular religiosity, key among them the conceptual relationship posited between embodied practice and the believing subject. Simply put, the Protestant conception of religiosity presupposes a distinction between a privatized interiority that is the proper locus of belief and a public exteriority that is an expression of this belief. In this view, while rituals and bodily practices might represent belief, they are not essential to its acquisition or expression. Much of the energy of modern religious reformers has been spent trying to establish and stabilize the distinction between the "true" nature of belief in divinity (abstract, universal, a-contextual) and the fickle world of religious signs whose meanings are *this-worldly* and only contingently (not necessarily) related to the abstractions they signify.⁷ As I have discussed elsewhere, part of the aim of many contemporary Muslim reformers writing under the rubric of "liberal Islam" is to establish this distinction by grounding it in the resources and scriptures of Islam.⁸

In contrast to such an understanding of religion, the pious subjects of this book posit a very different relationship between outward bodily acts (including rituals, liturgies, and worship) and inward belief (state of the soul). Not only are the two inseparable in their conception, but, more importantly, belief is the product of outward practices, rituals, and acts of worship rather than simply an expression of them. Why is this difference consequential? Because far from being an ideational or intellectual stance, it affects the way people live and order their lives; their sense of self and personhood; their understanding of authority and its proper relationship to individual desires and capacities; and distinct conceptions of human flourishing. As I suggested earlier, this topography of the self has profound consequences for how politics is imagined and lived. As a result, battles between orthodox and reformist interpretations of religion (in a variety of traditions) often enfold contrastive conceptions of the subject and politics—the importance of which is often overlooked by students of religion and politics alike.

My analysis of religious formation among the pietists has resonances with similar kinds of practices found in a number of traditions, key among them Christianity and Judaism. My recourse to an Aristotelian framework to analyze

⁷ It is this conception that makes the project of comparative religion possible, in that the phenomenal forms of religion (rituals, scriptures, liturgies, acts of worship) come to be understood as the cultural and temporal representations of the abstract and atemporal truth of the divine.

⁸ Mahmood 2006.

the pedagogy of ethical cultivation among the women of the da'wa movement has important resonances in Christianity that I discuss in chapter 4. I found the Aristotelian tradition to be relevant not only because of its rearticulation in contemporary Islam, but also because the behavioral pedagogy it offers presents a very different account of subject formation from the one presumed in theoretical debates in the academy on this topic. By reversing the direction between outward bodily acts and subjective interiority (the former enact the latter rather than represent or express the latter), the Aristotelian model raises interesting questions about bodily capacities and routine daily acts that make particular kinds of subjects and sociopolitical imaginaries possible.⁹

Since I wrote *Politics of Piety*, I have received notes from a range of academics and nonacademics who have found my discussion of the Aristotelian conception of *habitus* useful for thinking about a range of practices that fall outside the purview of the traditions I mention above. For example, a long-time practitioner of martial arts wrote that the arguments of *Politics of Piety* resonated with his experience of teaching and practicing tae kwon do. People are attracted to martial arts, he noted, for a variety of reasons: some want to get stronger, others pursue it to learn self-defense, and yet others might want to enact a Bruce Lee fantasy. Over time, however, some come to realize that there are goods internal to the martial arts tradition that are beyond any such ends—ends that can, after all, be achieved through other means (such as working out in a gym). Such a realization, he suggests, often changes one's relationship to the practice, which becomes something more than a means to goals that are contingently related to the practice but not central to its conceptual architecture. For such people, performative bodily behavior becomes a means for realizing virtues that are internal to the practice of martial arts itself.

I quote my martial arts correspondent here in part because he captures a dimension of my argument that was not entirely apparent to me when I wrote *Politics of Piety* and has since expanded my thinking. It has also helped me articulate a response to those readers who have read this book as a culturalist argument and assume it to be about "Muslim women" or Islamic religiosity as such. This is a mistake for two primary reasons. One, there are just as many Muslims (women and men) who embrace the conception of religiosity I emphasize in this text as there are Muslims who strongly disagree with it. Two, the conception of religiosity that the pietists embrace is extant in many religious traditions, often eliciting the same kinds of dismissals that the women's da'wa movement encounters. These dismissals, I suggest, should be analyzed as diagnostic of the normative place assigned to religion in a secular imaginary. While the ethnographic mate-

⁹ My work, as my readers know well, is inspired by the scholarship of Talal Asad, who first opened this question to intellectual reflection in the *Genealogies of Religion*, and has since taken it up in regard to secular formations as well (Asad 2003).

rial presented in this book is about the da'wa movement in Egypt, my analysis of this movement raises issues that cut across the divide between the West and the non-West, the Muslim and the non-Muslim world.

The Egyptian Uprising and Politics of Piety

The fact that the Egyptian uprising in 2011 did not have pronounced Islamic overtones or Islamist leadership has led a number of scholars to hastily pronounce the dawning of a new “post-Islamist era” where the Islamic politics that dominated the Middle East over the last two decades have become irrelevant. Not only does this rush to judgment need to be rethought, but the very meaning of the terms “Islamic/Islamist politics” should be unpacked. While there is no doubt that the preeminent Islamist political party, the Muslim Brotherhood, like other Egyptian political parties, did not play a key organizing role in the demonstrations, it would be wrong to conclude that Egyptians with strong Islamic proclivities were not an integral part of the mobilization. In fact, all reports indicate that these demonstrations were significant precisely because they did not rely on old networks of mobilization, instead drawing support from all sectors of Egyptian society, cutting across secularist, leftist, liberal, and Islamist lines. The demands of the protesters did not have a religious dimension and centered around three points: the restoration of political and civil rights, the establishment of a just democratic system, and the reinstatement of some semblance of a social welfare state.

The fact that the uprising took this shape did not surprise many of us who have been following Egyptian politics over the past decade. In contrast to the mid-1990s, by 2008—when I returned to Cairo to do field research—the old entrenched divisions between the secularists and Islamists had softened. The newly emergent opposition press published writers from both sides of the divide and reported on various atrocities the regime committed regardless of the victims’ political and religious affiliations.¹⁰ Faced with the increasing decline in public services, rising poverty, and the impudent and ubiquitous brutality of the security police, most Egyptians had come to feel that their common enemy was the corrupt and nepotistic government rather than the factions between them. Young Egyptians, fed up with the inertia of the geriatric leadership of opposition parties (including the Muslim Brotherhood), turned to issue-based activ-

¹⁰ In the mid-1990s, there was only one prominent opposition newspaper, *al-Sh'ab*, published from an Islamist point of view. It was shut down by the Mubarak government in the late 1990s. In contrast, in 2008 there were at least three independent newspapers (*al-Dustour*, *al-Masry al-Youm*, and *al-Badeel*), two of which have prominent Islamic intellectuals contributing regular columns along with secular writers.

ism, working across divisions that their elders could not overcome. Social networking technologies and the Internet (blogs, Facebook, Twitter) were one avenue for this new activism, but there were others, key among them labor union politics that cut across lines of difference to create a common political project.¹¹ A small indication of this transformation was the suggestion made by a prominent young blogger from the Muslim Brotherhood in 2008 that instead of the slogan “Islam is the solution,” extant in the 1990s, the Brothers should adopt “Egypt for Egyptians,” which spoke far better to the aspirations of most people. This was indeed the slogan that emanated from the protesters across Egypt in 2011.¹²

So what does this mean for the da’wa movement? Not only is it alive and vibrant, but many of those involved in it participated in the protests and did not find their demands for political and civic freedoms to be incongruent with their commitment to Islamic forms of piety. Furthermore, I would argue that it is precisely because their commitment to piety was not premised on a state-centered conception of social change that they could embrace the movement for the ouster of the Mubarak regime without considering it a modification of their religious stance. The members of the piety movement were as affected as other Egyptians by the corruption and brutality of the Mubarak regime and the impoverishment of daily life it had engendered. In fact, the Mubarak government had been especially brutal in the 1990s toward Egyptians—particularly men—who displayed overt signs of religiosity, viewing them as potential members of Islamic militant organizations. It is no surprise, therefore, that pietists joined their fellow citizens to demand the government’s ouster.

The judgment that this is a “post-Islamist” era is complicated for another reason. The term “Islamist” often enfolds within itself the assumption that those who ascribe to Islamic forms of sociability (such as the ones propagated by the da’wa movement) are opposed to democratic political and economic formations.¹³ The fact that Egyptian Muslims who exhibited signs of this sociability were an integral part of the democratic protests of 2011 casts doubt on the easy line of causality drawn between abidance by conservative social mores and the danger posed to democratic projects. Do orthodox religious sensibilities, includ-

¹¹ For my comments on the Egyptian uprising, see “Architects of the Egyptian Revolution,” <http://www.thenation.com/article/158581/architects-egyptian-revolution>.

¹² Charles Hirschkind, “The Road to Tahrir,” <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/02/09/the-road-to-tahrir/>.

¹³ Post-Mubarak Egypt has witnessed the emergence of groups who label themselves “Salafi.” They are known to have launched attacks on Sufi shrines, Coptic churches, and women not wearing the hijab. The sociological basis of these self-described Salafi groups is unclear, and they are rumored to be part of the “anti-revolutionary” trend in Egypt. While the Salafis share the emphasis on sartorial markers of piety with the da’wa movement, there is no necessary relationship between them. Many in the da’wa movement have condemned the attacks on the Sufi shrines and the churches.

ing those that challenge secular norms of sociability, actually threaten the entire edifice of a liberal democratic system? If so, how? Or does the threat that democracy currently faces in countries like Egypt stem far more from geopolitical and neo-liberal formations than from orthodox Islamic social mores? As the recent events in Egypt show, the answers to these questions are far more open-ended than has been assumed so far.

Notably, Egypt is quite different from Saudi Arabia, Iran, or Pakistan—three countries where Islamic social mores have proliferated over the last several decades, and where the goals of political, civil, and economic equality remain stubbornly elusive. In each of these three cases, while the authoritarian regimes have opportunistically used the “morality” card to retain a tight hold over power, it would be hard to conclude that orthodox Islamic social mores constitute the greatest threat to the establishment of substantive democracy in these countries. There are other far more important factors that make such a project difficult—such as the Saudi monarchy and its geopolitical and economic coalition with the United States; the authoritarian clerical regime in Iran that draws sustenance from its oppositional stance against the Saudi-American geopolitical alliance; or the military junta in Pakistan that has made a Faustian bargain with the U.S. government and the Taliban alike to maintain its suffocating grip on power. Egypt’s democratic aspirations are subject to similar and parallel geopolitical forces; while the da’wa/piety movement is an important player in the national landscape, it has hardly been the key impediment to the development of projects for social and political equality.

The hasty judgment that the revolutionary uprising in Egypt heralds a “post-Islamist” era also fails to take into account the transformations the da’wa movement has wrought in Egyptian society—the sensibilities it has created, the lifestyles it has made extant, the gender norms it has established—all of which are not going to dissolve or become irrelevant overnight. Whatever the sociopolitical struggles and projects that lie ahead, it is clear that they would emerge from a sociality that has been deeply marked by the activities of the piety/da’wa movement. It seems to me that the issues *Politics of Piety* raised are even more relevant now, but I suspect that the courage and ingenuity of the Egyptian people will have a lot more to teach us than this book could anticipate. I look forward to this challenge.

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Berkeley, California

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