EVENTS

Biographies of Religious Engagement: Islamic Activism in Psychological Perspective: a Centre for Contemporary Islam Conference, 10-12 October 2012

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The phenomenon of Islamic activism, both within the political framework of "Islamism" or others, has been looked at mainly through the lenses of political studies and classical sociological theories. However, the original intention of the conference "Biographies of Religious Engagement" was to present the life histories of religious activists from the perspective of the psychology of religion. In trying to developing a framework to discuss these life histories, the conference also contributed some important elements of discussion about the terminology that can assist in understanding the trajectories of the activism of various Islamic actors who have attempted, often from differing ideological perspectives, to "(re-)establish Islam on a social or political level."

The term "conversion" was a key concept under scrutiny. The term was used in the content of the presentations of Michelangelo Guida on two Islamist intellectuals of early Republican Turkey, Andrea Brigaglia on a Wahhabi and a Shiite activist in Nigeria, Laura Smith on a Shiite activist in Egypt, and Aini Linjakumpu on autobiographies of former Islamic militants. A significant question that developed in response to conversion was the usefulness of William James' model. James defined conversion as the process whereby religious ideas, previously peripheral in one's consciousness, take a central place, and become the habitual centre of one's energy, deeply affecting the nature and the direction of one's action in the world.

[1]Several questions were posed regarding the notion that the term "conversion" in popular parlance usually implies the crossing of a (religious)

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tradition. Nevertheless, an important conclusion reached was that "conversion" is mainly a moment of change in a series of inner trajectories; moments of conversion should thus be viewed also as changes *within* a specific religious tradition (in our case, Islam), involving, for instance, processes of engagement or disengagement in or from specific forms of Islamic activism. Brigaglia made this clear in his presentation of two Nigerian case-studies: Ibrahim El Zakzaky and Ja'far Mahmud Adam. In both studies, the call for stricter adherence to *Shari'a*, or Islamic religious law, suggests that Zakzaky and Mahmud Adam engaged in a spectrum of change within their existing belief structure. These inner changes impacted deeply upon their external activism, and thus need to be addressed through the lenses of the psychology of religion.

The notion that conversion may be viewed as a series of trajectories also brought into question the concept of "Islamism." The debate surrounding this term focused in part on "... the challenge of Islamism to 'reinvent' a certain identity." While several delegates argued in favour of the idea that Islamism is a reaction to western hegemony and thus a reaction to western imperialism, others contended that Islamism is an independent ideology that brings mobilization which is not dependent upon a reaction to something; for example, western hegemony. Gadija Ahjum's use of the term was given particular attention during this discussion. Her argument is that an Islamist is one whose "...Muslim identity is at the centre of his or her political practice." Others, like Ramzi Ben Amara in his presentation on the biographies of Islamic activists of the *Tajdid* group in northern Nigeria, argued that the term Islamism is ultimately misleading because it does not directly correspond to any emic self-representation of the activists under scrutiny. Ultimately, each presenter seemed to employ the term "Islamism" and "Islamist" in his or her own subtle way, and the only true agreement that was reached was the importance of acknowledging "loaded terms," and that Marshall Hodgson's model of terminology usage may be useful in locating one method by which to adhere when employing terms such as "Islamism." Nevertheless, each use of the term yielded useful insights, and even

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brought into question the idea of a "Post-Islamism" as the conference came to a close.

The term *Tajdid*, or *reform,* was also a recurrent one during the conference, and seemed to encompass some of the nuances of both the concepts of "conversion" and "Islamism." Auwais Rafudeen presented on Mufti Abdu nNabi Hamidi, a South African Sunni activist. According to Rafudeen, Mufti Hamidi was a paradigmatic case used by South African Muslims of Barelvi tendency in order to distinguish themselves from other forms of Islam (Deobandi, Salafi), and to uphold their "true path" of Islam. However, the supporters of Mufti Hamidi were also encouraged to engage in a process of self-reflection that led them to change their traditional Barelvi mindset on issues like donations and their belief in the purpose behind *Urs,* for example, in order to survive the criticism of their opponents. What this could suggest is a *spectrum of change* in the outlook of South African Sunnis. In the same way, Halkano Abdi Wario argued in his presentation on the life of Sheikh Abdullahi among the Waaso-Borana of Kenya that "the rise of Islamist leaders in rural Africa is a product of transnational revivalism and reform." Ultimately, these are two clear examples of the intricate relation between ongoing processes of religious *tajdid*, individual stories of conversion, and different (often conflicting) trends of Islamic activism.

The conference successfully addressed the concept of "self" in relation to the concept of "biography," which was one of the central goals of that meeting. The contributions that looked deeply into the inner trajectory of the "self" of an individual actor were those of Aslam Farouk-Ally and Tahir Sitoto. The first contribution looked at the biography of the Egyptian Islamist intellectual Muhammad al-Ghazali, reconstructing his early career through a reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's "ideological becoming." The second contribution, by Tahir Sitoto, concluded the conference by looking at the religious dimension in the biography of South African black consciousness activist and convert to Islam Don Mattera; it made a strong point for looking at Islamic activism beyond the narrow lenses of "Islamism."

In the concluding remarks of the conference, it

was agreed that the trajectories of the self are paths that emerge in the individual, but are defined by the *location* of that individual and his or her *conversation* with the outside world. This path can lead to *conversion*, but propagation, or the perpetuation of conversion, inevitably leads back to a renewed *conversation* with the self. Regarding "biography," it was agreed that targeting a particular person or ideology provides a legacy for followers: these legacies are perceptibly important. As mentioned, the question of whether there could be a "Post-Islamism" was one of the concluding problems that remained more or less unanswered, but provides scope for a promising preview of further scholarship on the subject.

Notes

1 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature,* Toronto: Modern Library (1999), chapters on conversion (pp. 210-84).