

“Reflecting on the Politics of Piety”

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Abstract: This essay reflects on Saba Mahmood’s book, *The Politics of Piety, The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, which analyzes conceptions of self, agency, and politics among the female practitioners of Da’wa in Egypt. Mahmood draws upon Judith Butler and Michel Foucault to demonstrate that the manner by which practitioners inhabit the norms governing their lives, is the source of their agency and influence in Islamic society. I provide a feminist analysis of the Da’wa conceptions of agency by drawing parallels with two distinct North American phenomena: the emergence of Women’s Clubs in the 19th Century as purveyors of social and moral reform, and the Christian Patriarchy movement promoting the doctrines of complementarianism and pronatalism.

Keywords: Saba Mahmood, Da’wa movement, agency, subjectivation

This essay is a reflection on Saba Mahmood’s book, *The Politics of Piety, The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005) which analyzes conceptions of self, agency, and politics among the female practitioners of Da’wa, or women’s mosque movement, in Egypt. The movement is a part of the larger Islamic Revival occurring since the 1970’s, marked by increased “religious sociability” across the sociocultural landscape. Mahmood’s project is prompted by the uneasy relationship between feminism and religion, particularly Islam, and the question of why women may choose to involve themselves in socio-religious movements that further their subordination. Mahmood’s analysis draws upon Judith Butler and Michel Foucault to demonstrate that the manner by which practitioners inhabit the norms governing their lives, is the source of their agency and influence in Islamic society. In

response, I draw parallels between Da'wa conceptions of agency with two distinct North American phenomena: the emergence of Women's Clubs in the 19th century as purveyors of social and moral reform, and the Christian patriarchy movement promoting the doctrines of complementarianism and pronatalism.

Mahmood begins her inquiry with an interrogation of the subject of freedom. She challenges the notion of freedom and the desire for freedom that are embedded in Western secular-liberal philosophical traditions as universal and transferable to the Islamic context. According to Mahmood, the secular-liberal tradition, of which Western feminism is a part, is posited on the assumptions that freedom is innate and universal to the human condition, and tied to conceptions of autonomy that situate the individual as the ultimate authority in determining his or her destiny. These traditions suggest two distinct kinds of freedom: negative freedom which is the absence of obstacles to self-guided choice and action, and positive freedom which is the capacity to realize one's will through self-mastery and self-governance, unencumbered by the regulations of custom, tradition, transcendent will, and so forth. Central to both kinds of freedom is the concept of individual autonomy, or the ability to choose one's desires regardless of the content of the desire.

The emphasis on individual autonomy is clearly a point of conflict with a poststructuralist feminist reading of the Da'wa movement (or of liberal conceptions of freedom in general). The prevailing discourse on autonomy fails to account for the emotional, embodied, and embedded character of people. From a poststructuralist feminist perspective, the idea of total autonomy is illusory because the individual is never absolute. In fact, the emergence of self occurs in relationship

to community, and exists in a continual tension to it. Women allied with the piety movement are exercising agency insofar as they make a choice for participation and, in making that choice, adopt practices and virtues that give public expression to their internal beliefs. Their mode of agency is distinct from the forms of autonomy that eschew tradition in the cultivation of selfhood, because the teachings and rituals and performance of ritual practices are what actualize the self. Thus, agency in Da'wa is found within the practice of piety to which the subject subordinates herself.

Ah—but here is the problem for feminists: how can the concept of agency coexist with that of subordination? Why would women choose to adhere to traditional virtues that are associated with their subordination in social and political life? Is the piety movement in fact a subversive movement that manipulates structures of hierarchy and patriarchy in order to open pathways for positional power and resistance against oppressive norms that dictate and delimit women's place in the world? Mahmood warns readers against imposing their Western feminist agenda of resistance/opposition into the motivation of Da'wa practitioners. Instead, Mahmood appeals to the theoretical configurations of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to examine the agentic capacity that is inherent in the movement. Mahmood's position here is that we must detach agency from the goals of progressive politics, which privileges resistance to norms, in order to discover instead how we inhabit norms.

Mahmood elucidates two key insights from the work of Foucault in this regard. The first insight is that power cannot be understood solely on the model of domination, but rather as a strategic relation of force that is productive of new

desires, discourses, and so forth. The second insight is that the subject is produced by rather than precedes these relations. Thus, the paradox of subjectivation is that the very processes and conditions by which a person is subordinated are the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent. Mahmood elaborates further through Butler's theory of performativity whereby the destabilization and resignification of power discourses occur through the reiteration of the practices that act to constrain. The act of doing (in contrast to the act of resisting) is productive of new discourses, and therefore agentic.

These insights are brought alive in examples from Mahmood's ethnographic research of six neighborhood mosques populated by Da'wa practitioners and teachers. Her examples demonstrate the deliberations of women who are striving for actualization within secular or nationalistic climates that challenge this identity. The issues with which they grapple are not theological abstractions, but real concerns that impact their daily lives: how to deal with anger; how to cultivate habits of shyness or modesty when these don't feel natural; how to handle a husband who drinks alcohol and views pornography; how to work in close physical contact with men; and so forth. In particular, the example of Abir and her wayward husband, Jamal, shows how women have inhabited the norms for Islamic women in a way that empowers them to reach for a higher moral status in their homes and in society. Abir appealed to the transcendent will of God and the traditions and rituals of piety as the grounds for her authority, which included an ongoing struggle over her attendance at mosque classes. Mahmood writes that

Abir's ability to break from the norms of what it meant to be a dutiful wife were predicated upon her learning to perfect a tradition that accorded her a subordinate status to her husband. Abir's divergence from approved standards of wifely conduct, therefore, did not

represent a break with the signifying system of Islamic norms, but was saturated with them, and enabled by the capacities that the practices of these norms endowed her with.ⁱ

What is it that women like Abir want? What are the new desires and discourses produced through subjectivation? Mahmood makes it clear that Abir and Da'wa practitioners are seeking not to change gender relations so that men and women are "equal" in a social sense of the word. Neither do they seek to change Islam as a theological system. Instead, the Da'wa movement aims to transform society by closing the gap between religious beliefs and daily conduct, with ritual and devotion as the means by which this transformation occurs. Mahmood's adaption of an Aristotelian view that ethical acts are good only if they achieve their goals in a prescribed behavioral form, posits that bodily acts are critical markers in the embodiment of agency.

Mahmood's explication of the Da'wa movement establishes a lens for interpreting the instrumentality of religious practice and belief in achieving agency. As I read *Politics of Piety*, I drew parallels between the Da'wa practitioners and their North American counterparts from the 19th century who established Women's Clubs as vehicles for self-development and social reform. The Club women were acting within their sphere of influence (which was a very limited sphere considering that social convention deemed their proper place to be the home); and they were driven forward with a moral charge based in their Christians beliefs. The Club women formed associations as a way of strengthening society by extending their ordained "civilizing" influence beyond the home. I see a similar influence with the piety movement, although there are also significant historical differences between the

two. The Club movement segued women's entrance into the public realm and their eventual demands for political inclusion and radical social change.ⁱⁱ

It is at this juncture that the Club movement and the Da'wa movement diverge, and Da'wa joins hands with the Christian Patriarchy movement. The Patriarchy movement, like Da'wa, is prescriptive in promoting piety in daily life, primarily through the doctrines of complementarianism and pronatalism. Christian complementarianism, based in a literal interpretation of Biblical text, believes that men and women realize full and equal humanity only through acceptance of their proscribed roles. Men are deigned as the leaders, protectors, and providers and women are the helpmates and nurturers of the family. Pronatalism in the Christian patriarchy context shuns any form of family planning (including natural family planning), requiring that women accept all children God gives to them as a demonstration of radical faith and obedience. Further, a family's fecundity is its means for expanding God's kingdom by having more children than their adversaries.

Consider these words from Nancy Leigh DeMoss, Christian radio host and advocate of the True Woman movement:

I began to wonder what might happen in our day if even a small number of devoted, intentional women would begin to pray and believe God for a revolution of a different kind—a counterrevolution—within the evangelical world... Unlike most revolutions, this counterrevolution does not require that we march in the streets or send letters to Congress or join yet another organization. It does not require us to leave our homes; in fact, for many women, it calls them back into their homes. It requires only that we humble ourselves, that we learn, affirm, and live out the biblical pattern of womanhood, and that we teach the ways of God to the next generation.ⁱⁱⁱ

According to DeMoss, the religious sociability of the evangelical counterrevolution is signified by a prescriptive biblical womanhood of caregiving and

homemaking. However, anyone living in the United States knows that what is implied in this call to liberation through submission is hardly confined to the home or family. As the evangelical movement organizes, its political impact grows and becomes apparent in the enactment of policies and institutions that jeopardize the freedoms of women outside the Patriarchy movement. It is possible for me, as a feminist, to regard the work of the Da'wa movement in Egypt with generosity. Frankly, my physical and material life is not immediately threatened by their moral project. But what about my counterparts in Egypt? Women who, like me, do not align with a theologically conservative movement that upholds gender subordination, however it is justified? What recourse do these women have, especially when we imagine the combined effects of Da'wa, Arab nationalism, and political Islamism? Egyptian women whose relations with their husbands and extended kin are less than satisfactory may find empowerment and agency through the practice of Da'wa. In these instances, Da'wa sustains women if they choose to "endure," or enables them to muster the courage to leave. But are the choices of enduring or leaving enough? What about the rest of us? The (im)possibilities leave me feeling quite undone.

i Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety, The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2005), p. 177.

ii Kaminer, Wendy. *Women Volunteering, The Pleasure, Pain, and Politics of Unpaid Work from 1830 to the Present* (Norwood, MA: Anchor Press, 1984).

iii DeMoss, Nancy Leigh, *Biblical Womanhood in the Home* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books 2002), p. 13.