which was consumed by the Muslims) (p. 248). The latter also wasted much time, as they still do, on kat [qār] chewing sessions (p. 246). But, to the great credit of all its components, “Sana’a was remarkably peaceful — perhaps because they all went armed” (p. 250).

Wavell’s description of the Turkish defensive equipment and disposition is so professional and detailed that he inadvertently gives one indication of being an intelligence officer, with or without commission. Yet Wavell’s second attempt to escape to the North fails despite his being cunning, daring and re-sourcefulness because his Arab guide, a scoundrel, let him down.

Returning to Britain the author was ill advised to demand the enormous sum of 20,000 Pounds Sterling from the Foreign Office for its having failed to protect him in the Yemen. But both the Foreign Office and the British Embassy in Istanbul remained convinced that Wavell’s losses and fate had been due to his own fault because the Turkish authorities had been entitled to restrict his movement for valid security reasons in a war-torn country. Thus there were no legal grounds for collecting a penalty from the Sublime Porte. Indeed, reading this official correspondance in the Appendix (pp. 332-343) is painful.

Murad Wilfried Hofmann


*Politics of Piety* is an ethnographic description of Muslim revivalism in Egypt, viewed from the vantage point of women of various social strata who routinely attend religious lessons offered by female preachers in the mosques of Cairo. These religious lessons not only emphasize the study of Islamic scriptures, but also focus on social norms, personal orientations and bodily comportments perceived as essential to nurture a pious and virtuous self.

This fascinating analysis of women in the contemporary mosque movement in Egypt clearly presents a bold challenge to the conventional ideas of secular feminists. Saba Mahmood investigates the conceptual challenges that women’s involvement in the Islamist movement poses to feminist theory
in particular and to secular-liberal thought in general through a detailed ethnographic account of the women’s mosque movement in Cairo (p. 2). It is important, the author warns the reader as she begins her careful study and analysis, not to presuppose that the ideological perspectives we maintain will necessarily be useful or helpful for the methodological approach and inquiry at hand. The author calls upon her readers to join her in “parochializing our assumptions about the constitutive relationship between action and embodiment, resistance and agency, self and authority— that inform most feminist judgments from across a broad range of the political spectrum about non-liberal movements such as the women’s mosque movement” (p. 38).

*Politics of Piety* is an excellent study that renders an alternative lens through which we may comprehend the women’s mosque movement in Egypt. This book, and the powerful critique it contains, divulges spaces of Islamic piety that debunk the shibboleths which dominate thinking on the topic in the West. Mahmood meticulously deconstructs the discursive banalities that typical strands of liberalism and feminism impose on the Muslim world. The book contains a masterly depth of description with theoretical sophistication to give us an insightful look into the faith and experiences of Muslim women, often in contestation with not only Western liberal influences but also Arab nationalism and political Islamism. The author demonstrates an extraordinary level of self- and disciplinary critique, believing that “a certain amount of self-scrutiny and skepticism is essential regarding the certainty of my own political commitments, when trying to understand the lives of others who do not necessarily share these commitments” (p. xi).

The section on “Women and the Da’wa” (pp. 64–72) is rich and erudite, as Mahmood contrasts the hegemonic power of secular liberalism with the emergence of the da’wah movement and remarks that “the modernist project of the regulation of religious sensibilities, undertaken by a range of postcolonial states (and not simply Muslim states), has elicited in its wake a variety of resistances, responses and challenges” (p. 78). These challenges, in her view, although deeply indebted to the logic of secular liberal government “cannot be understood solely in the practices of the modern state” (p. 78). The anthropological inquiry of the last three chapters focuses precisely on investigating why and how these social forces of ethical reform— such as the women’s mosque movement— disturb central presuppositions of the social imaginary of the secular “liberati” even though such piety movements have no lofty political objectives such as capturing state power.

“Pedagogies of Persuasion,” the third chapter in the book, begins with the claim that “public education and urbanization have not led to a decline in religious observance in the Muslim world” (p. 79). Throughout, the book is
meant to give pause to theorists of the social sciences when confronting issues of liberalism, agency, or religion. Under the subject of “the modernity of traditional practices,” Mahmood asserts that “tradition is not a set of symbols and idioms that justify present practices, neither is it an unchanging set of cultural prescriptions that stand in contrast to what is changing, contemporary or modern. Rather the past is the very ground through which subjectivity and self-understanding of a tradition’s adherents are constituted.” (p. 115).

Post-structuralist or deconstructionist feminists have challenged the ideas that have long been a constitutive part of the liberal/progressive agenda and have critically interrogated deeply entrenched categories such as gender, class or race. It should not be therefore surprising that Mahmood’s account of the Muslim world contravenes conventional wisdom and debunks many certainties held as absolute truth by feminists and liberals alike. Mahmood’s ethnographic study highlights three sets of issues: (a) “the different practical contexts in which women deploy diverse classical and popular genres of Islamic literature . . . with discursive authority”; (b) “hierarchies of class, gender, and generation” as they “influenced the kind of Islamic materials selected”; and (c) “how patriarchal conceptions of women’s sexuality . . . are debated, interpreted and adapted” by the numerous women who are involved in the mosque movement (p. 82). The vignettes she highlights underscore these facets while offering a glimpse of the manner in which women are actively participating in an engaged and interactive learning experience rather than as passive drones with practically no dialogic exchange (pp. 104-105).

Chapter four, “Positive Ethics and Ritual Conventions,” embarks on a discourse on ethics from a Foucauldian approach, which calls for an interrogation not merely of the religio-cultural norms embedded in moral codes but the variegated ways in which people actually live out these codes. The author notes that, “What is consequential is not whether people follow the moral norms or not but what relationships they establish between the various constitutive elements of the self and a particular norm” (p. 120). Mahmood’s contention here is not simply the necessity to locate the individual within the institutional milieu of the social. Rather, she tries to map the contour of the kind of subject presumed to be necessary to the political imaginary of the piety movement (of which the mosque movement is an important part)” (p. 152).

What is unique about such a large number of women organizing themselves for public meetings in mosques to teach each other Islamic doctrine is that it has transformed the historically male-centred environment of mosques as well as the character of Islamic pedagogy. At the same time, however, the women’s mosque movement underscores virtues and
behavioural norms that are usually associated with feminine subservience and passivity, such as modesty, shyness, humility, and perseverance. Mahmood deconstructs not only the varied manifestations of agency as they evolve within the trajectories of the mosque movement but also the kinds of analytic questions that are opened up if agency is analyzed in some other modalities—questions that remain submerged if agency is analyzed in terms of resistance to the subordinating function of power (pp. 153–54).

By analyzing the type of agency displayed when a novice endeavours to master the virtue of al-ḥirya ("shyness"), Mahmood offers the reader an intelligent and highly nuanced understanding of how a life lived in consonance with Islamic ethics impacts a woman's maneuverability within the structural matrix of patriarchal mores that questions ideas of agency assumed within liberal and post-structural feminist intellectual thought. One of the women participating in the mosque study, Ashmawi describes how the routine practice of particular actions impacts one's interiority. According to Mahmood, such women hold that, "The proper locus of the attribute of modesty is the interiority of the individual, which then has an effect on outward behavior. [M]odesty is not so much an attribute of the body as it is characteristic of the individual's interiority, which is then expressed in bodily form" (pp. 160–161).

Conventional feminist discourses would tend to examine this mosque movement through the normative paradigm of women's liberation and autonomy, either to lament its participants' subservience to exploitative and patriarchal mores or to search for elements of resistance and reinterpretation that permit these women to express a uniquely female voice and agenda. But both of these perspectives would be misleading. They assert that women's autonomy and self-actualization can only be manifested in contradistinction to dominant social norms and institutions, whereas the women studied by Mahmood privilege, as the core impetus of their identity formation, their submission to God's will and their attempts at living out a virtuous and pious self. As opposed to painstakingly trying to depict these women's social oppressions, or promoting their lives as authentic expressions of Islamic culture, Mahmood forces the Western reader to interrogate his or her assumptions about the notion of resistance (p. 36). The author argues that, "It is only by exploring these norms and traditions in relation to the practical engagements and forms of life in which they are embedded that we can come to understand the significance of that subordination to the women who embody it" (p. 188).

Mahmood forcefully questions the way a Western, liberal organization of women is characterized as being involved in political praxis, while the mosque
movement is seen as an internalization of oppression (p. 198). The author argues that the conventional liberal tradition of signifying politics as a matrix of "rights, recognition, and political representation" ignores the practices of self-constitution at the centre of these women's lives (p. 193). Even characterizing these practices as "resistance" is problematic for Mahmood. She recounts the narrative of a woman whose husband opposes her participation in mosque study. The woman disobeyes his command to cease her mosque activities, instead incessantly calling him to account for his theological failings through a repertoire of knowledge she has cultivated by her rigorous study of Islamic law (pp. 176-80). Mahmood acknowledges that such a scenario may be perceived as gender resistance. But she cautions readers all too willing to posit similarities between this and liberal individualism since it is precisely the appeal to traditional religious injunctions that allows the wife to engage in such behaviour. She endeavours for virtue and piety, not liberation or even equality. And the specific trajectories of her objective make binary oppositions such as "submission versus subversion" unhelpful (p. 180).

To further illustrate this point, Mahmood looks at the Muslim veil, which has been analyzed ad nauseum in academic and journalistic accounts in the West. Despite a plethora of reasons offered for its renewed popularity in modern Egypt, often positing the wearing of the veil as an act of resistance to the domination of Western norms or as a convenient mechanism to negotiate through urban life, scant attention has been given to notions of female modesty or piety as Islamic virtues, even though it is precisely in this type of language that many women who choose to don the veil articulate their decision. Their sincere belief is that the veil is not something that could be divorced from the pious virtues of modesty, humility, and submission, as if one could or should enshroud an "inner" self from its public persona. Instead, bodily acts such as donning the veil or behaving modestly in the presence of men are both a means for obtaining these virtues and these virtues themselves. The notion of the veil is thus the process of both being and becoming a particular type of a person, and not the expression of a preformed identity. The women, hence, are not obsessed with any notion of subversion or différence but on "[w]hat resources and capacities does a pious lifestyle make available . . ." (p. 168).

Mahmood's careful and attentive approach to her informants' own words and reasoning is not necessarily moved by the anthropologist's effort to remain "true" to her subject: rather, the ideas and language employed by the mosque movement "talk back" to the analytical methodology characterizing mainstream social science and to the numerous assumptions of an under-interrogated secular-liberal-feminist project. The book starts off by challenging
the parameters of “secular” certitudes and liberal conceptions of freedom, and then engages extensively on the topic of subject formation to render an analysis that affirms, following Foucault through Talal Asad, “the work that discursive practices perform in making possible particular kinds of subject?” (p. 188).

The “Epilogue” addresses some of the author’s concerns at the beginning of the book, stating that for the scholar of Islam situated within the Western academy none of these questions can be adequately answered without encountering the essential tropes through which knowledge about the Muslim world has been organized, key among them the trope of patriarchal violence and Islam’s (mis)treatment of women” (p. 195). By explicitly problematizing her own deep-seated assumptions about Muslim women and Islamic revivalism “through an exercise of disciplined suspension of judgment toward the normative limits of political discourse” (p. 198), Mahmood is able to broach questions and approaches with which a secular-liberal lens would not be so comfortable. Politics of Piety thus poses a significant challenge to the way in which the liberal academic tradition regards religious practice and accounts for moral agency. Mahmood’s brilliant study of the Islamic movement is a refreshing alternative to the cliché-ridden discourse that currently masquerades as knowledge about Islamic social movements.

Junaid S. Ahmad


For anyone interested in the complicated and often controversial subject of Biblical history, Tim Wallace-Murphy is the author to look out for. And his latest book What Islam Did For Us provides a comprehensive, if not profound, analysis of the history of the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Wallace-Murphy has attempted to dress old wounds by pointing out the significance of the Muslim Empire in the development of the European nations. The Muslim contribution to the sciences and the revival of