

saba mahmood politics of piety

saba mahmood politics of piety is a seminal work in the fields of anthropology, political theory, and religious studies. Authored by Saba Mahmood, this influential book explores the complex relationships between religion, politics, and gender in contemporary societies, particularly focusing on Islamic piety movements in Egypt. The politics of piety examines how religious practices and ethical formations intersect with notions of power, agency, and resistance. Mahmood challenges conventional secular and feminist frameworks by emphasizing the importance of understanding religious agency on its own terms. This article delves into the key themes, theoretical contributions, and critical reception of saba mahmood politics of piety. It also investigates the broader implications of Mahmood's work for studying religion, gender, and political agency in the modern world. The following sections provide a detailed overview and analysis of saba mahmood politics of piety.

- Background and Context of Saba Mahmood's Work
- Core Themes in Politics of Piety
- Theoretical Contributions and Methodology
- Religious Agency and Gender
- Implications for Political Theory and Secularism
- Critical Reception and Scholarly Impact

Background and Context of Saba Mahmood's Work

Saba Mahmood's politics of piety emerged from ethnographic research conducted in Cairo, Egypt, focusing on the women's mosque movement during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The book situates itself at the intersection of anthropology, feminist theory, and political philosophy by challenging dominant paradigms about religion and secularism. Mahmood's work responds to the tendency within Western liberal thought to view religious women in Muslim societies as passive victims of patriarchy. Instead, she offers a nuanced account that highlights the active role of women in shaping their religious lives and political identities. This context is crucial for understanding saba mahmood politics of piety as a critical intervention in debates about agency, piety, and power.

Core Themes in Politics of Piety

The politics of piety centers on several interrelated themes that illuminate the complex dynamics of religious life and political action. Mahmood examines how ethical self-formation through religious practices constitutes a form of political agency. Central to the book is the idea that piety is not merely a private or spiritual matter but deeply political, as it involves engagement with structures of power and social norms. The text explores the tension between individual autonomy and communal obligations within Islamic ethics, particularly among women adherents. Additionally, Saba Mahmood's politics of piety investigates the ways in which religious movements contest secular modernity and reconfigure concepts of freedom and selfhood.

Ethical Self-Formation

Mahmood's analysis foregrounds the process of ethical self-formation, where individuals cultivate specific dispositions, habits, and bodily comportments in accordance with religious teachings. This practice-oriented approach challenges the binary between autonomy and submission, revealing the complexity of religious agency beyond Western liberal assumptions.

Religious Practices as Political Acts

The book argues that religious rituals and norms are not simply expressions of faith but can function as political acts that negotiate power relations within society. For example, women's participation in mosque activities becomes a site of political engagement and contestation.

Negotiating Secular and Religious Spheres

Saba Mahmood explores how Islamic piety movements navigate the boundaries between secular state institutions and religious communities, highlighting the contestations and accommodations that shape political identities.

Theoretical Contributions and Methodology

Saba Mahmood's politics of piety is notable for its innovative theoretical framework and methodological rigor. Mahmood employs ethnographic methods to produce a rich, grounded analysis of lived religious experience. The work critiques dominant liberal theories of agency that prioritize resistance and emancipation, proposing instead a notion of agency that includes compliance and ethical self-discipline. This reconceptualization opens new avenues for understanding non-Western forms of political participation and subject formation. Mahmood also draws on Michel Foucault's theories of power and ethics to analyze how religious subjects enact forms of self-governance.

Ethnographic Approach

The book is based on detailed fieldwork, including participant observation and interviews with women engaged in the mosque movement. This empirical foundation allows Mahmood to present a nuanced portrayal of religious life that avoids simplistic binaries.

Critique of Liberal Secularism

Mahmood challenges the secular liberal framework that often judges religious practices through the lens of individual autonomy and resistance, arguing for a more inclusive understanding of political agency.

Foucauldian Framework

Drawing on Foucault's concepts of power, discipline, and ethics, saba mahmood politics of piety offers a sophisticated analysis of how power operates through religious practices and how subjects actively participate in their own formation.

Religious Agency and Gender

One of the most significant contributions of saba mahmood politics of piety lies in its exploration of gender and religious agency. Mahmood shifts the focus from viewing Muslim women solely as victims of patriarchal oppression to recognizing their complex motivations and forms of empowerment within religious frameworks. The book highlights how women's piety and participation in religious movements can constitute a form of political agency that resists simplistic categorizations. This rethinking of gender and agency challenges feminist scholars to reconsider assumptions about freedom, choice, and power in religious contexts.

Agency Beyond Western Feminist Paradigms

Mahmood argues that Western feminist paradigms often fail to capture the lived realities of Muslim women who find meaning and empowerment in religious practice, even when these practices appear to conform to traditional gender roles.

Women's Participation in the Mosque Movement

The women's mosque movement serves as a case study for understanding how women engage in religious and political life, asserting their presence in public religious spaces and shaping communal identities.

Intersections of Gender, Religion, and Politics

The politics of piety highlights the interconnectedness of gender, religious ethics, and political engagement, showing how these domains influence and transform each other.

Implications for Political Theory and Secularism

Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* has significant implications for how political theorists and scholars of secularism understand the relationship between religion and politics. Mahmood's work problematizes the strict separation of secular and religious spheres, demonstrating that religious ethics can be a site of political action and subject formation. This challenges the dominant secularist assumption that religion is inherently incompatible with modern political agency. Instead, the book encourages a rethinking of political theory to accommodate diverse forms of agency and subjectivity shaped by religious commitments.

Rethinking Secularism

The book critiques the secularist narrative that often marginalizes religious actors and calls for a more nuanced understanding of secularism that recognizes the political dimensions of religious life.

Expanding the Notion of Political Agency

Mahmood's analysis broadens the conception of political agency beyond acts of overt resistance, including forms of ethical self-cultivation and participation within religious frameworks.

Challenges to Liberal Political Theory

The politics of piety questions liberal political theory's emphasis on individual autonomy, suggesting alternative models of freedom rooted in communal and religious contexts.

Critical Reception and Scholarly Impact

Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* has been widely acclaimed for its groundbreaking contributions to multiple academic disciplines. Scholars have praised the book for its rigorous ethnography, theoretical innovation, and nuanced treatment of religion, gender, and politics. It has sparked important debates about agency, secularism, and feminist theory, influencing research in anthropology, political science, religious studies, and Middle Eastern studies. However, some critics have questioned the applicability of Mahmood's framework beyond the specific context of Egyptian Islam or expressed concerns about the political implications of emphasizing compliance in agency. Despite these debates, the book remains a foundational

text for understanding the politics of religious piety and the diverse expressions of political life in contemporary societies.

- Praised for its ethnographic depth and theoretical originality
- Influenced feminist and postcolonial critiques of secularism
- Stimulated interdisciplinary discussions on religion and politics
- Generated debate on the limits of agency and resistance paradigms

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is Saba Mahmood and what is her work 'Politics of Piety' about?

Saba Mahmood was an anthropologist known for her influential book 'Politics of Piety,' which examines the women's mosque movement in Cairo and explores the complex relationship between religion, politics, and gender in contemporary Islam.

What is the central argument of 'Politics of Piety'?

The central argument of 'Politics of Piety' is that women's engagement with piety and religious practices in the mosque movement should not be understood simply as passive submission but as a form of ethical self-cultivation and political agency within Islamic frameworks.

How does Saba Mahmood challenge secular feminist perspectives in 'Politics of Piety'?

Mahmood challenges secular feminist perspectives by arguing that agency and empowerment should not be narrowly defined by liberal feminist ideals; instead, she highlights how women's participation in religious practices can constitute a form of agency that does not necessarily align with Western notions of freedom or autonomy.

What methodology does Saba Mahmood use in 'Politics of Piety'?

Mahmood employs ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and interviews, within the women's mosque movement in Cairo to provide an in-depth analysis of how women engage with religious practices and ethics.

Why is 'Politics of Piety' considered significant in the study of religion and politics?

The book is significant because it offers a nuanced understanding of how religion operates as a political force, especially through the everyday practices of women, challenging dominant secular and feminist narratives about Islam and political agency.

How does 'Politics of Piety' address the concept of agency?

Mahmood reconceptualizes agency by showing that it can manifest through compliance and self-discipline within religious traditions, rather than solely through resistance or subversion, expanding the ways scholars understand political action.

What role do women play in the mosque movement discussed in 'Politics of Piety'?

Women in the mosque movement actively participate in cultivating piety, ethical self-formation, and community leadership, demonstrating their significant role in shaping religious and social life beyond traditional gender roles.

How has 'Politics of Piety' influenced contemporary discussions on Islam and feminism?

The book has influenced debates by encouraging scholars and activists to reconsider assumptions about Muslim women's agency, the politics of religious practice, and the diversity of feminist engagements with Islam.

Can 'Politics of Piety' be applied to broader contexts outside of Egypt?

Yes, while focused on Egypt, the theoretical insights of 'Politics of Piety' regarding ethics, agency, and the politics of religious practice have been applied to study other Muslim communities and debates about religion and politics globally.

Additional Resources

1. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* by Saba Mahmood

This seminal work by Saba Mahmood explores the complex relationship between Islamic piety movements and feminist theory. Mahmood challenges secular liberal assumptions about agency and freedom by examining the women's mosque movement in Cairo. The book argues that piety should be understood as a form of ethical self-formation rather than merely a political stance or a form of resistance. It offers a nuanced view of how religious practices shape subjectivity and social life.

2. *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam Is Reshaping the World* by Shadi Hamid

Shadi Hamid discusses the global political impact of Islamic movements and the ways Islam is often treated as exceptional in political discourse. The book complements Mahmood's work by examining contemporary Islamic political movements and their engagement with democracy and secularism. Hamid argues that understanding Islam's unique political role is essential for global politics today.

3. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* by Leila Ahmed

Leila Ahmed provides a historical overview of the role of women and gender in Islamic societies, tracing debates from the early Islamic period to the present. This book offers valuable context for understanding the environment in which movements like those studied by Mahmood emerge. Ahmed highlights the diversity of women's experiences and the evolving interpretations of gender in Islam.

4. *Constituting Modernity: Hindu Nationalism and the Politics of the Past* by Janaki Nair

This book examines how religious and political identities are constructed in South Asia, with a focus on Hindu nationalism. It provides a comparative framework for understanding how religious piety intersects with politics, similar to the themes in Mahmood's work on Islamic piety. Nair explores the role of historical narratives in modern political movements.

5. *Faith and Power: Religion and Politics in the Middle East* edited by Bernard Lewis and Buntzie Ellis Churchill

A collection of essays that delve into the intricate relationship between religion and politics in the Middle East. This volume provides broader insights into the political contexts that shape Islamic movements like those Mahmood studies. It offers perspectives on how faith influences governance, social change, and conflict in the region.

6. *Secularism and Its Discontents* by Talal Asad

Talal Asad critically examines the concept of secularism and its implications for religious life and political authority. His work is often paired with Mahmood's to deepen understanding of secularism's role in shaping modern political and religious practices. Asad challenges Western-centric views and highlights the complexities of secular governance in Muslim-majority societies.

7. *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* by Fatema Mernissi

Fatema Mernissi offers a feminist critique of traditional interpretations of Islamic texts related to women's rights. The book explores power dynamics within Islamic societies and debates over gender and authority. It complements Mahmood's focus on piety by addressing the political dimensions of gender and religion.

8. *Religious Transnationalism and the Politics of Piety* edited by Marina Ottaway and Julia B. Thompson

This edited volume explores how religious movements transcend national boundaries and influence politics globally. It situates Mahmood's analysis of piety within broader trends of transnational religious activism. The essays examine various faith traditions and their political engagements in contemporary settings.

9. *Gender and Islam in Africa: Rights, Sexuality, and Law* edited by Margot Badran and Kathryn Hogan

Focusing on the African context, this collection addresses how Islamic piety intersects with gender,

sexuality, and legal frameworks. It provides comparative insights relevant to Mahmood's work by highlighting diverse expressions of Islamic feminism and political activism. The book explores the tensions and negotiations involved in gender and religious identity across Africa.

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