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(IM)PIETY: ISLAM, PIOUS SINNING AND REGULATED TRANSGRESSIONS

Wael al-Soukkary[*]

Abstract: Much has been written about Islamic piety from anthropological and sociological perspectives. However, Islamic impiety has yet to be theorised, which is interesting given how widespread it is in Muslim-majority countries. This article argues that it is essential to examine and theorise impiety because the lives of believers constitute pious *and* impious experiences. However, the central argument of this paper is *not* that theorising impiety alongside piety is essential for understanding Muslim communities. Instead, pious and impious experiences are only sometimes easily distinguishable. This is to say, piety and impiety do not exist on separate planes of social experience and behaviour. In other words, it is not necessarily the case that certain practices and behaviours are demonstrably pure forms of impiety, even when they contradict Islamic orthodoxy and mainstream standards of pious behaviour. Instead, the article suggests that pious nuances may exist in the most impious practices and behaviours, which I call (im)piety.

Keywords: *Islam, sin, transgression, negotiation, piety, impiety*

INTRODUCTION

The importance of *taqwa* (piety) in Islam cannot be understated. The word *taqwa* and its derivatives are mentioned in the Qur'ān 258 times in different forms and contexts.[1] In Islamic theology, the term *taqwa* collectively describes faith in God and *tawhid* (monotheism), fear and love of God, acceptance of Islam, obedience to Divine commands, abstinence from wrongdoing, and precision in following the directives of God and the example of Prophet Muḥammad. In that sense, *taqwa* is separate from and contingent on faith in God and His reckoning (whether in this life or the next),[2] because *taqwa* is an ongoing endeavour to fulfil God's wishes and better oneself according to correct Islamic standards of righteousness. To achieve salvation in Islam, faith must be complemented with good, righteous behaviour, a function of *taqwa*.

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[1] Erik Ohlander, "Fear of God (taqwā) in the Qur'ān: Some Notes on Semantic Shift and Thematic Context," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 50, no. 2 (2005): 140.

[2] This distinction is evident in the Qur'ān. For example, it describes those who will succeed in the afterlife as "those who were faithful (*amanu*) and were fearful (*yatqwn*)" (10:63).

As crucial as *taqwa* is, Islamic theology also recognises that humankind is fallible and imperfect. Therefore, occasional sin is inevitable and expected; even the most pious resolve would be tested during their lives. That is why Islamic theology significantly emphasises *al-istighfar* (asking God for forgiveness) and *tawba* (repentance). This is not the same as the Christian doctrine of original sin because, in Islamic theology, every human is born with *fitra* (innate goodness). However, Islam teaches that socialisation, falsehoods, temptations, weakness, the whisperings of the devil and the rule of tyrants can corrupt humans. This susceptibility to sin ties in with the imperative of constantly seeking forgiveness from God, which is as important as striving towards leading a pious life.

With all this in mind, let us now ask: Could the pious ever sin? Could the less committed believers ever *not* sin? Do the wicked ever fear Allah or do they surrender entirely to the *waswasah* (whispering) of the devil and their corrupted desires? Is it possible for a person to act piously or impiously on different occasions? Moreover, can one ever be wholly pious or impious?

These are not rudimentary questions, at least not in the implications of their apparent answers. Since the pious are not infallible, they can sin regardless of their level of commitment and diligence to piety. Moreover, since a lack of religious commitment does not necessarily mean its absolute absence, it would be reasonable to assume that less committed believers could occasionally be pious. Because the ‘wicked’ do not necessarily abandon their faith, some of their behaviours could still be bound to *taqwa*. Therefore, if piety is situational, this would imply that piety as a personal quality is fluid rather than a final state of being. In other words, to be less committed religiously is not necessarily irreverent to God, utterly undutiful to religious practices or in utter disregard to religious standards of piety.

This conclusion raises other questions with less obvious answers. If piety is fluid, meaning it has degrees and intensities that are situationally manifested in human behaviour, then what would impiety be? Is impiety an extraordinary state of being reserved for individuals who are just pure evil and wicked? Furthermore, suppose the fluidity of piety already accounts for lesser internalised intensities of commitment to piety. What use do we even have for the term impiety as a descriptor of a personal quality? Would it not be more reasonable to think of piety as a spectrum where one could be more or less pious?

One could suggest that piety/impiety describes behaviours rather than personal qualities to avoid the conundrum presented by these questions. For example, to pray is pious, but to disregard religious duties is impious; to help others is pious, but to cause harm is impious; to refrain from extramarital relationships is pious, but to engage in infidelity is impious, and so on. However, this distinction only makes sense based on two assumptions. First, we could divorce the act from the person committing it; and second, any given behaviour could be categorised entirely under an appropriate description where it is either pious or impious. This, however, is easier said than done because if the terms piety/impiety describe behaviours rather than personal qualities, what about situations in which an impious behaviour is committed with consideration to the religious imperative of piety and reverence to God? For example, it could be apparent to a believer that to view pornography is impious, to masturbate is impious and to have premarital sex is impious. Nevertheless, would viewing pornography and masturbating to avoid premarital sex be impious? Would committing a categorically impious act refrain from committing a more severe impious act out of reverence to God and a commitment, albeit imperfect, to Islamic standards of piety? Should pious nuances in impious behaviours be accounted for as a form of piety?

Addressing these questions is crucial for scholarship on modern Muslim-majority countries (MMCs) and Muslim communities in general. This is particularly the research case where piety and morality are examined. This might also be useful for political scientists studying secularisation, Islamic movements and governance. As I will discuss shortly, many researchers have observed that the significance of Islam in the lives of Muslim subjects and the social imperative of pious performances coincide with other factors inflecting their material and social conditions, desires and behaviours. This often leads to what would seem as contradictory socio-economic and political arrangements, lifestyles and social practices where, in all these things, piety and impiety are tensely imbricated, and Islam and secularity are co-opted and contested. This leads to a fundamental question. Suppose Islam is significant in the lives of Muslim subjects and a crucial component of the sociopolitical organisation of societies. How are certain impious behaviours facilitated and tolerated by the state and Muslim subjects, if not normalised?

It is argued in this article that it is crucial to examine and theorise impiety because the lives of believers constitute pious *and* impious experiences. Of course, this happens with variances in intensities and specificities. However, I am *not* suggesting it is important to study impiety *alongside* piety to understand Muslim communities. Instead, I suggest that piety and impiety do not exist on separate planes of social experience and behaviour. In other words, it is not necessarily the case that certain practices and behaviours are demonstrably pure forms of impiety, even when they contradict Islamic orthodoxy and mainstream standards of pious behaviour. To put it simply, I am calling for recognising the sacred in the sacrilegious and acknowledging the possibility that pious nuances may exist in the most impious practices and behaviours, which is what I call (im)piety. This will be discussed in detail shortly.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been written about Islamic piety from anthropological and sociological perspectives. A cursory glance at the literature reveals many works examining Islamic piety from diverse and different angles. Many scholars have analysed and theorised Islamic piety to show it is more than just obedience to Divine commands and directives of textual traditions that are frozen in time. There are now two prominent theoretical strands in what has become known as the anthropology of Islam. Notwithstanding the variances among each strand, one strand emphasises the role of power relations in producing religious knowledge and the other focuses on individual everyday practice. Scholars from both strands have broadened our understanding of pious conduct as it relates to broad socioeconomic, political and material conditions; historical and techno-economic transformations; and individual desires and anxieties as well as aspirations and frustrations.

The first strand builds on Talal Asad's conceptualisation of Islam as a discursive tradition that does away with the binaries of religion and modernity. Instead, it extrapolates from the Foucaldian conception of power and discourses that any religion – including Islam – should be contextualised in the power relations that produce religious knowledge. Asad explains the term "discursive tradition" as comprising "discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice, that precisely because it is established, it has a history."[3] For Asad, there are no meaningful distinctions between tradition and modernity as mutually exclusive domains of culture or society. Instead, he suggests that Islamic discursive traditions have an element of continuity that binds the present to the past so the things we associate with modernity are also rooted in tradition. All this should remind us that the oppositional preoccupation with tradition and modernity reflects the discursive tradition of Western modernity, the coordinates for which were extended to other parts of the world in ways that often demanded a degree of mental gymnastics. In other words, in Asad's framework, homogeneity and, more broadly, the systematic regulation of people's lives are manifestations of power put into practice (through debate, competition and institutionalisation) rather than just the outcomes of essentialist orientations of tradition or texts (and hence his emphasis on discourses).[4]

The second strand investigates individual practice in modern life's messy and ambivalent context. It is more interested in exploring the malleability of pious conduct rather than just applying the theoretical abstractions of Asad and his interlocutors. In this strand, the importance of religion in Muslim communities is still recognised and the power relations that produce religious knowledge are acknowledged. However, religion is considered one among other forces and factors that inflect and shape Muslim subjects' desires, aspirations, frustrations and lifestyles. Some have recognised this strand as a scholarship that focuses on the so-called "everyday Islam." The theoretical thrust of this approach is perhaps best illustrated by Schielke's reminder that "the vast majority of Muslims who – like most of humankind – are sometimes but not always pious, at times immoral, and often undisciplined have remained in the shadow of an image of Islam as a perfectionist project of self-discipline."[5] In other words, Schielke reminds us to distinguish between, on the one hand, the idealism of piety as a virtue and the aim of absolutist normative directives as commanded by Islamic discourses and texts, and on the other hand, the people carrying out the task of self-discipline and interacting with the requirements and standards of Islamic piety among many other considerations.[6]

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[3] Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009): 20.

[4] The application of the Asadian framework can be seen in various seminal works, such as Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992); Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Salwa Ismail, *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006).

[5] Samuli Schielke, "Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009): 24.

While both strands could overlap, Deeb rightly observes they "are so often constructed and read as diametrically opposed to one another, as though this is a zero-sum game."[7] The main point of contention between both strands seems to be the position of Islam in the everyday. For example, in response to Schielke's work, Fadil and Fernando criticise studies of the "everyday Muslim" because, in their view, it abstracts social life into two separate domains.[8] The first is religion, which they argue is presented as rigid, disciplined and unnaturalised. The second is the everyday, which they claim is presented as flexible, spontaneous, ambiguous, secular and humanised. In other words, for Fadil and Fernando, overemphasising the everyday leads to constructing binary analytical frames where we have the everyday and secular modernity on one hand and morality and Islamic piety on the other. Not only did Fadil and Fernando question the ontological distinction between both, but they also cautioned that it risks estranging Islamic piety and tradition in the everyday domain.

I agree with Fadil and Fernando that constructing the everyday as well as invoking the trope of "navigating complex modern life" runs a risk of potentially untangling religion from everyday experiences. This is problematic because it would ultimately distort our perceptions of these experiences. After all, Islam is a significant part of the mundane and significant, the specific and general, and the sacred and profane. I do not think this was either the aim or implications of the works of scholars examining individual practice's malleability. In my view, the critical point they make is that anthropologists should account for how other cultural elements, social forces and human agency influence religious commitment. In addition, these scholars invite us to consider modern Muslims as more than carriers of tradition or subjects of tradition-guided reasoning regardless of the political process that produces any given religious knowledge. This is necessary because empirical studies show that many Muslims do not live their lives this way (daily or otherwise). Significant scholarly attention has been given to various practices and behaviours in Muslim communities that are categorically impious. For example, online dating;[9] alcohol and drug abuse;[10] fashion consumerism;[11] a wide range of Islamically prohibited leisure practices;[12] and the production and mass consumption of commercialised arts.[13]

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[6] This sensibility towards human agency is evident in the works of scholars such as Mona Abaza, "Shopping malls, Consumer Culture and the Reshaping of Public Space in Egypt," *Theory, Culture and Society* 18, no. 5 (2001); Petra Kuppinger, "Globalization and Exterritoriality in Metropolitan Cairo," *Geographical Review* 95, no. 3 (2005); Magnus Marsden, *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Leonie Schmidt, "Urban Islamic Spectacles: Transforming the Space of the Shopping Mall during Ramadan in Indonesia," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (2012); Samuli Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015); Sarah Tobin, *Everyday Piety: Islam and Economy in Jordan* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016).

[7] Lara Deeb, "Thinking Piety and the Everyday Together: A Response top Fadil and Fernando," *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 2 (2015): 94.

[8] Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando, "Rediscovering the 'Everyday' Muslim: Notes on an Anthropological Divide," *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 2 (2015).

These studies raise an essential question: if Islam is so important in MMCs, and if piety is important cultural capital and a desirable mode of living, why are impious behaviours widespread? Aliakbar Jafari and Ahmet Süerdem observe that the sacred and profane are "symbiotically present" in consumer practices in MMCs. They highlight scenarios such as an Iranian woman who observes daily prayers but also attends mixed gender parties; Turkish Muslims who celebrate the end of the holy month of Ramadan by consuming alcohol; Jakartan families who attend the Friday prayers then indulge in "hedonic shopping"; and Arab students in Dubai who rejoice in the "grandeur of Islamic mysticism" in lavish restaurants, which serve sheesha and play pop music in the background. Jafari and Süerdem argue that, in these scenarios, "the Halal (lawful) and Haram (unlawful), the Mustahabb (favoured) and Makruh (disliked), and the Islamic and un-Islamic are all juxtaposed to shape the mundane consumption practices of these people."[14] They then argue that such practices are "obvious paradoxes" reflecting "the effects of globalisation of consumer culture" and they are "grounded in very ordinary cultural habits of the indigenous people of each society."[15]

While Jafari and Süerdem correctly identify apparent contradictions between various modes of living in MMCs, framing these contradictions as paradoxes is to dismiss the possibility of their occurrences. However, there are empirically observable contradictive practices, behaviours and attitudes that would suggest they are not paradoxical at all. Nothing is paradoxical about an individual combining seemingly contradicting personal traits, ideas and practices. If it is not paradoxical, the question becomes how it is possible.

This is mainly where the Asadian framework reaches its limits; it does not offer much to work with concerning impiety. Conceptualising Islam as a discursive tradition may illuminate the political process, one that is embedded in power relations, by which contradicting Islamic discourses are shaped, packaged and delivered or silenced. That is to say, the Asadian framework could explain the differences *within* Islamic discourses about what constitutes impiety. However, when Muslim subjects act outside the broad agreements of different Islamic discourses, the Asadian framework becomes null. This is expected since conceptualising Islam as a discursive tradition is inherently limited by its fixation on discourses "which seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice."[16] Of course, this raises the question of who determines this. The theological answer is God, but the sociopolitical answer, as Asad argues, is those claiming authority in the name of God and – more importantly – those whose discourses are made dominant. The issue is that, while the Asadian framework claims to do away with the binaries of religion and secular modernity, it inadvertently reinforces them by essentialising and restricting religious expression and behaviour to what is deemed correct by any given Islamic discourse. In other words, it pays no heed to individual negotiations with Islamic orthodoxies if it is not guided by a desire to receive "correct" instructions about how to behave. This effectively designates impious behaviour as a thing outside the domain of Islam and religious experience in general. In other words, there is a profoundly problematic slippage in the Asadian framework, specifically, from considering the power relations that produce "correct" religious knowledge to imagining the religious experience solely as one confined within Islamic orthodoxies.

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[9] Laura Kaya, "Dating in a Sexually Segregated Society: Embodied Practices of Online Romance in Irbid, Jordan," *Anthropological Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2009).

[10] Laurence Michalak and Karen Trocki, "Alcohol and Islam: An Overview," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 33 (2006); Naglaa Mahmoud, Maha al-Mazroua and Mostafa Afify, "The Prevalence of Illicit Drugs and Alcohol in Road Traffic Accident Fatalities in the Eastern Region of Saudi Arabia," *Indian Journal of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology* 14, no. 4 (2021).

[11] Annelies Moors, "Islam and Fashion on the Streets of San'a, Yemen," *Etnofoor* 16, no. 2 (2003); Banu Gökariksel and Ellen McLarney, "Introduction: Muslim Women, Consumer Capitalism, and the Islamic Culture Industry," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 6 no. 3 (2010).

[12] Aliakbar Jafari and Ahmet Süerdem, "An Analysis of Material Consumption Culture in the Muslim World," *Marketing Theory* 12, no. 1 (2012); Deeb and Harb, *Leisurely Islam*; Johanna Pink, *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption* (London, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020).

[13] Mehdi Semati, *Media, Culture and Socieculture in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State* (New York, London: Routledge, 2008); Karin van Nieuwkerk, *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theatre: Artistic Developments in the Muslim World* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011).

[14] Jafari and Süerdem, "An Analysis of Material Consumption Culture," 64.

[15] Ibid.

This leads to another problem with the Asadian framework that further exacerbates its incapacity to help us better understand impious conduct. Specifically, the way Asad imagines the virtuous Muslim as "an individual inhabiting the moral space shared by all who are bound by God."[17] The question is: what forms this "moral space"? Asad argues that discursive practices shape these moral spaces through "tradition-guided reasoning."[18] So, even when Asad addresses Muslim subjects, he does so within the canopy of the guidance of tradition. This is problematic, as Brittain tells us, as "those Muslims who are comfortable with the public/private distinction in their self-identity would not be considered a 'virtuous Muslim' according to Asad's universalized schema."[19] It also follows that Islamic virtue could only be achieved with this "tradition-guided reasoning." In other words, it is almost as if impious and unvirtuous Muslims become nominal Muslims when they do not behave according to the directives of any Islamic discourses. However, this is precisely the idea rebuked by studies on everyday Islam. Instead, it shows that Muslim subjects can internalise ethical considerations and express religious commitment even when they behave impiously. That is to say, there are different shades of Islamic praxis, some of which are not necessarily qualified or even condoned by any Islamic discourse. In other words, the reconfiguration of Islamic morality is not necessarily bound to principled interpretations of seminal texts, a function of Islamic discourses. Rather, Islamic morality can be reconfigured through practice without necessarily aspiring to homogeneity and consistency.

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[16] Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology," 20.

[17] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 219.

[18] Ibid., 211.

[19] Christopher Brittain, "The 'Secular' as a Tragic Category: On Talal Asad, Religion and Representation," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 17, no. 2 (2005): 155.

Remarkably, Islamic jurisprudence is not oblivious to the potentiality of such ambiguity in Islamic praxis. There are guiding principles that could be understood as transgression regulators. For instance, the foundational concept articulated as "that which cannot be gained fully should not be left out completely,"[20] which posits that in circumstances where the complete achievement of a goal becomes unattainable, but partial attainment is within the grasp of the responsible party, they should exert effort to realise what is within their reach, rather than completely abandoning the pursuit, all while avoiding the excuse of incapability to attain the entire objective.[21] This rationale is rooted in the idea that recovering a portion of the desired outcome, while feasible, is more advantageous than completely relinquishing the endeavour. Similarly, there are passages from *ḥadīth* that indicate that concealment of sin (that is, regulating the transgression) is more favourable than obstinately sinning in public. For example, it is reported that Prophet Muḥammad has said "All the sins of my followers will be forgiven except those of *Mujahirun* (those who commit sins openly or disclose their sins to others)."[22] Therefore, it is reasonable to posit that conceptualising Islam as a discursive tradition can allow room for setting rules for regulating transgressions. Be that as it may, it would be a narrow form of (im)piety whereas what I am suggesting has more breadth in the range and type of sins it accommodates. More importantly, it is predicated on individual autonomy instead of principled guidance from scholars.

Hence, rather than just fixating on power relations that produce principled Islamic discourses, the question becomes how human agency also shapes moral behaviour when the directives of Islamic texts and interpretations are transgressed. Answering this question is precisely why theorising impiety is crucial and long overdue. If we understand and define impiety as irreverence to God and an utter disregard for religious standards of piety, then there would be something profoundly self-contradicting in the ways many Muslims live to the extent that it could present a paradox to observers and scholars. As Asad argues, the virtuous Muslim only seeks correct instruction about proper Islamic conduct and practices. For this to be the case, however, we would have to conceive piety and impiety as opposites and as some final and self-contained states of being. However, as this article argues, this is not and cannot be true.

Piety is a significantly desired mode of living and pious performances are imperative for acquiring a positive social status and, in some cases, having a good standing with the law. However, Muslims also have other aspirations, desires and motivations, which may be at odds with their desires to be pious or with *the* mainstream Islamic orthodoxy in a given context, if not *the various* competing Islamic orthodoxies within the same context. This means they frequently have to navigate tensions between their different desires on the one hand and between their desires and their conditions on the other.

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[20] Arabic: *Maa la yadrukuh kulu la yutruk guluh*.

[21] Abdul Latif al-Saramy, "'Qa'aditat Ma La Yudruk Kulu La Yutruk Guluh': Ta'silan wa Tatbikan" ['The Principle of that which cannot be Gained Fully should not be Left Out Completely': Foundation and Application], *The Journal of Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University* 6 (2008): 177.

[22] Muhammad Khan, *The Translations of the Meanings of Sahih Bukhari* (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Darrusalam, 1997), vol. 8, The Book of Good Manners, 62 (*ḥadīth* 6069).

This conundrum is part of the lived reality of many Muslims worldwide. Schielke observes this in the multitude of ways Egyptians navigate the complexity of modern life. Schielke's central argument is that global capitalism, which is characterised by invoking a "deeper sensibility of being in the world,"[23] has greatly influenced and shaped Egypt's politics and economy and the everyday life of Egyptians. Schielke argues that global capitalism has done so by taking away "many of the grounds of certainty that existed in a smaller and slower world"[24] and replacing them with various vistas of hope and prospects. Specifically, Schielke proposes the concept of 'grand schemes,' which include religious commitment, middle-class respectability, ideologies, revolution and romance. He defines grand schemes as "ideas people understand as larger than life, unrealisable yet calling for the realisation."[25] However, the hopes and prospects of these grand schemes are almost always situated in a future that is yet to come but often turn out to be unrealised promises. This leads to what Schielke describes as a state of "temporality of the future," which leads to pervasive existential tensions between frustration with the present and the promise of a better future.

Schielke's arguments invite us to consider and acknowledge that the lives of Muslims are not necessarily coherent or consistent and are certainly not monolithic or religious in a traditional sense. This is mainly because of: (i) the diversity of strategies and practices that characterise the quests for fulfilling the promises of these grand schemes (which are often contradicting); and (ii) the variety of promises and idealised states of being that are inherent in these grand schemes, which may also be contradicting.

However, what remains unclear is how those who engage in impious behaviour perceive and rationalise their impiety and – more importantly – how they reconfigure Islamic morality in practice rather than in principle. That is to say, there is a gap between conceptualising the "everyday Muslim" as an active member of society navigating the messiness of modern social life and how piety and religion remain present in the mundane and profane of the everyday. As Deeb suggests, "scholarship could push further and highlight both the ways the everyday is shaped by religious discipline and normativity *and* the ways that religious discipline and normativity are themselves produced through and change via everyday social life."[26] One of the ways to do this is to go further than acknowledging and examining the presence of categorically impious behaviour in Muslim communities by investigating and theorising impiety as more than just a lack of piety (whether momentarily or consistently).

IMPIETY AND REGULATED TRANSGRESSIONS

The central argument in this article is that impious behaviour, a vast category in Islamic theology, is not necessarily vacant of pious considerations or ethical self-cultivation. That is, there is a space between piety and impiety where transgressions are committed but regulated and rationalised in such a way that still upholds some sense of commitment to religious directives and consideration of God's timeless presence (in other words, *taqwa*) or what I call (im)piety. If (im)piety denotes pious nuances in impious behaviour, it is crucial to highlight what constitutes the latter within the framework of (im)piety.

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[23] Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense*, 23.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 228.
[26] Deeb, "Thinking Piety," 96 (italics in original).

From now onwards, this article will use the term impiety to denote behaviour and actions that an individual believes are Islamically incorrect, regardless of the positions of any given Islamic orthodoxy. The reason for this, and as we turn our attention to how (im)piety is practised on an individual level, is that we are considering individual rationalisation of (im)piety and how internalised conflicts are resolved (or perhaps left unresolved).

For example, if a pubescent, sane Muslim woman does not wear the hijab and *does not believe* the hijab is Islamically mandatory, then there would be no internal conflict due to the action of showing her hair and her desire to be a pious Muslim woman. However, most classical and contemporary scholars agree that the hijab is Islamically mandatory.[27] Similarly, an already veiled woman that does not wear the niqab – that is, covering her entire body, including her face – and who believes the niqab is Islamically mandatory, then there would be an internal conflict between the action of showing her face and the desire to be a pious woman even though most scholars do not consider face covering to be obligatory.[28]

Earlier, I called for the theorisation of Islamic impiety, considering the possibility of ethical self-cultivation and maintaining religious sensibilities when people knowingly violate what they accept as correct Islamic directives and Divine commands. In other words, I suggest that piety does not end at simply following the dictates of authoritative texts and that certain acts of sinning could involve pious practices in certain conditions. If that was the case, there would have to be something about how a regulated transgression is rationalised and committed, or what I call (im)piety, that does not completely sever the ties with God and does not negate the religious/social imperative of being pious. So, the question becomes, what are the conditions that separate the utter disregard of religious directives and irreverence to God on the one hand and (im)piety on the other?

Let us begin answering this question by closely examining the concept of *taqwa* once again. If piety describes more than just mechanical obedience to a text and ritual practices, and if it denotes a way for ethical self-cultivation and a relationship with God, the environment[29] and others,[30] it follows that impiety is also more than the mere act of transgression and disobedience to a text and the norms of ritual practices. Moreover, it would indicate that Asad's imagination of the "virtuous Muslim" is too restrictive. Instead, I contend that "virtuous Muslims" are those who attend to "correct" forms of Islamic practices and those who transgress the requirement for a given practice without entirely severing their ties with God or abandoning their commitment to Islamic piety as a desired mode of living.

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[27] Shiu-Sian Hsu, "Modesty," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, vol. 3, ed. Johanna Pink (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2016).

[28] Hadia Mubarak, "Burqa," in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Islamic World*, ed. John Esposito (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2009), eBook edition.

[29] Qur'ān 28:77.

[30] Qur'ān 2:177, 25:72-74.

In this framework, active Muslim subjects are given leeway to deviate from their perceptions of Islamic orthodoxy and mainstream standards of Islamic piety by several considerations without losing a sense of their religious identity and their commitment to Islamic virtue. These considerations include understanding that sins in Islamic theology have variant levels of severity; the way transgressions are committed (with regard to their visibility); the selective observance of piety at other times and spaces; performances and expressions of guilt; *ḥusn alẓann and biallah* (trusting in God’s forgiveness and mercy); nominal commitment to religious duties; and acceptance of the moral authority of texts (but not necessarily abiding by it).

Under this scheme, impious behaviour remains Islamically wrong, but it does not rule out the possibility of pious self-validation and ethical self-cultivation. That is, so as long as it occurs under the awareness of God’s presence, acceptance of the validity of Islamic directives and the imperative of obeying Divine commands. That repentance is acknowledged as a necessary responsibility.

Against the pressure to conform to Islamic standards of piety, the social imperative of being seen as a pious and good Muslim, and the desirability of piety as a mode of living, (im)pious reasoning allows people with contradicting desires and aspirations to manoeuvre without compromising their self-image as good Muslims or presenting themselves to society as impenitent sinners that have no regard for the sacredness of religion. There are four broad principles of (im)piety: (i) not to challenge or transgress Islamic normative standards on principle, (ii) internalising guilt and a promise for repentance, (iii) invoking the power of God as an all-merciful and all-forgiving being, and (iv) the selective observance of piety. These four principles combined signal an unbreakable link to an awareness of God and religious commitment where some transgressions are rationalised and, through the process, become a way for ethical self-cultivation. This will be further explained in the next sections.

THE FOUR PRINCIPLES OF (IM)PIETY

As discussed earlier, the starting point of (im)piety is an inner conflict between a desire, a behaviour, a necessity or even an emotion vis-à-vis one’s convictions about correct Islamic standards of piety, good Islamic moral behaviour and God’s commands. To reiterate, this conflict does not necessarily have to correspond to the tension between, on the one hand, one’s desires or behaviour and, on the other hand, mainstream standards of piety, classical Qur’ānic exegesis or Islamic jurisprudence. In other words, this conflict is more universal because it transcends the diversity in Islamic thought since we chiefly consider individual perceptions about what is Islamically permissible or unlawful.

It is essential to consider and examine the power relations and continuity of Islamic traditions that shape Islamic discourses. However, we must also acknowledge that anyone who believes in Islam could have this inner conflict that cannot be resolved by shopping in the vast market of Islamic discourses. That is to say, what we are chiefly looking at are inner conflicts that arise in oneself in isolation from what constitutes Islamic orthodoxy. So, we could say that one of the differences is that impiety is about what constitutes Islamic orthodoxy, whereas (im)piety is about what an individual considers Islamic orthodoxy.

With that in mind, there are a few basic questions that I seek to address with this analysis. What thoughts and emotions do one have when they knowingly violate what they perceive as Divine commands and transgress *what they believe* are correct Islamic standards of piety and good moral behaviour? Does a sinner, perhaps driven by a strong desire, habit or necessity, mindlessly sin without thinking about heavenly repercussions? Does a sinner sever entirely the ties with God and the desire – and perhaps also the worldly and heavenly imperative – of being a pious Muslim? After all, without a framework that defines and categorises sin, there would be no sinners. This is to say, for the category of sinners and conceptualisation of sin to exist meaningfully, they must intrinsically and necessarily imply some commitment and an obligation to God. Since that must be the case, do sinners ever reflect on their behaviour and recognise, whether during the moment of sinning or after the fact, that they are doing or have done something wrong?

I find it unreasonable to assume that individuals who engage in impious behaviour – that is, behaviour that *they believe* violates Divine commands – lack this kind of self-reflection whether they engage in such behaviour consistently, sporadically or whimsically. Moreover, if this is not the case, could impious behaviour be reconciled with the religious and social imperative of piety? Not only would I argue that is possible, but in the process of self-reflection and navigation of these tensions, there is also room for ethical self-cultivation and the embodiment of piety in (im)pious behaviour.

First Principle: Acceptance of Divine Commands

The first principle is not to question the validity of Divine commands. Muslims universally believe God's words are final and Divine commands transcend time and space. If a person violates a Divine command (that is, a command this person believes is a Divine command) and knowingly does so, then questioning the validity of this command constitutes scepticism, defiance or both. In other words, there is a vast difference between, on the one hand, violating a Divine command out of weakness against temptation or lack of religious resolve and, on the other hand, violating a command on principle with the view that Divine commands are imperfect, invalid or irrelevant. That is to say, there is a crucial difference between (im)piety (which recognises and accepts divine commands but postpones comprehensive commitment to obey), apostasy (rejection of a particular divine) and atheism (rejection of all divine).

(Im)pious reasoning and behaviour are predicated primarily on (i) the recognition and acceptance of a divine and (ii) awareness of one's shortcomings regarding obedience to divine commands. Accordingly, inner conflicts are perceived to be a result of personal weakness and perhaps a manifestation of social decadence rather than fundamental problems with the divine commands or, more generally, the existence of this divine. For example, a person who consumes alcohol *with the view that it is Islamically impermissible by Divine command* would blame their behaviour on distractions, temptations, personal weakness or – more broadly – social decadence and the 'secularity' and corruption of the state (which allows the consumption of alcohol in the first place) rather than the invalidity of the Divine command. Similarly, a woman who shows her hair *with the view that the hijab is Islamically mandated by Divine command* would blame her behaviour on internal and external factors rather than question the validity of these Divine commands.

In short, violating a Divine command (that is, a command one perceives as a *truthfully* Divine command) on principle puts that individual in the realm of *mukabbara* (obstinacy), which leads to *kufr* (bearing in mind that *kufr* as a Qur'ānic concept is not restricted to disbelief in the one true God and His prophets but also blatant and brazen defiance of His will).[31] The bare act of submitting, at least in thought, to God's commands serves as an enduring tie with Him and Islamic notions of right and wrong despite the occasional or persistent violation of these commands.

Second Principle: Internalising and Performing Guilt

The second principle of (im)piety is internalising a sense of guilt and remorse with the promise of repentance once a person recognises their shortcoming regarding fulfilling their religious obligations and failing to observe *taqwa*. This is where (im)pious reasoning borrows but also departs from the Islamic doctrine of *tawba*, as Islamic theologians explain.

In Islamic theology, guilt is a pillar of *tawba*, which is a form of worship.[32] (Im)piety is predicated on this guilt. However, there are standards for what constitutes *al-tawbat al-nusuḥ* or sincere repentance, which must include the sincere determination not to return to the sin and acting on this determination. However, with (im)piety, that determination is replaced by a promise for that determination – but in the future.

For example, an unveiled woman *with the view that wearing the hijab is a Divine command* could internalise the guilt and perhaps express it outwardly in social situations that require doing so but would still carry on with the violation of this command with the promise (or hope) that one day she will change. Again, and despite not leading to *tawbat nusuḥ*, this sense of guilt and the promise to change (but in the future) maintain personal ties with God and the religious imperative of *taqwa*. As Liza Debevec argues in a study of Muslims in Burkina Faso and their adherence to mandatory daily prayers, "postponing piety does not draw piety itself into question."[33] This also chimes well with Schielke's notion of the "temporality of the future," which describes the perpetual incompleteness of seeking and realising the promises of grand schemes in the present (including religious commitment).

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[31] The term *kufr* denotes disbelief in God as well as faith in false gods and religions. It also denotes defiance of His will. For example, Qur'ān 2:34 explicitly categorises Satan as "from the *Kafiryn*" for rejecting God's command to bow to Adam.

[32] Gabriel Reynolds and Amir Moghadam, "Repentance in the Quran, Hadith, and Ibn Qudāma's Kitāb al-Tawwābīn," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 141, no. 2 (2021) :387.

[33] Liza Debvec, "Postponing Piety in Urban Burkina Faso: Discussing Ideas on when to Start Acting as a Pious Muslim," in *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion*, EASA Series (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), vol. 18, 44.

Third Principle: Invoking the Power of God

The third principle of (im)piety is invoking the power of God as a mediator in one's inner conflicts. In Islamic doctrine, God has 99 names or – more precisely – 99 Divine properties. Some of these names describe God's exclusive Divine and absolute attributes, such as *al-Quddus* (the Holiest), *al-Khaaliq* (the Creator), *al-Wasi* (the All-encompassing), *al-Alim* (the Omniscient), *al-Nuur* (the Light), *al-Hayy* (the Ever-living) and *al-Baqqi* (the Everlasting). These are attributes that God and only God can possess. However, God is also represented in the Qur'ān as personal, as indicated by some of His other names and attributes. These names, while describing absolute and Divine characteristics, represent God about His human creation. For example, *al-Hady* (the Guide to Goodness and Truth), *al-Wudood* (the Kind), *al-Mu'idh* (the Giver of Honour), *al-Karim* (the Most Generous), *al-Razzaq* (the Ever-providing), *al-Raheem* (the Most Merciful), *al-Saboor* (the Forbearing) and *al-Ghafur* (the Most Forgiving). Notice how these reassuring attributes contrast with other foreboding ones such as *al-Muntaqim* (the Avenger), *al-Gabar* (the Almighty), *al-Hasib* (the Reckoner), *al-Shaheed* (the Witness), *al-Dār* (the Distresser) and *al-Mudhil* (the Giver of Dishonour).

These attributes are not exclusive to God since a human can be kind, merciful, patient, forgiving, avenging and reckoning. Through these Divine yet humanly relatable attributes, a relationship with God can be perceived and experienced to be personal. Moreover, through this personal relationship with God, the sinner hopes for forgiveness and promises repentance in the future. In Islam, God expects obedience and reverence, and He will reward or punish accordingly in the afterlife and on Earth. Moreover, He listens to and answers prayers and plans for (and can intervene in) every event, from the mundane to the extraordinary. On the other hand, within the framework of (im)piety, He is also a mediator between sinners and fallible humans. His attributes include being an avenger, reckoner and judge. The (im)pious wish and, in some instances, expect God to be merciful and patient when they knowingly transgress His rules and desires and continue to do so. In other words, they believe, hope and sometimes expect God's absolute attributes of benevolence, patience and mercy would help them avoid His wrath and judgement.

In other words, the (im)pious seeks to position God against Godself. Therefore, it is a faithful and even pious position as only those with faith in God would hope and seek for this to happen. This, however, shows a significant gap in Asad's formulation of Islam as a discursive tradition because no discursive traditions instruct the believers on how to negotiate with God or, even more crudely, turn the powers of God against Godself. Nothing about this is *correct*, yet it is still a common form of Islamic practice.

Through this dualistic relationship, faith in God could be accounted for as a factor in how (im)piety is rationalised and practised. Not only does it allow space for sin, imperfection and lack of commitment while also maintaining a relationship with God and a sense of religiosity, it also does not require challenging the validity of either religious norms and values or Divine commands, which is the first principle of (im)piety as I have argued earlier. Suppose we understand moral choices to be multifaceted where, among other things, they are positions assumed by an individual about social forces. In that case, they are expecting or appealing to God's mercy when a 'wrong' moral choice is, by extension, also a position an individual assumes about social forces (which includes God as a social actor). In other words, we could say that (im)piety is a practical individual response to the imperfections and contradictions of the individual, their social environment and the tensions between various personal desires. Furthermore, it is a human-induced and facilitated failure within the social, not within Islam. In that sense, God is a mediator where faith in His mercy allows, but not necessarily legitimises, a margin for manoeuvring against strict and closed models of a 'good' moral life in a context influenced by other social forces that may tempt, allure or in the views of some people "corrupt" the individual.

This analysis follows Samuli Schielke's invitation for scholars to consider theorising the power of God in their ethnographic examinations and analyses. Schielke argues that, despite the enormous body of scholarship on Muslim societies and Islam, an anthropological theorisation of God has been lacking until recently. This is not to say that anthropologists are oblivious to the importance of God in the lived realities of Muslims. Schielke acknowledges that "God is present in ethnographies conducted among Muslims."[34] Instead, what is missing is a systematic inclusion of God, particularly "the quite tangible acts and presence of God in relations among humans."[35] In other words, Schielke is calling for a phenomenological account of belief in God as understood by the subjects of ethnographic enquiries.

At this juncture, we should be reminded that to acknowledge the significance and importance of Islam is not to treat Muslim societies as if there are no other forces that influence the lives and subjectivities of Muslims or the social and political organisation of Muslim societies. Hence, an anthropological enquiry into Muslim societies should also note how globalisation, modernisation schemes, technological advancement, economic transformations, arts and entertainment, traditions and other factors influence personal relationships with God. More importantly, it must consider how everything is interconnected, how one thing shapes and is shaped by everything else. To borrow from Michael Gilsenan,[36] who was influenced by Walter Benjamin's adaptation of the *Flâneur*, I suggest anthropology as a "way of walking" toward the expected and unexpected without restricting oneself to a single way of reasoning or operating within conceptual limitations. This is not suggested as an innovative strategy for the anthropologist to 'apply' to human objects of study. Instead, it is to assume a malleable navigational approach to modern life as people do, whether consciously or unconsciously. This is particularly important when considering the imbrication and ambivalence characterising modern life. It is, however, even more, crucial when we consider how traditional religious thought is reconfigured and reattuned to contemporary conditions. That means conditions where the totalising truths are undercut, at least in praxis, by the lived realities of people.

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[34] Samuli Schielke, "The Power of God: Four Proposals for an Anthropological Engagement," *ZMO Programmatic Texts* 13 (2019).

[35] Ibid., 2.

[36] Michael Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Arab World* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1982).

Philosopher Gianni Vattimo captures this historical moment with his philosophical style, *pensiero debole* or "weak thought," which does away with absolute certainties and truth. While this is characteristically similar to the postmodern turn that destabilises and deconstructs foundations of truths, including reason, there is a significant difference. Weak thought is a way of thinking that emphasises hermeneutics rather than epistemological and metaphysical certainties *without* slipping into relativism. As Vattimo and Rovatti argue, "Rationality must de-potentiate itself, give way; it should not be afraid to draw back toward the supposed area of shadow, it should not let itself be paralyzed by the loss of the luminous, stable, Cartesian point of reference."[37] They then explain that

> Weak thought is thus certainly a metaphor and, to some extent a paradox…It points out a path; it indicates a direction of the route; it is a way that forks from the no matter how masked hegemonic rationality [ragione-dominio] from which, nevertheless, we all know a definitive farewell is impossible.[38]

In that sense, positive thought is restrictive because it is totalising, whereas weak thought is a way to open new paths of understanding this historic moment.

In a sense, God could be perceived as a temporally contextualised social actor to the extent that we could think of two Gods that, in practice, are used and played against one another. On the one hand there is the conceptualisation of God as an uncompromising vindicator who revealed absolute truth to humanity, issued commands and expected obedience. On the other hand, there is the conceptualisation of God as the forgiving facilitator in a context where the former's absolute and final truths are eroded by modernity. A similar distinction could be made between idealised perceptions of piety, those drawing on strong religion, and the way piety and impiety are practised, which, among other things, hermeneutically draw on weak religion. In this context, and as Grimshaw suggests, doing anthropology as a way of walking or flaneuring is not just to wander "through a city of texts and ideas" but also an act of observing and encountering "dialectical moments that create a new angle of vision."[39] This materialises in my conceptualisation of (im)piety and the theorisation of God as a multifaceted social actor.

Fourth Principle: The Selective Observance of Piety

The fourth and last principle of (im)piety is the selective observance of piety. What I mean by that is the consistent or occasional commitment to some but not all religious obligations and standards of piety. Piety could be selectively observed in two main ways. The first type is what I call the relative selective observance of piety in which a particular sin does not entirely compromise the commitment to *taqwa* or sever the ties with God because the uncommitted graver sins act as a threshold for how far one would violate God's commands. Hence, avoiding such sins becomes a form of ethical and religious self-cultivation. In other words, certain behaviours and actions are selected and uncompromisingly avoided, and in relation to the potentially grave sinful behaviour, the actual – but less grave – sinful behaviour becomes rationalised and used to signal a commitment, albeit imperfect, to obeying God's commands. For example, uncompromisingly committing to the weekly Friday congregation and prayer but not the five mandatory daily prayers during the rest of the week, fasting Ramadan but not praying, not wearing a veil but avoiding premarital romance, consuming alcohol but avoiding pork, watching pornography but not committing adultery, snogging or 'making out' outside marriage but not having sexual intercourse, or – more generally – what Jafari and Süerdem framed as paradoxes.

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[37] Cited in Giovanna Borradori, "'Weak Thought' and Postmodernism: The Italian Departure from Deconstruction," *Social Text* 18 (1987): 39.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Michael Grimshaw, "Flaneuring with Vattimo: The Annotative Hermeneutics of Weak Thought," *Critical Research on Religion* 2, no. 3 (2014): 272.

There are some noteworthy points to consider here. The examples I have provided are neither exhaustive nor universal. The relative observance of piety may vary from one individual to the other depending on internal and external factors. Moreover, the contrast between the severity of sins may or may not correspond to the verdicts as well as the classifications and hierarchies of sin that are found in classic Islamic jurisprudence or mainstream Islamic understandings in a given context. In other words, the trade-off embedded within the relative observance of piety is not set in stone and it may or may not correspond with Islamic jurisprudence, broader social conditions, one's habitus or social logic. In saying that, these negotiations are not paradoxes but pragmatic reconciliations that enable many individuals to navigate the messiness, contradictions and tensions of modern life.

The second type of selective observance of piety is what I call performative selective in which the act of sinning may become less severe, depending on the way it is performed. As we have discussed earlier, *mujahara* and *fuswq* in Islamic theology may exacerbate the severity of even minor sins. Boasting sinful behaviour or committing sinful actions impenitently is a sign of a lack of guilt, which contradicts the first principle of (im)piety. There are two connected layers to such (im)pious performances. First, an inward performance of guilt in which the (im)pious internalises to signal to God their desire to be more obedient and committed in the future. Second, an outward performance of guilt to society either through secrecy and discretion or expressed recognition of one's shortcomings. This signals to God and society one's reverence to the Divine and hence lessens the severity of the sinful act. Here, there is also an element of the relative selective observance of piety where the commitment of a sinful act, but with shame and in secret is lessened in its severity by the avoidance of the potential commitment of the same sinful behaviour, but boastfully.

The performative selective observance of piety could also be exercised by the condemnation of others or selective outrage. Within the framework of performative selective observance of piety showing outrage and repulsion towards those who commit grave sins – particularly ones that act as thresholds for (im)piety for a given individual – may signal one's commitment, albeit imperfect, to God and His commands. For example, internalising and outwardly expressing outrage towards categories of people with qualities that are perceived to be exceptionally corrupt and immoral, such as homosexuals, drunkards, prostitutes, pimps, singers, belly dancers, *dayothin* (those who are complacent about the chastity of their women), atheists, secularists, liberals, jihadists and the regime's sycophants. Again, the way these categories are constructed and which groups of people the categories include vary from one individual to the other and are shaped by a variety of factors that correspond to broader social conditions and the specificities of individuals and their immediate social context. Furthermore, there is an element of the relative selective observance of piety at play here along categorical lines. Within the framework of (im)piety, one may be a sinner regarding a particular commandment or standard of piety but *at least* not as bad as whichever irreducibly corrupt category has been construed to be exceptionally bad. Hence, not being part of these worse categories internalises and signals a commitment, albeit imperfect, to God and Islamic standards of piety.

CONCLUSION

The embedded religious sensibilities within the framework of (im)piety are not part of any notion of 'correct' Islamic practices or 'tradition-guided reasoning.' Rather, (im)piety is performed and accommodated in part precisely because it does not redefine principle traditional Islamic ethics and Islamic notions of haram and halal. Instead, it is practised through the establishment of elusive and ambivalent thresholds of impious practices that signify a sense of religiosity regardless of how nominal, superficial, unorthodox and 'untraditional' it may be. (Im)piety is performed through the symbolic, selective and situational expressions of piety and contrasts with other potential transgressions that are avoided because 'they go too far.' In other words, it is not impiety as a whole person; rather, it is (im)piety by particular actions. As discussed earlier, this could be practised at an individual level. However, it could also be practised by the state; for example, the way some states in MMCs countries mix secular and Islamic laws. So, there is state-level (im)piety as well when the state is neither theocratic nor secular but a secular-Islamic state. This is not to dismiss that (im)piety is absent at a state level, even under theocratic regimes. All this could be a topic for further discussion and consideration.

In all these examples, impious behaviour is regulated by (im)pious reasoning where the tensions of modern life are mediated through an elaborate, yet elusive, religious framework of thresholds, contrasts with potential but avoided transgressions, and symbolic meaning that serves as a final unbreakable link to God, religiosity and moral goodness. The maintenance of this link allows transgressions *not* to be practised and conceived as an abandonment of one's religious identity or faith but rather as mistakes, flaws, distractions, temptations and necessities that do not necessarily absolve one's religiosity and ethical considerations. To be clear, I am not arguing that faith in Islam can only be (im)piously articulated. Rather, I am arguing that, as much as there is room for consistency and 'correct' Islamic practices, there is also room for flexibility, reflexivity, improvisation and negotiation. Having said that, from personal observation and as evident in the literature discussed earlier, (im)piety *is* pervasive in many MMCs and constitutes much of the religious experience of many 'ordinary' people from many walks of life who do not think of themselves as lesser Muslims than those who are more observant and consistent with whichever Islamic discursive tradition they embrace.

It is important to note here that (im)piety and its thresholds do not have standards that are set in stone. (Im)piety is relative in intensity and scope to the individual's experiences, positionality and levels of religious consciousness. It is also worth noting that (im)piety, and particularly the way it simultaneously allows individuals to maintain a sense of religiosity and facilitates transgressions about upholding thresholds, could be met with scrutiny and criticism by more committed individuals. (Im)piety may seem abrupt and whimsical, but this elusiveness grants its pervasiveness and ability to be accommodated. (Im)piety does not require a revision or reinterpretation of tradition and it is not a principled reformist form of religious practice. Rather, it is a form of accommodative and situational practice and non-tradition-guided reasoning that maintains a sense of religiosity and establishes a sense of one's commitment to the values, obligations and notions they contradict. In other words, conceptualising (im)piety as a regulator of impious behaviour helps us recognise and understand the various ways the selective enforcement of, and the occasional (or consistent) deviance from, Islamic standards of piety in a modern world of contradictions, and without necessarily dichotomising secular modernity and religion.

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