

## Second thoughts about the anthropology of Islam, or how to make sense of grand schemes in everyday life

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### Abstract

A growing body of anthropological research has turned to study Islam as a discursive tradition that informs the attempts of Muslims to live pious and moral lives, the affects and emotions they cultivate and the challenges they pose to a liberal secular ideology. While this turn has provided direction for a number of innovative studies, it appears to stop short of some key questions regarding everyday religious and moral practice, notably the ambivalence, the inconsistencies and the openness of people's lives that never fit into the framework of a single tradition. In short, there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam. To find ways to account for both the ambivalence of people's everyday lives and the often perfectionist ideals of good life, society and self they articulate, I argue that we may have to talk a little less about traditions, discourses and powers and a little more about the existential and pragmatic sensibilities of living a life in a complex and often troubling world. By broadening our focus to include the concerns, practice and experience of everyday life in its various moments and directions, we may eventually also be better able to make sense of the significance of a grand scheme like Islam in it.

### Keywords

anthropology, Islam, discursive tradition, secularism, everyday life

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Islam has become a central topic for the anthropological (and other) study of people, societies, traditions and concepts that in one way or another can be called Muslim. Studies of political movements, education, morality, migration and diaspora and many other issues have become increasingly embedded in a paradigm of Islamic-ness, with publication titles over and over again referring to »The role of Islam in...«, »Muslims in...«, »Islam and...« etc. Given the indeed great significance of Islam in the lives of a great number of people around the world these days, this is not entirely past the point. We are well advised to take religion seriously and to avoid the pitfalls involved in reducing religious pursuits to economical or political ones (Starrett 1998; Lambek 2000; Mahmood 2005). There is a problem of focus, however. This paper has grown out of a sense that the ways some influential recent

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anthropological research has taken »Islam« as the Archimedean point to study the lives of people who in one way or another adhere to the message of Muhammad privileges a conceptual engagement with the Islamic-ness of its subjects in a way that needs to be balanced. To put it more provocatively, there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam.

This requires some explanation. Too much Islam in what respect? Isn't the anthropology of Islam, after all, about Islam? I think that this seemingly straightforward assumption may actually be part of the problem. To explain what I mean, I will try to briefly point out two peculiarities that characterise many anthropologies of Islam.

First, ethnographies about the religious lives of Muslims often privilege people who consciously present themselves as pious, committed Muslims and who participate in the activities of religious groups and organisations - in other words, people who share a sense of activist commitment. This is not to say that it is not important to look at dedicated activists. It certainly is. But most people are not dedicated activists. Focussing on the very pious in moments when they are being very pious (in mosque study groups, for example) risks taking those moments when people talk about religion as religious persons (at different times, they can talk about very different things and enact rather different sides of their personality) as the paradigmatic ones, and thus unwittingly reproducing the particular ideological aspiration of Islamist and Islamic revivalist movements: the privileging of Islam as the supreme guideline of all fields of life.

It is evident that in many places, definitely so in Egypt where I have conducted my fieldwork, adherence to Islam really is very important for people, and has become more so in the past couple of decades. This is something that needs to be recognised and accounted for. But in many ethnographies of Muslims' lives there has emerged a more far-reaching way to a priori privilege the Muslimness of the people involved and the Islamic-ness of the projects they pursue. This, then, is the first part of an explanation: There is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam in the sense of a lack of balance between the emphasis on religious commitment and a not always sufficient account of the lives of which it is a part.

Second, there is a peculiar preoccupation with the question as to what Islam is. In recent years, many of my colleagues have been highlighting that they study Islam as a discursive tradition. As a PhD student, this was one of the first things I learned in the staff seminars of our institute. Meanwhile, I have come to find it rather peculiar that people find it necessary in the first place to state what they think Islam is. The anthropology of Christianity, in comparison, appears much less preoccupied with the question as to what kind of object of study Christianity is. Why, then, would we need

to have one answer to the question about what Islam is? After all, it can be rather different things depending on the questions we ask. This is not to join the argument that there are many »Islams«. What I mean is that Islam, like any major faith, is not simply something - it is a part of people's lives, thoughts, acts, societies, histories and more. Consequently, it can be many different things - a moral idiom, a practice of self-care, a discursive tradition, an aesthetic sensibility, a political ideology, a mystical quest, a source of hope, a cause of anxiety, an identity, an enemy - you name it. The second part of an explanation, then, is that there is too much Islam in the sense that the anthropology of Islam has a preoccupation with defining its field of study, a preoccupation that may not be very helpful for understanding the significance of Islam as a part of people's lives.

These two peculiarities are both related to the way »Islam« in the anthropology of Islam has become more than a just a subject matter. The privileging of Islam as the key to the lives of people of Muslim faith allows »Islam« to emerge as a class of its own, a paradigm of study that is attractive and accessible for a growing body of graduate courses, PhD theses, funding applications and research papers. The anthropology of Islam appears to have become more than simply a sub-field of the anthropology of religion that has its focus on Islam. The anthropology of Islam is a project concerned with methodological debates of its own, guided by a sense about Islam not only being a religion different from, say, Hinduism, but a different kind of an issue altogether, one that requires a disciplinary approach of its own.

In this process, two key topics have emerged as guiding paradigms of much of the recent anthropological study of Islam: the concept of Islam as a discursive tradition, and a focus on the cultivation of moral affect grounded in that tradition. These topics have provided direction for a number of innovative studies that often share a focus on Muslims who consciously and consistently aim to be pious, moral and disciplined, their debates about how to do so, the challenges they face and the challenges they pose to a liberal secular ideology of subjectivity and normativity. Some of this research is very good and has provided significant progress for our theoretical understanding of embodiment, power and ideology. The problem with this line of studies, however, is that they are somewhat out of balance. There is a certain tendency to project Islam as a perfectionist ethical project of self-discipline, at the cost of the majority of Muslims who - like most of humankind - are sometimes but not always pious and who follow various moral aims and at times immoral ones. The ideals and aspirations people express and the everyday lives they live are characterised by complexity, ambiguity, reflectivity, openness, frustration and tragedy. They argue for discipline at times and for freedom at others,

but often live lives that lack both. If we want to account for the significance of Islam in people's lives, we have to account for it in this wider context.

In this paper I argue for an existential and ethnographic approach that accounts for the motivations, experiences, complexities and ambiguities of everyday lives. To understand the complex logic of lived experience, we will have to take the inherent ambiguity of people's lives as the starting point, just as we have to locate their world-views in both the local contexts they are physically acting in as well as the global connections, both imagined and enacted, they locate themselves in. These are not merely exceptions from some kind of normality; on the contrary they are the normality of people's lives – even those who at times argue for holistic and perfectionist ideologies.

My critique is empirical and methodological more than it is theoretical, and so are the suggestions I present at the end of this paper. What concerns me is the question how we can study and understand people's lives in a way that credits the importance of religious and other traditions, ideologies and expectations without losing sight of the complexities of life experience, the powers to which people are subjected and the active reimagination and reinvention of traditions and ideologies that constantly takes place in everyday life.

With this critique I take issue especially with a research programme that has become very productive and influential in recent years. Characterised by the keywords piety, ethics and discursive tradition, this research programme is often associated with the work of Talal Asad and his influential intervention in the *Anthropology of Islam* (1986). My critique is not, however, directed at the work of Asad and his concept of Islam as a discursive tradition. It is a good concept, and while I do have certain reservations about it (Schielke 2007), I do not intend to be involved in a conceptual critique here. What I am interested in here is not concepts as such but what is accomplished through them.

Instead, I wish to offer some points of – hopefully constructive – criticism about what has been accomplished by a much wider research programme that has taken discursive tradition as its keyword. This is a research programme that has achieved some significant insights, but also created some problems that need to be tackled. In the following I argue that most of the key insights and issues of this research programme, notably ethics and the cultivation of affect, are highly productive but may need to be balanced by a more existential approach that foregrounds the many concerns and pursuits of everyday life. Some issues however, notably the juxtaposition of the Islamic and the secular/liberal, are flawed and may need to be revised in favour of an approach that is more perceptive of the situational, pragmatic and incomplete nature of discursive power.

I open the enquiry with a more theoretical discussion of two key issues, first, the search to understand what Islam »is«, and second, the current turn to a study of Islam through the notions of tradition, ethics and piety in juxtaposition with secular and liberal powers. I then return to the everyday world that is the site of my fieldwork in Egypt in order to point out some key issues that I see as helpful for reaching a better understanding about what it actually means to live a life that, among other things, can be a Muslim life.

### **What Islam »is«**

Many of the first and groundbreaking anthropological approaches to Islam between the 1960's and 80's tried to explain what Islam actually is. The answers – the blueprint of a social order (Gellner 1981), or the locally embedded specific version of a greater symbolic order (Geertz 1968) or a multitude of culturally specific »Islams« (El-Zein 1977) were unsatisfactory (see Asad 1986; Varisco 2005; Marranci 2008). Interestingly, some of the best works from this period did not even try to explain what Islam is; instead they offered some good accounts about what it means to live as a Muslim in a specific historical and cultural situation (e.g. Gilsenan 2000 [1982]; Abu-Lughod 1996 [1986]). Since then, however, Talal Asad (1986) has come up with a very powerful solution that has helped to fortify the question about what Islam is as a standard part of teaching, PhD theses, and theoretical sections of research papers.

According to Asad, Islam is a discursive tradition created by the generations of Muslims debating the correct form of practice with a view to its past, present and future. While extremely popular among anthropologists, this view has not remained uncontested. For example, Gabriele Marranci (2008) has argued that Islam is essentially an emotional category, that Islam is about the feeling of being a Muslim. But this is not the key point for me. What concerns me is the question what it is about Islam that it makes it so important to understand what it »is«? Why is it not sufficient to say that Islam is a religion? Asad has a good theoretical point against the study of Islam as a religion: the category of »religion« in the social sciences, he points out, is the outcome of a very specific European development in Christianity and carries the very likely risk of levelling the specific features of religious traditions around the world – notably the Muslim notion of *dîn* (religion), which is both vaster and narrower than the social scientific category (Asad 1993). Vaster because it involves many more fields of life, and narrower because it is a normative notion. There is a very common assumption among Muslims that *dîn* is a true religion revealed by God, including Islam, Christianity and Judaism, but excluding Hinduism, Buddhism, Bahá'ism, etc. From this point of view, an anthropology

of »religion« that posits Islam as belonging to the same class of things as Buddhism would be rather beside the point.

But if Asad is rightly sceptical of the heuristic value of the term »religion«, his students are very confident about the heuristic value of another general notion: tradition. Asad's name is nowadays regularly mentioned in articles and conference papers whose authors explain that they »understand Islam as a discursive tradition«. As mentioned before, it is not my intention in this context to discuss the premises and implications of the notion of discursive tradition. What I want to focus on now is that those who argue that Islam is a discursive tradition do not argue that Christianity, Marxism, human rights, anthropology etc., are also discursive traditions – although this certainly can be argued and has been taken into consideration in the context of the anthropology of Christianity (Anidjar 2009). They are not involved in the general study of discursive traditions, but in the study of Islam in particular, and they find it important for the purposes of their analysis and argumentation to specify what Islam is. The label »Islam as a discursive tradition« as it is commonly used these days is thus less often about an actual inquiry into discursive traditions (but see Salvatore 2007), and more often about an attempt to find a frame that allows one to look at Islam as a whole.

What, then, does »Islam« explain that makes it so important to know what it is? Evidently it is important, otherwise it wouldn't keep us so busy.

Islam is the name of the religion founded by Muhammad on the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century A.D. In the literal meaning of the Arabic word, »Islam« means submission, that is, submission of the human to God. In its archaic meaning, Islam is an act, and therefore has no agency. Agency, if any, lies with the human believer who submits her or his will and acts under the supreme agency of God. And yet Muslims today speak of Islam less as an act of the believer and more as an entity external to the believer. What is important is that at some point, probably long before even the oldest Western anthropologists were born, a gradual conceptual shift began that turned Islam from an act and a disposition into a corpus of norms, procedures and attitudes, and eventually into system that itself prescribes acts and attitudes, a system that, metaphorically or literally, is granted agency that is God's: commanding, prohibiting, knowing, describing, sanctioning.<sup>2</sup> So the Orientalists and

<sup>2</sup> It is necessary to specify that historically speaking, there probably was no direct shift from »God« to »Islam« as the focus of attention. Importantly, Muslim intellectual traditions typically focussed on scholarly masters and related to their specific arguments and the traditions they established. The increasingly systemic quality of »Islam« emerged through these intellectual traditions, but it only became dominant in the 20th century, when mass education and media made traditions of scholarly transmission increasingly obsolete

later the anthropologists of Islam already encountered an abstract notion of religion as a corpus, and to an increasing degree also as a system and as an agent (and this encounter has further contributed to Muslims' increasing objectification of Islam during the past century, see Starrett 1998). Although most of them were not believers in Islam, and some of them even openly hostile to it, they nevertheless found it very easy to deal with it as something, an entity, a thing.

Why is it so convenient to deal with the adherence of people to Muhammad's message as an entity? The fact that Muslims themselves commonly do so is not a sufficient answer, for the typical answers given by anthropologists differ a lot from the typical answers given by Muslims (that is, Muslims not trained in anthropology). For Muslims, Islam is neither a blueprint, nor a multitude, nor a discursive tradition. For Muslims, Islam is the true Religion of God.<sup>3</sup>

To use an extremely old-fashioned anthropological term, »Islam« is a very abstract and powerful fetish: an entity imagined and created by humans that, because people ascribe it power, begins to have power over them. As a fetish, Islam is in a way even more powerful than God, because God is always surrounded by secrets and mysteries, and His motivations and plans are beyond human understanding, while Islam can be studied, analysed, explained and interpreted. And every study, every explanation, every analysis and interpretation makes it more solid, more factual and more powerful over those who engage it – regardless of whether they believe in it or not.

From a social scientific point of view, the question of what Islam »is« is a bad one, because the logic of the question already loads the category of Islam with expectations. Expectations that by knowing what it »is« we will know what will happen to people who believe in it. No matter what our answer to the question of what Islam »is«, by pursuing the question we will willingly or unwillingly contribute to the power of our belief in the fetish of Islam, making it more solid and encompassing. For a Muslim proselytiser, this makes good sense. But for us as social scientists concerned with the human condition and human agency, there is good reason to be cautious about a question that reinforces, instead of investigating, the growing imagination of a world religion as an entity with agency.

and objectified Islam as textbook knowledge (see Eickelman 1992 and Starrett 1998).

<sup>3</sup> My free translation, oriented toward vernacular usage, of the Qur'an verse »Inna al-islām huwa ad-dīn 'ind Allāh« which is commonly quoted by Muslims to state the supremacy of Islam over other faiths. This is in fact the only passage in the Qur'an that allows the interpretation of Islam as a religion rather than as an act of the individual believer.

The focus on Islam as a peculiar entity of its own kind is part of a history of exceptionalism in the study of cultures and societies in which Islam is the dominant religious tradition. Even in variants that are radically critical of Orientalism, it carries an Orientalist heritage: an assumption that Islam is something significantly different from »the West«. Instead of being the backward other of European modernity, Islam may now be taken up as the pious other of secularism, the resisting other of neo-colonialism or the methodological other of comparative social science. Elevated to such a position of significant alterity, the religious traditions of Muslims gain particular brilliance and importance for the sake of highlighting their particularity through their difference. But at the same time, the faith and lives of Muslims in their own uniqueness, their specificity in their own right – and not just comparatively – become opaque, reduced to their Islamic-ness. To study Islam as »something« makes it much easier to enter sophisticated theoretical debates, but it also makes it much easier to overlook the ways Islam actually matters in the lives of people who adhere to it.

The problem, then, lies not with the answer but with the question. If we should give any anthropological answer at all to the question of what Islam is, we must first realise that this is an empirical question. The answer depends on the situation at hand, the people involved, the dynamics evolving and the questions we as researchers are asking. This is not to say that the question or the answers to it should be bare of theoretical directions. That would be a sure recipe for bad research. But it is to say that our theoretical directions should have a different focus. If we want to understand what it means to live a Muslim life, then we need a grounded and nuanced understanding of what it means to live a life – more urgently than we need a sophisticated theory about what Islam is.

But the problem is not settled yet. The two questions of what Islam is and what it means to live a life are commonly intertwined. And they are intimately bound together in what may be the most influential and productive research programme in the anthropology of Islam at the moment: the study of piety, ethics and tradition.

### **Piety, ethics, tradition**

The tremendous significance of Talal Asad's work for the contemporary anthropology of Islam lies less in that particular short essay in which he develops the notion of discursive tradition (Asad 1986) than in the way his wider body of work (Asad 1993; 2003; 2006; 2009) has been taken up and developed by a generation of anthropologists who have made creative use of his critical enquiries about religion and the secular in order to study the dynamics of doctrinal debate among Muslim activists, the power of Islamic ideals of morality and piety,

the connections between everyday religiosity and religious scholarship and the relationship between Muslim practices of piety and secular architectures of power. For the anthropology of Islam, these works have come to constitute what Imre Lakatos (Lakatos and Musgrave 1970) has described as a research programme, that is, a shared set of problems, methods and terminology that provide productive fields of research. According to Lakatos, a research programme is seldom proven false, because its key premises and theories can always be protected through ad hoc theories. Instead, the key criterion by which the success of a research programme can be judged is its capability to produce new problems and solutions. This is a pragmatic criterion and a useful one for inquiring what is and what is not accomplished by the research programme of ethics, piety and tradition.

While this research programme is most prominently associated with the work of Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006), it is far from unified, of course, and different lines of inquiry regarding ethics and piety have been developed in the works of Michael Lambek (2000), Heiko Henkel (2005), Lara Deeb (2006) and Stefania Pandolfo (2007), to mention just few of the many worth mentioning. The insights provided in these works have been taken up in recent years by a veritable flood of publications marked with the keywords of piety, tradition and ethics. This emerging field of study, albeit far from unified, is marked by a shared preoccupation with Muslims' pious practice, aligned with a framing of the enquiry as one about »Islam as a discursive tradition«. While some authors have been making rather free and eclectic use of these themes (see, e.g. Starrett 1998, Ismail 2003, Schulz 2006), in other cases there is a tendency to develop a canon of references and concepts to the degree that, especially in northern America, one may speak of the emergence of something like an orthodox canon (see, e.g. Scott and Hirschkind 2006; Anjum 2007).<sup>4</sup>

The research programme of piety, ethics and tradition has made it possible to recognise much better how Muslims' engagement with their religion is neither the outcome of blind adherence, nor the result of coercion, but an active and dynamic process of engagement with ideals of good life and personhood – a point that has been truly important in a decade overshadowed by the global »war of terror«, as it perhaps should more accurately

<sup>4</sup> This is a development that has to do with institutional politics as much as with the nature of the argument itself, and the influence of the research programme of piety and ethics is correspondingly uneven across the international academic field. Its influence is most marked in northern America. In Europe it has been appropriated more critically. It seems to be rather marginal in the Francophone and Spanish-speaking worlds.

be called. But this research programme has also magnified some of the problems inherent in the anthropological turn to Islam as the key to the lives of Muslims. These are problems that many in the field are acutely aware of, and many share the sense that it is necessary to look beyond the elegant but narrow confines of piety and tradition and to include the messier but richer fields of everyday experiences,<sup>5</sup> personal biographies and complex genealogies (see, e.g. Abu-Lughod 1996 [1986]; Ewing 1990; Marsden 2005; Osella and Soares 2009; Masquelier 2009; Moors 2009; Bangstad 2009b; Deeb 2009). Part of the problem is located in the specific focus on moral and pious subjectivity. Another part is based in the wider master narrative in which the study of Islam as ethics and tradition is commonly embedded.

The first part of the problem – moral and pious subjectivity – is primarily one of balance, whereby the privileging of pious pursuits in isolation from wider paths of life has contributed to accounts of religious experience that are based more on what people argue for and less on how they actually live. All I want to add to this problem are some practical suggestions on how a more balanced approach could be accomplished while building on the important insights about ethics and subjectivity. I will return to this point towards the end of this paper. The second part of the problem – the wider master narrative – is a more fundamental one and may require some more substantial rethinking, which is why I try to tackle it in some more detail in the following.

### **Islam vs. liberalism**

The key themes of this research programme in the anthropology of Islam – ethics, piety, subjectivity, self-formation, the cultivation of affect, debate, governmental rationality – are very often bound together by a master narrative that posits the Muslim tradition of ethics, affect, devotion and debate in juxtaposition with liberal and secular notions about the state, law, self and so on. This juxtaposition is not merely an analytical tool; it is part and parcel of a political self-critique of liberalism and secularism aimed at revealing how the alleged superiority and universality of Western traditions of enlightenment actually conceal mechanisms of coercion, silencing, and exclusion, as well as culturally and historically specific notions that cannot be taken to be valid for all of humanity. The counter-claim made by this critique is that we have to

<sup>5</sup> By juxtaposing »elegant but narrow« with »messy but rich«, I am obviously making an aesthetic distinction and equating it with a distinction in the substance of the argument. This is intended. As is known among anthropologists at least since the Writing Culture debate, the ways one writes anthropology cannot be separated from the substance of the argument one makes.

recognise the humanity of Muslims (and anyone else) as they see themselves and not reduce them to the ideological patterns of Western liberalism.

As a political critique, this master narrative is justified. Certainly European and American politicians, intellectuals, journalists and ordinary citizens very often do make questionable claims to civilisational and moral superiority, and such claims do need to be questioned. And certainly it is imperative to recognise the humanity of all people, regardless of the notions and ideals they hold. As a paradigm of anthropological research, however, this master narrative carries the risk that we will find it too easy to point our finger at the usual suspects, with the result that our enquiries may fail to account for what is really at stake for the people involved. In the end we may once again fail to seriously recognise the humanity of people on their own terms.

To make this clearer, I offer a short critical review of two recent contributions (both published in 2009) from this field of study, not because I find them bad, but on the contrary because I find them so good that they deserve a serious critical engagement that I hope may show where their power and where their problems lie.

The first example is Saba Mahmood's brilliant but also somehow hermetic essay »Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?« (Mahmood 2009), in which she scrutinizes the ways what she describes as secular and liberal assumptions about speech, law and moral injury have caused a misunderstanding about the reasons why Muslims so energetically protest against the cartoons published by the Danish daily *Jyllandsposten* in 2005. Mahmood argues that what really made Muslims upset about the cartoons was the way Muslim devotional tradition works towards building an intimate personal relationship with the Prophet Muhammad as an extension of the believer's self and family, in contradistinction to a secular understanding of speech and meaning that insists on a clear differentiation of things and their representation.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, Mahmood argues, Europeans were unable and/or unwilling to understand the motivations of Muslims. Muslims in turn failed to successfully make their point and instead tried to

<sup>6</sup> This seems to be a rather reduced understanding of the complex ways of dealing with speech, image and representation in contemporary European cultures. Take, for example, the ways the swastika has become identified with Nazi terror. One may successfully claim with European media that a caricature depicting the Prophet Muhammad in an unfavourable way is »just a caricature«, yet one might expect a lot less understanding if one claimed that a Nazi flag is »just a flag«. So Europeans do seem to be very well able to think beyond the flat distinction of things and representation. But some of them may not want to do so if it would suggest making important political and ideological concessions.

make reference to European laws against discrimination and hate speech without understanding that the European practice of law regarding moral offence is by nature majoritarian and unlikely to take seriously the concerns of a religious minority, the more so as their concerns are not correctly translated due to a misconception about the nature of speech and representation, a misconception that, according to Mahmood, is essentially due to a »normative understanding of religion internal to liberalism« (Mahmood 2009: 74).

Mahmood's primary level of analysis is highly sophisticated cultural concepts, such as Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language (Mahmood 2009: 72). While she does quote the voices of Muslims to develop the point about the emotional importance of intimate attachment to the Prophet, in general the article moves on a high level of abstraction where concepts, rationalities and traditions - rather than people - are the main agents. This becomes especially clear in the way the secular, the liberal and the state repeatedly appear not just as key analytical categories but as things, so much that they are implicitly attributed agency:

(...) contrary to the ideological self-understanding of secularism (as the doctrinal separation of religion and state), secularism has historically entailed the regulation and reformation of religious beliefs, doctrines, and practices to yield a particular normative conception of religion (that is largely Protestant Christian in its contours). (Mahmood 2009: 87)

Historically speaking, the secular state has not simply cordoned off religion from its regulatory ambitions but sought to remake it through the agency of the law. (Ibid.)

There thus emerges an over-arching and all-present secular rationality, embodied by the national state and intimately paired with liberalism in a way that is not explained. Mahmood takes up the cartoon controversy as a point to drive home the point that »the secular« is inherently partial, saturated with power and prejudice, and hence unlikely to fulfil its publicly proclaimed promise of inclusion and tolerance. In other words, her critique targets these abstract entities and not the Europeans who found it convenient not to take seriously Muslims' concerns.

Mahmood does offer a welcome clarification about the importance of emotional attachment that makes the person of the prophet Muhammad such a sensitive issue for Muslims. Because of the work of an intimate and sensitive emotional bond that characterises Muslims' veneration of their

prophet, a caricature could cause a strong sense of moral injury in a way other provocations could not. And yet Mahmood's analysis strikes me as problematic, because I miss something of the emotional dynamics I encountered during the controversy. It offers only a partial account of why the caricature controversy could arouse such strong emotions. Because Mahmood's analysis is so much focussed on the quasi-systemic features of an Islamic and a liberal model of cultivating political and religious affect, her analysis remains confined to this duality. But this duality is not helpful if we want to understand the emotional dynamics of the caricature controversy.

I was in Egypt at the time of the controversy, and my impression was that something more was going on. I encountered people being at once angry and enthusiastic about defending their prophet. Pain and anger were actively cultivated and exercised as part of an intensive and enthusiastic event through which people felt encouraged to express a strong emotional sense of affection and offence. At least in Egypt, the controversy was not just a reaction of Muslims »committed to preserving an imaginary in which their relation to the Prophet is based on similitude and cohabitation« (88). It was part of a dynamic process of creating and promoting - rather than just preserving - a specific religious and political sensitivity. And it provided many people a very gratifying possibility to do something good, something real in defence of the Prophet: boycott Denmark.

As I returned to the Netherlands, I found a strikingly similar sentiment being cultivated in the press and in informal discussions among my friends. Rather than a secular rationality at work, what I saw was a much more plain and old-fashioned chauvinist gut reaction that turned the freedom to provoke Muslims into a matter of honour (and refusing to do so into a matter of cowardice), an issue at which one's moral commitment to »our« shared values was measured. Again, I found people rather enthusiastic about having a clear sense of fear and offence, about feeling justified anger and being able to make a strong point about where they stand.

On both sides, the issue was roiled again and again for many weeks, offering the people involved a strong sense of righteous indignation, emotional bonding and knowing one's place. Thus while the discourses and the arguments expressed as well as the specific moments of moral injury experienced on both sides of the controversy may have been different, the emotional quality of the event was often strikingly similar on both sides; and this can be explained by neither Islamic tradition nor secular power. If we want to understand why the reaction of Muslims - and indeed, just like them, the defenders of the cartoons who reacted in emotionally similar ways - was not irrational, it is there-

fore not sufficient to provide a nuanced theoretical analysis of the way a revered person becomes part of a believer's self. This does make it easier to understand the kind of injury involved, but it does not yet allow us to understand how and why that injury was *cultivated* with such enthusiasm (and how and why a different sense of injury was cultivated with similar enthusiasm on the other side). In my view, the Danish caricature affair was an event of meaningful anger on both sides: an occasion to feel and express righteous anger about being hurt and threatened in a way that both *requires* and *allows* a clear response. As such, I suggest that if we look for an interpretive framework to understand it, populism may do much better than a juxtaposition of secular/religious reason and affect.

Populism, Leena Avonius (2008) argues in her study on Sharia implementation in Aceh, is a modality of political discourse and mobilisation that turns a diffuse and often implicit moral »gut feeling« into simple slogans and personified distinctions of good and evil, us and them. Populism is furthermore characterised by a highly opportunistic use of whatever legitimate discourses are available (such as Sharia in Aceh or secularism in the Netherlands) in order to place them in the service of an personified political battle. By making it possible to give names to a sense of moral unease, populism not only allows one to express implicit moral anxieties, it is also offers a way to actively enlarge and aggravate them to a point of escalation. The Danish cartoon affair is a prime lesson in how that works, although history of course does offer other lessons in populism that are much graver and much more terrible in their consequences. Since a key power of populism lies in its utility in naming and reinforcing anxieties that people really have, it would be mistaken to label populism simply as false. Yet thinking about global events of anger in terms of populist agitation may help us look beyond explicit discursive justification and give more attention to the emotions that are being cultivated.

While Mahmood's point about the specific kind of emotional bond Muslims cultivate with their Prophet and about the specific kind of expectations and anxieties that are involved in applying positive law do take us a step further, her insistence on framing this as a quasi-systemic difference between the Islamic and the secular/liberal results in a brilliant theoretical critique that somehow misses the point. It misses the point, I argue, because the engagement with Islamic tradition and secularism/liberalism is informed by a political meta-narrative that directs the analysis towards a generic critique of modern power and away from the actual lives, emotions and experiences of people in their everyday lives. In the end, what we see is a critique of idealised secular and liberal self-understandings by means of their juxtaposition with an equally idealised Islamic tradition.

I have no problem with the critique. I have a problem with the juxtaposition. In my view, this kind of an anthropological theory does a bad job insofar as it does not tell us how it actually is to live under the conditions it describes. In the abstract image of secular/liberal rationality I recognize neither the Europe in which I grew up, nor the Europe in which I live (there is quite a difference between the two, marked by the end of the Cold War). For one thing, secularism is in no way particularly liberal, and at least where I come from (Finland) secularism has been at least as much if not more related to socialism, communism, occultism and the many other social and cultural movements that have marked the last century and half (see, e.g. Jokinen 1906; Ervast 1928 [1903]; Soikkanen 1961). Furthermore, while Europe's anti-Muslim new nationalist movements do write secularism large in their declarations, I see a more opportunistic populist usage, rather than an underlying secular rationality at work.

I also do not see the lives of Muslims in Egypt accounted for by this theory. The traditions of Muslim devotion are important but not sufficient to account for the complex lives my Muslim friends and interlocutors live – not to mention the degree to which the forms and aims of Muslim devotion have shifted in a matter of just a generation or two from an emphasis on saintly intercession and communal belonging towards an emphasis on moral knowledge and activist commitment (see also Deeb 2006).

One could object that I am taking issue here with Mahmood's specific preference for high theoretical critique rather than with the substance of her argument. With my declared preference for grounded and dialogical ethnography, my objections would therefore be more a matter of taste than a serious argument. There may be something to this objection, which is why I want to take up another example that is more ethnographic and more sensitive to the actual lives of people but in which the ethnography is framed by the contrast of the Islamic and the secular.

This second example is Nadia Fadil's article »Managing affects and sensibilities: The case of not-handshaking and not-fasting«. (Fadil 2009). Fadil, too, explores the issue of causing and taking offence, but her focus is less on abstract notions and more on the pragmatics of everyday life. In a rich and sensitive fashion she looks at the experiences and narratives of two groups of Muslim women in Belgium: pious women who insist on not shaking hands with men, and impious women who insist on not fasting during Ramadan. Both are highly aware that their insistence will offend the sensibilities of some of the people with whom they interact and try to balance the complicated demands of standing by their principles and of showing tact towards their colleagues, friends and

families. Their situations and positions are quite different, however, Fadil argues, because the way »we« view their actions from a liberal perspective with its maxims of authenticity and outspokenness privileges the not-fasting women against the not-handshaking women.

As for Mahmood, also for Fadil the difference is once again one of Islamic tradition on one side and liberal and secular notions of personhood on the other. Fadil is careful to point out that this is not a hermetic boundary: the not-handshaking Muslim women's understandings of selfhood and agency are in a significant way influenced by liberal notions they have appropriated, and the not-fasting women's sensibilities and also some of their solutions are informed by their intimate rootedness in Muslim families and embodied traditions. This differentiated outlook notwithstanding, Fadil's analytical framework stands and falls with the categorical difference between the Islamic and the secular/liberal, and this categorical difference is once again more than an analytical framework: in the final instance, it is a political critique of the way a »liberal« common sense views some choices as legitimate and others as illegitimate.

This is a valid point, and a necessary one in order to make the reader realise that both the not-handshaking and the not-fasting women are making complex moral and pragmatic choices that must be taken seriously. And yet by insisting on this as the key point, her analysis falls short of her ethnography. Some of Fadil's ethnographic material makes it very clear that there are multiple – partly competing, partly combined – claims to and determinations of a normality, all of which come together in people's lives in complex and often situational ways. Some of them make a difference among colleagues while others make a difference among family. But some of the very though-provoking material is used to come to rather sweeping and (meanwhile) conventional conclusions about the power of the secular/liberal to determine a specific normality. Fadil's critique of secular power stops short of accounting for what it means to be aware that one's convictions and actions can be offensive to others, what kind of offences may be involved, what may be at stake for the people involved and why different situations create different kinds of offence. To accomplish this, it might have been helpful to look at the not-handshaking and not-fasting women more in their own right and less as representatives of an Islamic-secular divide.

Fadil, however, aims at more. The problem Fadil tries to tackle is how to account for the pragmatics of moral action without losing sight of the reality of powerful discursive registers that pave the way for certain paths while closing others. This is a problem to which the master narrative of the critique of the secular offers a very compelling solution. In my view, however, the ambiguity with which

Fadil treats the problem of giving moral offence indicates that the solution does not work well and that a better solution is needed.

What we need, then, are better narratives of exactly how powerful discourses work in practice and of what powerful discourses there are out there anyway. I must admit that I do not have a clear solution to this problem, but I will try to make some suggestions.

The problem with the meta-narrative of a critique of secular and liberal power through its other, Islam, is that it reduces the complexity, richness and ambivalence (which is not necessarily painful, but often also joyful, see Marsden 2005) of human experience into providing evidence against a liberal/secular power constellation. Especially in Mahmood's essay and to a less sharp degree also in Fadil's article, the reader is presented with an image of a secular/liberal hegemony so strongly reduced to few key terms, notions and powerful points of view that to me it looks very much like a straw man and very much unlike the European cultures and societies as I know them. Perhaps a critical anthropology of secularism and new nationalism would do much better if it gave up or at least toned down its paradigmatic equation of the secular with the liberal and the nation state, and instead included the life worlds, experiences and trajectories of being secular in their main focus. This would certainly involve expanding the list of powerful discourses to include much more than the liberal. It would also involve the pragmatics of acting on the side of power, something that I see very sensitively accomplished by Oskar Verkaaik (2010) in his study of the ways Dutch civil servants run naturalisation ceremonies that have been established as part of a cultural nationalist policy – a policy that the civil servants are often critical of, and yet they often end up endorsing it in subtle ways. Such ethnographic and historiographic enquiry would be likely to be more successful in tracing the connections of existential concerns, powerful discourses and the pragmatics of action in a way that is critical without being reductionist.

### **Compelling pursuits**

Regardless of the points of critique that I have made and the many more points others have made (Marsden 2005; Van Der Veer 2008; Bangstad 2009a; Simon 2009; Starrett 2010) about the turn to the cultivation of ethics and the master narrative of Islamic tradition vs. secular power, I do find it important to highlight that this turn, whatever its problems may be, has provided some important insights into the study of the human condition. And that, of course, is what counts.

The turn to look at a creed as a discursive tradition offered an important step forward by focusing our attention to the fact that religion is not

about gods, books and institutions, but about the ways people worship gods, read books and act in institutions. This may appear to be a trivial insight, and yet it seems to be necessary to keep reminding colleagues, students, intellectuals, publicists and politicians about it. Also, the turn to the cultivation of affect has been an important step forward in the way of understanding what it means to believe in something and to live a life guided by that belief. And the critical theoretisation of the secular has offered ways to think about modern power and subjectivity in ways that go beyond the self-celebratory tendency of modernist secularism. The question for me, then, is: how can we go on from here? How can we overcome the problems of this line of research without losing sight of the insights it has to offer? How can we account for the ways people express perfectionist ideals in pursuit of living a complex, imperfect life? How can we tell about the motivations and pressures that make some ideas so compelling? How can we tell about the ways a meaningful world is imagined and the ways it both shapes and is shaped by people's expectations and lives?

This is an ethnographic problem as much as it is a theoretical one, and for the sake of an answer I will start by taking a look at the situation in three sites in Egypt where I have been conducting fieldwork since 2002.

In present-day Egypt, Islam has become omnipresent. Like many other places around the world, Egypt has been swept by a veritable religious euphoria since the 1970's. Religion is continuously visible, audible and palpable. And it has become characterised to an unprecedented degree by an enormous emphasis on individual learning, knowledge and practice, guided by the perfectionist aim to create a pious character that is »committed« (*multazim*, a term borrowed from the nationalist/modernist notion of *engagement* (Klemm 2000)) to religion as a complete framework of emotions, will and acts.

In a village that I call Nazlat al-Rayyis in northern Egypt, a strong sense prevails that people have become more religious and that this is a very good thing. People greet each other with the Islamic greeting »peace be upon you« (*as-salamu 'alay-kum*) rather than with the confessionally neutral »good morning/evening«; a lofty new mosque is being built in the outskirts of the village (although the work has temporarily stopped as a result of the global financial crisis); the bar in the village closed decades ago; and all adult women now wear the headscarf (*higâb*) as a part of a covering dress that reveals only hands, feet and face. In a village that was once a socialist and communist stronghold, the Muslim Brotherhood has become the most important political force and the most important religious one, along with the Salafi pi-

ety movement that promotes a rigorous moral and religious discipline.

In Alexandria, Egypt's second-largest city whither the upper and middle class Cairine head for summer vacation, the cosmopolitan heritage and easygoing holiday atmosphere of this port city has been challenged by the spectacular rise of various Islamic movements, most importantly the Salafi movement, which controls a large part of the mosques, especially in the eastern districts of the city. Men sporting long beards and short-hemmed trousers and women wearing a full veil (*niqâb*) covering their entire bodies have become more and more common in the streets of the city. But also those who do not join the Salafi movement generally show a strong sense of emotional commitment to the religion of Islam. There is a very wide consensus about the need for Muslims to fear God, to fulfil their religious duties, to shape their lives and societies accordingly and to defend their faith, their Prophet and their Muslim brothers and sisters.

In Cairo, Egypt's gigantic capital, a similar image prevails. Buildings, public transportation, shops and homes are covered with posters, stickers and graffiti calling people to pray and fast, to mind their manners and to cultivate their characters, to fight the Jews and to feed the poor, for women to cover themselves and for men to teach Islam to their families. Religious literature dominates the newsstands and bookstores. Broadcasts and cassette recordings of the Qur'ân and sermons are routinely played in cafés, busses, shops and homes. While various social niches especially in Cairo and Alexandria continue to encourage world views and lifestyles that are at odds with the wave of Islamisation, most of the upper- and middle-class citizens have come to embrace the wave of the Islamic revival, albeit in ways that do not challenge the sources of their wealth or their pursuit of consumerist pleasure (Lutfi 2009 [2005]).

This image is far from harmonious. While there has been a significant increase in religiosity as well as a general turn to a specific kind of religiosity, this does not mean that Egypt has become a generally more pious, moral or happy country. There are many ambiguities and contradictions, and some of them are sharp. In the village, young people express a nihilistic sense of boredom and frustration in spite of the great promises of modernist progress and religious hope they have embraced. The village has become a local centre of drug trade in recent years as marijuana and hashish have swept the black market in tremendous quantities and at low prices, and an increasing number of young people have become habitual consumers. In Alexandria, the rising commitment to religion has also become a breeding ground for violent confessional clashes between Muslims and Christians that have cost many lives (mostly of Christians)

in recent years. While public moral discourse focusses very strongly on the rigorous prohibition of adultery, both Alexandria and Cairo have become centres of prostitution for wealthy Egyptians and Arab tourists, often arranged for in the form of very short-term Islamic *'urfi* marriages.

Yet most of the ambiguities surrounding the Islamic revival are actually of a much less dramatic and bleak nature than those listed above. Rather than dark cracks in a perfectionist image of hope, they present themselves as a complex patchwork of different kinds of hope, different senses of living a good life. The same people who repent their sins and think about the Afterlife also debate the previous evening's football match, tell jokes, feel tired and glance at the opposite sex, even with religious stickers decorating the walls and the voice of the Qur'ân in the background. They entertain ideals of obsessive romantic love that defies all norms. They search for a place in life, try to be responsible towards their families and dream about new possibilities for themselves. They try to make money and to move up in society, often by any means possible. And at different moments, they hold different points of view and outlooks on life, arguing for them in very different tones. What happens, then, to the power of guidance, the purity that was the very reason and the justification for the ubiquitous everyday presence of religious objects and signs?

Writing on cassette tape sermons, Charles Hirschkind (2006) has fittingly described their presence as an »ethical soundscape« that fills and structures the noisy and crowded spaces of Cairo. The sensory presence of Islam as an overwhelming and compelling idiom of life, morality and politics is in fact almost omnipresent. It is present in the sounds of prayer calls, sermons and recitations, in the visual presence of religious decoration, graffiti, stickers and the minarets that mark the skyline. It is present in the bodily motions of prayer and invocation, the strain of wearing covering dress in hot weather, the weariness caused by fasting, the exchange of greetings, phrases and handshakes and the smell of certain perfumes preferred by Salafi activists. But this sensory presence is seldom clearly differentiated from other, very different kinds of sounds, images and surfaces that mark the everyday life of the big city and the provinces alike. Rather than a competition between pious and secular sensory regimes, an unpredictable co-existence of different nuances, moments and registers characterises daily life in Egypt.

A kiosk at a bus station in Cairo, decorated with verses of the Qur'an and stickers with moral and pious messages, has the radio turned on, playing the newest mellow love song produced by a Saudi-owned and Lebanon-based music corporation. A minibus arriving on the bus station from the countryside has been decorated by its owner with two

kinds of stickers, neatly organised next to each other:

»Don't forget to invoke God«

Photo of Nancy Ajram (Lebanese female pop singer)

»This is due to the grace of my Lord« (a pious phrase against envy)

Photo of Haifa Wehbe (Egyptian-Lebanese female pop singer)

»I seek refuge in the Lord of the dawn... « (a chapter of the Qur'ân believed to protect from evil and envy).

Zapping through satellite television the way many Egyptians do, one can quickly shift between a Salafi sermon, a video clip, a news programme, an Egyptian soap opera, a Hollywood film, a football match, a talk show and so on. Yet one thing that unites almost all programmes (with the exception of some state channels) is their commercial nature and the aggressive advertisements they make for commercial text message services that have become a financial backbone of television channels of various kinds.

Whenever one goes for a walk on the seafront of Alexandria and on the Nile promenades of Cairo, the scenery is without exception dominated by lovers (*habbîba* in Egyptian Arabic). Pairs of young people walk or sit on the promenades, talking to each other, sometimes holding hands, always closely together, always keeping as much polite distance as possible from other pairs. In another minibus, this one driving up and down the seafront in Alexandria, religious stickers admonish youths about dating: »Didn't he know that God sees?« »Would you accept it for your sister?« »Where is your life?« Indeed, the idea of young unmarried people dating, sitting shoulder to shoulder, holding hands and possibly kissing is a cause of considerable moral and religious unease among Egyptians. But at the same time, the same Egyptians also consider the meetings of lovers as a natural part of life, write and consume love poetry and songs, enthusiastically celebrate Valentine's day and proudly identify themselves as the romantic people (Kreil forthcoming). Some of them do decide to become »committed« and to give up all the ambivalence, stop writing love letters and looking the opposite sex into the eyes and instead dedicate themselves to the purpose of purified piety. But for many of them this remains a passing period in their lives, one part of a complex and often troubled biography. And sometimes even the most energetic Salafis fall madly in love.

Different worlds stand here side by side: the world of Islam as a regime of divine protection, order and justice; the world of commercial media with its reliance on consumerism, advertisement and sexual attraction; the world of romantic love

with its celebration of passion. But these are not different worlds. They are constituent parts of people's life worlds - life worlds that can never be explained by any single principle but that need to be understood in their complexity and openness, in their many hopes and frustrations (Jackson 1996; 2005). While the conservative ethics of the religious revival may appear completely opposed to, for example, the liberal celebration of romance and sexuality in pop music, film, video clips and youth culture, in fact one cannot be understood without the other, nor are they clearly distinct in people's lives (Schielke 2009). An attempt to understand what exactly is going on must take these different highly compelling pursuits as parts of an essentially complex and often contradictory subjective experience and practice.

I argue that we need to take these ambiguities seriously and to consider the ways people live them and their attempts to make sense of their lives. To understand what is going on, it is helpful indeed to look at the ways people cultivate emotional affects, the ways sensual experience structures daily life and the ways people try to solve, circumvent or cope with complex moral dilemmas. It is not helpful, however, to work with idealised oppositions, such as revivalist piety vs. liberal secularism, because most people adhere to something of both (and something of many other things as well), to different degrees at different times. Nor is it helpful to hold the aspirational aspect of pursuing piety too high without taking into consideration the troubles and disappointments that are often an inevitable part of aspirational projects.

I suggest that one good way to provide a better account is to take seriously Michael Jackson's argument about the primacy of existential concerns (Jackson 2005; see also Graw forthcoming). This means we should take as our starting point the immediate practice of living a life, the existential concerns and the pragmatic considerations that inform this practice, embedded in but not reduced to the traditions, powers and discourses that grant legitimacy to some concerns over others and structure some considerations while leaving others diffuse. Following this existential line of enquiry, it is also important to realise that the ways people try to find a place in life are ambiguous and often tragic in their outcomes. As Robert Orsi (2005) has shown in his work on American Catholicism, the same aspects that provide hope, recognition and inclusion can also be a source of frustration, intimidation and exclusion. This ambiguity appears to be characteristic of our attempts to live good lives, and an anthropology committed to understanding the human condition is well advised to take it seriously.

This is, in fact, something that has been taken seriously by anthropology for a long time. The current preoccupation with ethics and subjectivity is

paralleled by other approaches to subjectivity that are more concerned with ambivalence (Luhrmann 2006; Biehl et al. 2007). Both were preceded by an engagement with the issue of multiple identities, an engagement that, whatever its shortcomings may be, provided important insights that appear to have been partly forgotten by the research programme of piety and ethics (Ewing 1990; Wilce 1998; Van Meijl 2006). The existence and importance of multiple voices, too, has been recognised for quite some time (see, e.g. Abu-Lughod 1996 [1986]). And since the complexity of human characters is common knowledge and therefore also known by anthropologists, there is good reason to assume that this history could be taken much further back in time. Good ideas are usually quite old. There is thus no need to reinvent the wheel to account better for what it means to live a life of which Islam is a part. The theoretical directions are largely available.

In this light, what a good anthropology of being a Muslim needs most is a commitment to a sensitive and dialogical fieldwork and an eye for the biographical and historical depth of people's trajectories and societies, along with a theoretical analysis that is committed to doing justice to the people it tells about, which is far from a trivial task. In the end, this is more than a theoretical problem: it is a matter of an emotional commitment to anthropology as a dialogue and an encounter.

### **Grounds of commitment**

Above I have critically noted that there may be too much research on committed activists and too little research on the majority of Muslims who are not that committed. The empirical focus on the committed activists, I argued, seems to be related to the theoretical focus on Islam as a key to understanding Muslim lives. While I am critical of this theoretical focus, this does not mean that I would argue that we should stop doing research on committed activists. But I do argue that thinking about the existential primacy of people's search for a place in life and the tragic quality this search often takes also offers us a different image of activist religious commitment. The problem with many of the numerous ethnographies about Muslims that have been published in recent years is that they take committed activism as the paradigmatic, normal standard of religiosity instead of looking at committed activists as what they are: committed activists who are willing to go very far beyond ordinary expectations for the sake of an important cause in a way most people are not. This is a characteristic feature of activism and should have a prominent place in the study with and of activists.

In my own ethnographic encounters with people who for a period of time have tried to live a dedicated and activist religious life, two related moti-

vations feature very centrally. One is the search for a solution to a personal crisis; the other is the desire to find something truly important to pursue in a way that gives one's life a single and permanent purpose. Both appear to be quite general human pursuits, and yet neither of the two is very typical of everyday human experience, in which there are usually several important purposes in life.

To understand what these activists are after, it is therefore important to ask why, on what grounds and with what expectations some people embark on the search for dedicated perfection while others do not, and why some go on while others stop after a while. Muslims do not simply want to be good Muslims. Neither the will to be pious, nor the choice for piety rather than other forms of activism is obvious. Strikingly, many of those who join the Salafi movement do so because the ritual and moral rigour of Salafism promises order in a confusing life. At other times or in other contexts, they might have joined other religious or political groups, but for similar reasons. The questions I find worth asking, then, are: What makes a specific direction of activism attractive in a specific situation? What are the anxieties people try to overcome and what are the promises they are offered? What does their actual work of dedication look like? What consequences does it have? How do the experiments of activist dedication, which are often temporary, become a part of people's biographies?

To pursue these questions, it is helpful to be open to both the generally human, the historically and culturally specific and the individually idiosyncratic. For the sake of illustration, take the account of Mustafa, who became a dedicated Salafi in his early twenties after experiencing a period of strong disorientation, but stopped after less than a year. Today, he looks back at his Salafi period with a mixture of fondness, distance and regret. He remembers his short period of dedicated piety as a happy time, but is neither willing nor able to return to it.

To understand Mustafa's story, it is important but not sufficient to look at Salafi Islam's success in northern Egypt in establishing itself as the most powerful religious voice and therefore Mustafa's likeliest choice in the search for a clear difference between right and wrong. Having chosen the Salafi path, Mustafa's dedication took a specific direction with emphasis on gender segregation, abstinence from alcohol, drugs and cigarettes and viewing life as the application of divine Law. This had very specific consequences for the way he dealt with his mother and some of his friends, for example. But the emotional work this experiment did for him was also of a more general nature: Mustafa later compared it to me with his time in the army, which, he said, similarly provided him the clear structure he was missing. To understand his account, we therefore also need to

take seriously his idiosyncratic experience, his family history and the characteristic way he sometimes marches and sometimes stumbles through life. And considering this idiosyncratic level also helps to make intelligible the more general features of his quest.

Take, for the sake of comparison, the way Mustafa describes his motivations to become a Salafi and the way John Steinbeck (1961 [1936]) has the literary figure of Jim Nolan describe his decision to join the Communist Party in his novel *In Dubious Battle*.

Nilson touched the desk here and there with his fingertips. »Even the people you're trying to help will hate you most of the time. Do you know that?«  
»Yes.«  
»Well, why do you want to join, then?«  
Jim's eyes half closed in perplexity. At last he said, »In the jail there were some Party men. They talked to me. Everything's been a mess, all my life. Their lives weren't messes. They were working toward something. I want to work toward something. I feel dead. I thought I might get alive again.« (Steinbeck 1961 [1936]: 6)

In the time when I started to get back to myself I had lost many things. I started to search. Where is the right way? [...] I didn't have a basic method that I could follow to solve my problems and to face the world. I had no principle to follow. I had no law that I could apply and that would allow me to tell right from wrong. [...] I took to asking about everything in my life: Is it halâl or harâm? Even if I didn't have awareness about it, no clear textual proof. But my feeling was: If only I could know whether this is haram or halâl? [...] For a while I lived a better life like I hadn't lived it since the death of my father. It was even better. I got to know a lot of people, and I felt that the life I live is good. (Mustafa, interview in 2006)

Would Mustafa have been attracted to communism instead of Salafism if he had lived in a different time? Interestingly enough, his father was. But for Mustafa, the answer is probably no. Communism and Salafism are different solutions, not because they stand on different sides of the secular-Islamic divide, but because they appeal to slightly different kinds of sensibility. Both the real person Mustafa and the literary figure Jim Nolan search for a way to feel alive, to do something meaningful, to have a basis and direction of life. But while the communist creed that provides the sense of existential hope on the pages of *In Dubious Battle* is oriented toward a struggle against someone, a search for

meaningful existence through collective action, the Salafi creed that provided Mustafa a temporary firm hold in a time of crisis was heavily focussed on individual discipline and salvation. There may be more similarity between activist careers in communism and militant Islamism, but Mustafa had his reasons to stay away from both.

The point that I am trying to make is that when we look at Islamic – or any other – activism, it is necessary but not sufficient to look at the particular activist movement and the tradition to which it lays claim. This look needs to be supplemented by a look at both the idiosyncratic and the comparative levels. This is likely to require more work, but it is also likely to give us a much deeper view of the motivations and the consequences of activist commitment.

### **Conclusion: The ambiguity of grand schemes**

In a way, this approach bids farewell to the project of an anthropology of Islam, at least if the anthropology of Islam is meant to be an anthropology that is marked not only by its subject matter but also by its own set of theoretical concerns. Such anthropology is too likely to be trapped in the pitfalls of exceptionalism, too preoccupied with Islam to make really good sense of what it may mean to be a Muslim. I am hesitant, however, to relegate the issue to the anthropology of religion. Doing so, we would still face an analogous problem of an excessive privileging of religious identity and action in people's lives. We would still risk drawing an arbitrary dividing line between religious pursuits and other pursuits, a line I wanted to question by taking up the comparison of Salafi and communist activism.

I think that to understand the significance of a religious or any other faith in people's lives, it is perhaps more helpful to look at it less specifically as a religion or a tradition and instead take a more fuzzy and open-ended view of it as a grand scheme that is actively imagined and debated by people and that can offer various kinds of direction, meaning and guidance in people's lives (see Schielke and Debevec, forthcoming). What characterises grand schemes of this kind is their appearance of being external and superior to everyday experience, a higher and reliable measure and guideline of life – which can be both personified as gods, prophets, saints and heroes as well as abstract in the form of books, knowledge, ideologies and attitudes. What makes them so powerful is precisely the ambiguity that is central to their assumed externality: by virtue of their apparent perfection they can be called and acted upon, and yet the contradictions and setbacks of everyday experience seldom shake their credibility (see Simon 2009). Even if one's attempt to live a life guided by a grand scheme is frustrated by failures and tragedies, the grand scheme as a guideline of life can remain valid and credible. By virtue of their inherent ambiguity of apparent

perfection external to daily life and to the existential significance of the everyday, such grand schemes can never be accounted for alone. They must always be understood as connected in at least two dimensions: first, in their relation to everyday concerns and experiences; and second, in their relation to other compelling grand schemes that also promise to provide meaning and direction to those everyday concerns and experiences.

In the case of my fieldwork in Egypt, such grand schemes include commitment to Islam, romantic love, capitalist wealth and consumption, education and social mobility, development and modernisation and nationalist, pan-Arabic and pan-Islamist politics, to name just a few. This is not to say that the promise of good life and eternal salvation (with the converse threat of eternal damnation) that is central to people's adherence to Islam today is no different from romantic love or from social mobility. It is very different, and herein lies its appeal and its power. But the ways people »live Islam«, as Magnus Marsden (2005) has put it, may not be so dramatically different from the ways they live capitalism and love. In all these cases, we are talking about great hopes, deep anxieties and compelling promises about grand schemes and powerful persons that will lead to practical solutions, promises that people try to follow and to put in practice. Some do it more consistently than others. Some attempts actually help people to live a better life as they understand it. Others result in tragedy. Most are ambivalent, providing both satisfaction and suffering. Many attempts are short-lived, and almost all of them are partial. In all cases, the grand schemes are forever unrealised, and yet always apparently within reach, promising a hold, a direction in a difficult, complex and often frustrating life. Looking at these attempts and their consequences with an eye for the richness and the openness, but also the limitations and power relationships of the human condition is in my view the most promising way to understand the significance of the adherence to Islam as a part of human lives.

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