



MEDITATION

Living with unresolved differences

A reply to Fadil and Fernando

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Meditation on Fadil, Nadia and Mayanthi Fernando. 2015. "Rediscovering the 'everyday' Muslim: Notes on an anthropological divide." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5(2): 59-88

In their critique of "the Everyday Muslim," Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando give much attention to my work. And yet in my writings to which they refer, there are neither "everyday Muslims," nor "ordinary Muslims," nor "everyday Islam." Instead, there is a lot of everyday *life*. The same concept features also in Magnus Marsden's book: *Living Islam*. The framework of my research is existential, asking what it means to live a life, including its ordinary and extraordinary moments (and the work of making them so). Why put so much effort into uniting different research approaches under the straw man of "the everyday Muslim," but evade the question about living? Our key point of disagreement is not the everyday but living. Fadil and Fernando seem to propose that living can be best understood by looking at ethical practices that are informed by traditions and productive of *life-forms*. I propose to focus on *lives* made up of reflective and unreflected moments, different ways of being moral (and not so moral), and the experience of greater powers and an unpredictable destiny. The other researchers Fadil and Fernando mention have proposals different from mine and from theirs. The everyday figures in those proposals in such different ways that in my response I can only focus on my own work, clarifying what it may add to the conversation.

The part of my research that Fadil and Fernando discuss explored how the Islamic revival gained social hegemony in provincial Egypt *through and not in spite of* ambiguous lives of people who embraced revivalist ideals in a sincere but



half-hearted way. It was a process at once propelled and destabilized by the revivalist movement's striving for purity that was turning forms of livable ambivalence into contradictions requiring a solution. With the dialectics of "ordinary lives" and "grand schemes" Liza Debevec and I tried to understand what it takes to live a life guided by greater powers and compelling promises, and to make them a part of one's attitudes and actions—in varying ways at different times. Rather than privileging resistance, we took distance from de Certeau's political theology in that regard (Schielke and Debevec 2012: 9–10). Elsewhere, I have also addressed resistance against the Islamic revival, but that belongs to another ethnography.

Fadil and Fernando, however, see in my ethnography a privileging of liberal subjectivities, a binary opposition of religion and the everyday, an understanding of morality as abstract rules, a failure to account for negotiation, and an exclusion of the committedly pious. Fadil and Fernando work in a research tradition where the critique of liberalism plays a central role. Are they perhaps reading more liberal theory into my work than is actually there?

I agree with Fadil and Fernando that there is nothing natural about ordinary times. Making things ordinary requires work of a tacit kind that does not often find expression in reflective ethics, and that is saturated by and productive of relationships of power: political economy, postcoloniality, class, traditions. But why do Fadil and Fernando think that the exceptional is not real, not okay? Exceptional (that is, special) moments can be felt to be more real, more true, and more fulfilling. Ramadan is a case in point.

In their reading of my article, which was based on fieldwork from 2006, Fadil and Fernando find that I rejected Mustafa's own understanding of his Salafi commitment (both are emic concepts in Egypt, by the way) and imposed my own instead. Indeed, I did misinterpret Mustafa's experience, but not for the reasons they suggest. Mustafa is one of the key protagonists of my 2015 book. His story is neither about Salafism's failure nor about a temporary interruption on a teleological path of virtue. In 2007, he told me that his military service made him recognize his own need for order and discipline. Soon after, he found work as a sales representative. Later, in 2010, he told me that praying and giving alms had taken root in his character as values. But, he continued, his life was at best an approximation of those values. And the skills he was learning in his professional life did not make it easier. He described his trajectory by drawing two lines on the table with his finger: a straight one, and a curving line following it. His was a path curving left and right off of the straight path (*al-sirat al-mustaqim*) (Schielke 2015: 132). He did not present it as a teleological progress:

I think I was a much better person back then because I would see the world in a rosy way. I was younger and more naive. Meanwhile I have had to learn how to get along (*atsarraf*) in the world, and in order to get along, you must sometimes be tough and exploit the situation. (Schielke 2015: 177)

While in 2009, I read a dead end of the Salafi project into Mustafa's trajectory prematurely, Fadil and Fernando read into it a pseudo-emic perspective that conveniently appears congruent with their own theoretical framework (echoed in the phrase "past, present, and future," borrowed not from Mustafa but from Talal

Asad). That reading, however, is not congruent with what Mustafa said and did in the years that followed. So, we were both wrong.

Fadil and Fernando rightly pinpoint an ontological stance that informs my contribution to anthropology: the impossibility of perfection and the primacy of the incomplete and inconsistent. But striving for perfection is very well possible. It does not, however, result in that which it aims for in a straightforward way. Instead, it contributes to struggles that can be productive and fulfilling, frustrating and unpredictable, violent and destructive, sometimes all at once. Ontologically, the committed pious Muslim subject is akin to the self-determined autonomous liberal subject, the *homo sovieticus*, the enlightened Buddhist antsubject, and the activist nationalist citizen committed to a collective struggle. To not take seriously the ambivalence of such striving, is for me to not take seriously those who strive in such ways.

By framing my work by the anthropology of Islam (which I do not), Fadil and Fernando overlook that my thinking about the Islamic revival is paralleled by my similar thinking about other causes. Would they also argue that I “disqualify the ontological validity” of pure love when I address its discontents (Schielke 2015)? Or that I disqualify the ontological validity of the project of modernity when I address the hierarchical divisions needed to realize its otherwise impossible aims (Schielke 2008)? Or the ontological validity of young men’s urge to become labor migrants when I highlight the contradictory and tragic outcomes of migration (Schielke 2015)? Or of poets when I highlight the inherent contradictions of literature as a protected space (Schielke 2014a)? Or of the ethical work of loving a nation by pointing out how it relies on polarization and bloodshed to establish an otherwise impossible sense of purity (Schielke 2014b)?

For me, shared humanity is not exemplified in resistance and creativity but in tragic pursuits. We could talk about that.

Fadil and Fernando call for “taking our interlocutors seriously.” I agree. But what does it entail? When should those we speak with compel us to revise our theory, as Mustafa compelled me to do between 2009 and 2015? And when should we critically engage with some of their claims? The solutions depend on positionality more than epistemology.

My article on Ramadan was indeed written against Salafism. In the provincial Egypt of the 2000s, Salafism was becoming the hegemonic, normal way of being a Muslim, marginalizing and silencing other ways. A religious transformation was under way, so successful that it was becoming invisible. Because of my previous immersion in Sufi circles, this did cause me some “affective discomfort” (albeit of a less liberal kind than Fadil and Fernando assume). After 2011, much changed. I am now paying more critical attention to the affective and violent labor of loving the Egyptian nation.

As comes to secularists in Europe, Fadil and Fernando find challenging them the best way to take them seriously. They problematize the tacit, silenced, and normalized dimensions of secular power and its emic languages (see note 8 of their article). For my work, “the secular” as they conceptualize it is not very helpful because it is neither hegemonic nor normal in the milieus I know in Egypt. It also seldom strikes a chord with emic understandings of secularism and secularization. “The secular” is useful though for the work Fadil and Fernando are doing:

questioning taken-for-granted claims of European societies about themselves. The way Nadia Fadil combines academic research with public engagement belongs to the best I have seen from anthropologists of our generation. But what is a valuable engagement against a hegemonic normality in one place may result in a misunderstanding of the hegemonic normality of another place. We stand in different places, facing different powers, and need different approaches. In that regard, our difference is unresolvable. Yet anthropologists, too, know how to make do with unresolved differences in productive ways. There is currently an abundance of good research on pious and impious lives alike—appropriating work from various sides of this debate without polarizing. I think highly of such work.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Paola Abenante, Liza Debevec, Alice Elliot, Shelley Hirsch, and Sertaç Sehliskoğlu for feedback helping me to phrase my response.

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